

AN INTERVIEW WITH ROSS MARSHALL

Interviewer: Niel Johnson FINAL 6/15/20 (By Ross Marshall, proofed by Mary Conrad)
(corrections in parentheses)

NJ: It is May 19, 1997, and this is Niel Johnson and Harold Smith is here with me too, to help interview Ross Marshall here in the Frontier Trail Center in Independence. Ross, I see you filled this out very well for us. So we have quite a bit here on paper in black and white, this questionnaire that Ross filled out. We will probably still repeat some of the questions. Would you start out by giving us your name, birth place, birth date, and parents' names?

RM: Well, my name is Ross Marshall. I was born January 27, 1939, near Cainsville, Missouri up in north central Missouri. My parents' names were Donald and Wilma Marshall.

NJ: Did you say Kingsville?

RM: Cainsville.

NJ: Isn't that what Council Bluffs was called before they changed the name?

RM: This is Cainsville. It is in Mercer County, Missouri.

NJ: How long did you live up there?

RM: Well, I didn't actually live there. I grew up across the line in Iowa, really.

NJ: But you were born in Cainsville?

RM: Born on the Missouri side, but actually lived and grew up in southern Iowa in Decatur County until I graduated from college, really. Then I moved to Kansas City in 1961.

NJ: Where did you get your education?

RM: Iowa State University, civil engineering. I graduated in 1961.

NJ: How about your high school?

RM: I went to high school in Leon, Iowa. I graduated in 1957.

NJ: Leon, Iowa. Where's that close to?

RM: Close to the Missouri border in Decatur County, Iowa, north of Cainsville, MO

NJ: What was your father's occupation?

RM: He was a farmer and later a carpenter-contractor.

NJ: So you learned to farm growing up.

RM: Grew up on a farm, an Iowa farm boy.

NJ: Did you have horses and wagons?

RM: Yes.

NJ: How about tractors?

RM: Yes, we had tractors later. When I was a little kid not so.

NJ: Is that right? We're talking early '40s?

RM: We didn't get a tractor until the late '40s, sometime right after the second World War, I think, about 1947 probably we got the first tractor.

NJ: And you were using horses up to then. How big a farm was it?

RM: Well, at that particular time Dad was renting a good sized farm that was probably about 250 acres, a lot of farm land. It was quite a job. That was why he had to get a tractor. It was getting to be too much.

NJ: But you learned to drive a team of horses.

RM: When I was a little kid.

NJ: What kind of wagon? Did they have the steel wheels on that wagon or the old fashioned wooden hub wheels? Do you recall?

RM: Well, I think it had probably old kinds. The only wagons I can remember having were the grain wagons and hay wagons. And, frankly, I don't remember that much about the wagons. The best memory I have of wagons was rubber tire wagons. They were made from an old Ford chassis of some kind and had rubber tires on them. But I remember my grandfather still had the old style wagons. Because he didn't have a tractor until a couple years later than my dad got a tractor. So he was still an old fashioned farmer until he retired.

NJ: Of course those old fashioned wagons are now in demand.

RM: Of course they were all wore out then, at least the ones we had were.

NJ: I was just thinking that your farm experience with horses and wagons was one of the reasons you had a little more interest than the average person does in the trails and horse-drawn vehicles.

RM: Oh, I don't know about that. I think my interest in history is more academic than that. When I was a little kid in school, history was a favorite subject of mine. The farm was the farthest thing from my mind and I couldn't actually wait to get away from the farm, probably which is not unusual. When I became old enough I was not to be found on the farm. I'll put it that way. And it was never going to be my occupation.

NJ: What kind of history were you interested in in those earlier days?

RM: Well, as a kid in school, even in third and fourth grade, and I went to a country school. And in the country school that I went to, we never had more than about 12 kids in the six

grades. And I had just one other person in my grade. You got a lot of personal attention from the teachers. It is not totally unlike the home school climate of today. You get a lot of personal attention. And I think you get a pretty fast education when you have an interest. I was able to dig into a lot of things. History was just interesting to me, particularly America history, not so much world history. But American history I really liked.

NJ: You liked to read, I suppose.

RM: I liked to read a lot. By the time I was in fourth or fifth grade, I knew a lot about American history and geography, more so because I spent a lot of time at it.

NJ: Your teacher encouraged it.

RM: More than just what you had to do for the classroom. So I always had an interest in history. But it didn't have much to do with farming, I don't think.

NJ: You said you got into civil engineering.

RM: Yes, I was a civil engineer. I guess the reason I did that was math, which I liked and was pretty good at. I also knew that as an engineer you could make a pretty good living. But my interest has always been history.

NJ: A vocation and an avocation.

RM: It became an avocation.

NJ: When did you graduate from Iowa State?

RM: I graduated in 1961.

NJ: Were you in the military?

RM: No, I never was.

NJ: How about name of spouse and children.

RM: My first wife's name was Marina. She lived on the farm next to ours. We were just always kind of boyfriend and girlfriend. We were married while still in college. We had three children, all of whom of course now are grown with their own families. Their names are Jeff and Julie and Bryan. The two boys live here in the area. Julie lives in Long Beach, California. My present wife is Jana, we've been married since 1981, 16 years.

NJ: You went into civil engineering right after you got your degree, did you?

RM: In a sense. I've never really been a practicing engineer. I went to work for a construction company. And my career was basically in management, sales and management, of a national construction company.

NJ: What was the name of the company?

RM: CECO. It was an old line, well financed, lot of money in the bank kind of conservative sort of construction company. It was national in scope. In fact it was a Fortune 500.

NJ: What kind of construction were they involved in?

RM: High rise building construction. So I've been on a lot of airplanes and a lot of elevators up to the top of structures. I've seen a lot of concrete poured. But the company went into some hard times with the construction downturn back in the early '80s. There was a series of buy outs and leveraged buy outs and mergers. The money all got away when the hard times hit. The company still exists. But instead of a Fortune 500 company it is probably more of about a fortune....I mean it's really small

NJ: Down there. Was it corporate raiding that went on?

RM: Not corporate raiding. There was a leveraged buyout by the original family, who bought it back from the public. Financed, of course. Leveraged as far as you can in terms of the share value. The downturn hit and the earnings weren't there. It essentially went bankrupt in the final analysis. But it merged with another company, who turned out to be in worse shape than we were. And about that time we began to close offices and all the offices I had west of here clear to the Pacific Ocean I ended up closing them one at a time. Sooner or later it hit on my home address. So that was the end of my career.

NJ: So you had only one employer then.

RM: Yes, for 31 years.

NJ: 31 years. So you kind of retired then.

RM: Well, I didn't really retire, history being my real interest at that point and not really looking for another job of the same kind, I went to work for the Alexander Majors House over at 83rd and State Line and was there for three years as the executive director. It was an historic site, an 1856 home with a full-blown agenda of activities and visitations and tours, everything that you find at a historical site.

NJ: You didn't start that job until when?

RM: It was 1993.

NJ: Now here in your write up you say in the late '70s you bought Greg Franzwa's *Oregon Trail Revisited*.

RM: Yes.

NJ: You wanted to do the tour sometime in the future. This was while you were still busy with your civil engineering career. When did you move down here then?

RM: Well, I've lived in the Kansas City area since I graduated from college in 1961.

NJ: So your options were over here in Kansas City.

RM: Yes.

NJ: When did you first meet Greg Franzwa, since you brought him up?

RM: Well, I bought the book in the early 1970s. I think it was 1971 or 1972 authorship on it. There was an ad in some magazine and I bought the book. By virtue of that I got on the publisher's list for Patrice Press. I suppose the next thing I heard of from Greg Franzwa was after OCTA was actually formed and the first convention was planned here in Independence in 1983. I got the letter to not only be part of the convention but to be a charter member of the organization, which I responded to very quickly and said that sounded like a good idea. In the meantime after having bought *The Oregon Trail Revisited*, back in whenever it was, back in the mid-70s, I hadn't really done anything with it. I had not taken any of those tours that I had said I was going to someday. So I didn't know a whole lot more about the Oregon Trail than when I bought the book. The first time I ever met Greg, as I recall, was a meeting where he was brought in to speak to a group. I could be wrong on this but the way I remember was it was at Cedar Roe Library back in 1983, probably before that convention, probably in early '83.

NJ: You have here on May 19 in '83 you met him in the Cedar Roe Library.

RM: Really? That's more detail than I remember saying in my letter. I better get a copy of that letter. That was written several months ago. I've got some of the records.

NJ: Had you belonged to any history organizations before you got involved with OCTA?

RM: I don't think so.

NJ: In other words you had not taken any active part in any historical organizations.

RM: My life was completely in the corporate world. I belonged to all kinds of trade organizations and that kind of thing.

NJ: Had you ever written any history articles until recent years?

RM: No.

NJ: He gave a slide presentation and talked about his travels on the Oregon Trail, which resulted in the publication of his book.

RM: Yes.

NJ: Even before that, you mentioned getting this letter from Greg Franzwa in the fall of 1982 inviting you to be a charter member. Then you got a call from Barbara Magerl.

RM: Right.

NJ: Asking if you would be interested in attending the first convention.

RM: Yes.

NJ: Of this organization in Independence. Okay, this was the founding, charter meeting.

RM: The organization was actually founded in Denver in the summer of 1982. Without looking it up, I don't remember the date. But there was a meeting there of a dozen people or so that actually founded the organization and became the first board of directors. The first convention then was scheduled here in Independence in August of 1983. The letters were sent out for charter membership and later on to be a part of that convention. That's where Barbara Magerl came in. She was enlisted to be the local coordinator for that convention.

NJ: How many were at this convention? Do you recall?

RM: I don't have any specific numbers but my memory serves that there were upwards of 200, say between 150 and 200 people there. And by virtue of attending that convention, at people's option, of course, they had the right to become charter members. So early on the organization had 200 some charter members.

NJ: Where did they have the meetings?

RM: It was over here at the Sermon Center over on Noland Road.

NJ: There wasn't a meeting here before that. That was the first meeting that you can recall.

RM: Except for Greg's slide presentation. And I'm sure there were meetings here in preparation for the convention. But I was not a part of that.

NJ: You said here that these were interesting speakers and some of them are still close friends and that you learned about the trail in the local area on one of the treks. Did you go on the first trek then? Were you on the first trek that they had here in Jackson County after that convention?

RM: Well, as part of the convention there were a couple of bus tours. One of them clear to Alcove Springs around Marysville, Kansas. I did not sign up for that and the reason for that was in 1983 we already had our vacation time planned and I didn't have time off. I was able to go to some of the sessions, either morning or afternoon sessions. My wife went on the local bus tour. But actually I didn't go on any of the tours, just simply didn't have the time.

NJ: But you've been on some of the treks since then.

RM: Oh, yes.

NJ: You note that in the following year the convention was to be in Oregon City. Did you and your wife Jana...?

RM: Yes.

NJ: Talked about going to it. But in the spring of '84 you heard about the week-long cartographic expedition on the Sublette Cutoff.

RM: Yes.

NJ: In southwest Wyoming.

RM: Yes.

NJ: “Since we did not have enough vacation time to do both, we made a watershed decision to go on the Sublette. This was a marvelous experience. We spent a week with some of the most dedicated trek nuts in OCTA, most of which are still our closest friends in OCTA. The trip was really coordinated by Greg but was led by Troy Gray, John Latcher, Chester and Karen Buck and others.”

RM: Yes.

NJ: “We learned what a rut was and the romance of the diaries. At this point I was” (you’ve emphasized this) “really hopelessly hooked.”

RM: That’s right.

NJ: The Sublette Cutoff. That was the real experience.

RM: Yes. That was a watershed experience. It got in my blood at that point. I hadn’t really done much with the trail thing at all after that first convention. But I liked it. I remember meeting Troy and Billie Gray. Billie was his wife’s name there at the Sermon Center. Troy had given one of the papers about the Sublette Cutoff, as I recall. And I got to talking to him and his wife about that, how they spent the whole summer out there in the Wyoming desert with diaries and all this information. I thought that was rather fascinating. But I hadn’t done anything with it until the next year. Once we got out there and got some sand in our shoes and I saw my first diary, I don’t remember what I wrote in that letter, but the thing that really struck me we met at Chester Buck’s ranch house on Sunday night just to reconnoiter and meet him—the trek was to start the next morning—and Troy Gray was there. And he wanted to get a dairy out of his car because we got to talking about some detail there that evening. I followed him out to his car and he opened his trunk and he had all these books, all these published and unpublished diaries in the trunk of his car. And that made a lasting impression on me that here was this first-hand primary account of all these trail sites and people and experiences. That was the first diary I ever saw.

NJ: You saw these originals, you are saying.

RM: Probably not originals, but they are typescripts and many published books, like the (unclear) book and the (unclear) diary. But he had a whole trunk of them. That’s what he brought out there because they were there the whole summer so he brought his whole library with him and threw it in the trunk of his car.

NJ: Did he keep a dairy?

RM: No, Troy wasn’t much for writing. But the upshot of that was that I fell in love with diaries. When I got home I began to send off for all these used book catalogs between here and the Pacific Ocean. Before very long I got covered up in book purchasing.

- NJ: I remember a sign about the Sublette Cutoff. I'm trying to recall. Is it before you get to South Pass or is it from South Pass? You have to go through South Pass before you get to the Sublette Cutoff, don't you? Where is it in relation to South Pass? Is it just north of South Pass?
- RM: Everything goes through South Pass. Just on the other side of South Pass, five or 10 miles, I don't remember. It's just a little ways beyond the Pacific Springs area. There is what is called the false parting of the ways where the Sublette Cutoff leaves the Oregon Trail, which goes on down to Fort Bridger. The Sublette Cutoff trail actually left the Oregon Trail another five miles or so beyond that. That first marking is inaccurate. So all of the traffic for all of the Oregon, California, Pony Express, Mormon, everything went through South Pass. It was the only opening in the Rocky Mountains. And after that things began to split off to go in various directions.
- NJ: That was a little later development, wasn't it, the Sublette Cutoff so that there was still a lot of traffic that had gone the regular route before that cutoff was established, as I recall.
- RM: You're asking for dates here and I'm not sure without doing a little bit of reference work that I can delineate that to you. You see Fort Bridger didn't exist until into the 1840s. The early traffic went that way because of the presence of the Sublette Desert, which was 40 miles long with no water. But the Sublette Cutoff was in use in the 1840s. Caleb Greenwood was one of the guides who began to take parties across the Sublette Desert, which is named for William Sublette, I suppose.
- NJ: But that's 40 miles without water, you say.
- RM: It's quite a trek. The Bucks took us across one of those days in 1984 when we were there to confirm the mapping of that route.
- NJ: Sweetwater to Black River you came down, down by Fort Bridger.
- RM: Well, Black's Ford (unclear) is near Fort Bridger. The Sweetwater is really the river that flows out of the South Pass area. It actually comes down out of one river and comes down close to South Pass and then goes east and flows into the Platte River. That was the route the trek took, right up the Sweetwater.
- NJ: Did you camp, tenting while you were on the Sublette?
- RM: No, we stayed in a motel. People often ask me when I tell them I like the trails and like to be out on the trail that I must do a lot of camping and I must do a lot of it in wagons. I can assure I stay as far away from wagons as I could get. My preference is to be out in my Jeep with some friends and find a motel at night and get a good night's rest and try again the next day.
- NJ: You don't have any nostalgia about wagons, unsprung wagons.
- RM: No, wagons are not my thing. Trails I like.
- NJ: I understood there are ruts in the Sublette Cutoff.

RM: Oh, yes.

NJ: Swales.

RM: In that part of the country the trail is still there by virtue of the fact that it is still the ranch roads, still the only roads out there. Most of it is public land. The old trail is still the ranch road through most of Wyoming.

NJ: You read these diaries before you yourself went across the cutoffs.

RM: No, not in that particular case. That was in 1984. I was just beginning to understand what it was all about. Since then when we go to conventions every year we'll take an extensive tour of part of the trail and with some preparation and maps. We'll find the trail that way.

NJ: I notice you say here that in the winter of '84-85 you attended a meeting with local interested people in the recently completed Alexander Majors barn at 83rd and State Line. It was coordinated by Barbara Magerl and featured a program on the Oregon Trail by Greg Franzwa.

RM: There were a lot of people there, as I recall. There were upwards of 100 people there sitting up in the loft.

NJ: Didn't you say he sold his book?

RM: Probably. Hard copies.

NJ: Then you say, "Barbara asked several of us in attendance to meet soon to discuss the potential for the start of an OCTA chapter."

RM: Yes.

NJ: "This meeting took place in Duke Sumonia's living room 9116 Catalina on January 22, 1985. [not to be confused with the formal organizing meeting on January 22, 1986] About a dozen people attended, including Jana and me. We decided rather than formally organizing, we would have a series of activities during the coming year. One of these was a program at Avila College on March 5 presented by Barbara Burgess on the family aspects of the trail experience with a heavy emphasis on the woman's point of view. The program was well publicized and over 100 people attended." This meeting in January of '85 at Duke Sumonia's house was sort of the seminal event there. I guess that's when things really got started, would you say?

RM: As far as the local chapter is concerned.

NJ: Yes. About a dozen people attended - Duke, Barbara Magerl, Jane Mallinson, Kendall and Elaine McNabney, Les Vilda, Anne Regan, Jerry Masters, Lois Daniel and Jana and Ross. Who seemed to be the prime mover there, the one who was really spearheading?

RM: Well, I think Barbara, by virtue of the fact that she had already been involved with the convention here and encouraged all of us, almost individually, to be a part of things up to that point. I think Barbara, easily, was the early shaker here and Barbara at that time was on the national board of directors. This is 1985. I'd have to check my records. She was

on the board having been elected in 1984. She served a three-year-term. [In 1985, she was elected OCTA VP. Then she was defeated for re-election to the board in 1987]

NJ: I notice here in this next paragraph you say that she was the nominal head of this fledging chapter for the first year. So the chapter then actually, was that formally or would you say that was the date it was created, was in that meeting of January 22nd?

RM: No, we didn't do any formal organization that I recall. One of the reasons why not...First of all, I'm not sure we knew exactly what we wanted to be. Secondly, Duke Sumonia, first of all, we were meeting in his living room and secondly Duke was probably among the few people who knew more about the trail in the local area. Duke had spent most of his life poking around the trail here. Anyway, his encouragement was, why do we want to organize? Why don't we just have a little fun and learn about the trail and not spend our time in organizational pursuits. That was the way he was bent. And I think we sort of said, "All right, that sounds fine." That didn't last long, of course. First thing, we've got to organize ourselves, and we did. But for the first few months at least in 1985 there wasn't any formal organization. We had two or three events. I think I've got some paperwork here somewhere about those early events. It wasn't until the fall, late fall, at least later in the year, at one of the meetings at Barbara's house, I think it was, we actually appointed a nominating committee.

NJ: You mention here sometime in the fall of '85 a breakfast meeting was held in Olathe to discuss officers and chapter organization.

RM: Yes, it was probably in late fall.

NJ: You say Mike Duncan, director of the Mahaffie House, in Olathe was elected president and Rich Nolf, director of St. Joseph museums, was elected vice president. So this breakfast meeting, was that when you would say it got formally organized?

RM: Yes. The nominating committee was established before that and we met at breakfast.

NJ: You say only about four or five attended.

RM: Well, here I've got the minutes of the thing, well not the minutes of the thing but at least a summary here and some later minutes. It said, "The executive committee, chosen to implement organization of a local chapter of OCTA, met at 11:30 a.m." It wasn't breakfast. It was lunch. "At the Rodeway Inn, I-35 and Metcalf in Overland Park, Kansas, January 22, 1986, with the following present: Chairperson, Mike Duncan, Elaine McNabney, Ross Marshall, Peggy Smith, Richard Nolf, and Barbara Bernauer." That was the meeting I had reference to. So it was not a breakfast meeting and it was in January of '86. So my memory wasn't...

NJ: It says organizational meeting.

RM: This was the meeting that reported on the recommendations of this committee.

NJ: January 26 you say?

RM: January 22nd. We met for the first organizational meeting on February 27 to elect officers and establish a name for the organization, etc. So a very key piece of documentation here are the minutes. I'm a little confused here on the date of this thing. It was February 11th. Okay, now I understand what this is. This was a minutes or some meeting summary, if you will, of the January 22nd meeting dated February 11, sent out to everyone and announcing the upcoming organizational meeting of February 27th. So what we have here are the minutes or the report from the January 22 luncheon meeting at the Rodeway Inn. [this paragraph can be confusing, but the dates are all correct]

NJ: Okay, but also, according to my notes, there was an announcement of a local chapter organizational meeting for Nov. 12, 1985, at the Cave Spring Interpretive Center. Discussion, purpose, the name of the chapter, dues, structure, election of officers. Do you recall attending a meeting at Cave Spring?

RM: Yes.

NJ: I've got some notes here. On November 12th?

RM: Yes.

NJ: So that was even a prelude to the January meeting.

RM: Yes, it was a follow-up in these non-organized meetings that we've had all during the year. It was at that meeting that what I call a steering committee, and the minutes here call it an executive committee, was appointed. There is one additional name of John Leamon who was appointed to that committee, but he did not meet with us in January at that luncheon. We talked at that time about the kind of organization that we wanted to be and just threw some ideas out. No decisions were made. Harold Smith was at that meeting.

NJ: The meeting at Cave Spring?

Harold Smith: Cave Spring.

RM: Yes, you were there. Peggy Smith was there and Barbara Bernauer, Harold Smith, Milt Perry, Janet Perry, Rich Nolf, Denise Aires. I'm not sure who that is now. Bill (unclear) (Bullard?), Donna (unclear) (Bullard?), Duke Sumonia, Tony (unclear), John Leamon and Brad Leamon, his son. Mike Duncan. I assume that's who that is, and Sylvia Mooney. There were 19 present.

NJ: In the meantime there is a letter from Franzwa to Barbara Magerl on November 21, '85, in which he said that Barbara had a Chapter 3 off the ground. This was the third chapter that was organized. Do you recall whether this might have been the third one organized within OCTA?

RM: It was very early. Very early. I can't give you the background on that really. Barbara was on the board at that time and would know the sequence. I think that California was the first chapter. [Wyo may have been the 2nd chapter to form because we used their bylaws as our model in 1988] Idaho may have been the second chapter formed.

NJ: Even earlier than that on October 5th of '85 Thomas Hunt, president elect, of OCTA sent a letter to Barbara Magerl in which he said, "I'm delighted to hear that our OCTA members back in Missouri and Kansas are getting together to form a regional chapter." He also went on to stress that OCTA policy dictated that no one could join a regional chapter who is not in good standing with the national chapter. And secondly, that those belonging to the national chapter should not be pressured to join the local chapter. Such involvement must be strictly voluntary. Was that the rule to begin with, do you recall, that you had to be a member of the national chapter to belong to the local?

RM: Yes.

NJ: How about this business of not pressuring anyone to join the local chapter.

RM: I have no reaction to that. I am not even sure what that means.

NJ: I think they thought if they belonged to the national chapter that would be their first.....

RM: I think we were just beginning to get our toes wet on this chapter thing.

NJ: If you did not belong to the local chapter, could you still attend a meeting? I mean let's say you belonged to the national chapter but didn't belong to the local Trails Head chapter. You hadn't paid dues, for instance. Would you still be welcome at the meetings?

RM: Well, they still are. I mean anyone can come to our meetings. They are always open to the public. We have a lot of nonmembers who come and go on our treks, etc. So that would always be the case. I'm not sure what prompted that particular comment. I don't attach a lot of importance to that.

NJ: Okay. Trails Head, the name. Was that selected at...?

RM: That was selected at the luncheon meeting. Yes. By the way, backing up a little bit. There was a meeting also September 21st at Plaza Library, well attended, when we began to talk about the boundaries of this new chapter and the name of the chapter. Trails Head was brought up at that point, what dues might be, and prospective members must join national OCTA. All those notes are here.

NJ: January 22, are we talking '85 or '86?

RM: '86, the [Rodeway Inn] luncheon meeting. And there was a previous meeting on July 3rd 1985 at Barbara Magerl's house. I've got some notes here which I'm not sure I can decipher now.

NJ: So the breakfast meeting was actually in January of '86.

RM: Here was a meeting in July for a dedication of the first National Park Service sign that was put up throughout the state of Kansas at New Santa Fe at 123rd and State Line. That was July 5, 1985. That was another one of our activities for the year in our unorganized state.

NJ: What did you do that first year there?

RM: Well, I don't know if my record is complete here but the first event that was planned after that meeting in Duke Sumonia's living room on January 22, 1985. You know why we are getting mixed up, because we've got a January 22nd meeting two years in a row.

NJ: Yes, that's right. [1985 and 1986]

RM: Interesting. But at Duke's house we met for the first time. I don't know the sequence. But out of that grew the plans for this March 5th meeting at Avila that Barbara Burgess spoke at. We had a good attendance. She spoke about the trail and women's journals, I think, with some focus. After that the next activity that I have recorded up here was a tour of the Lone Elm Campground, which was on Mother's Day, May 12, 1985.

NJ: Did they establish the pinpoint location of that? Hasn't there been some discussion of the exact location?

RM: No, because that has been marked with a DAR marker since 1906, or whatever. Don Willsey, who has since passed away, was the owner of the farm and allowed us on the property. As I recall, he was there and gave us a tour of the site.

NJ: Is that just pasture land?

RM: Yes, pretty much.

NJ: Is that some grazing land there?

RM: It's actually on Cedar Creek, where the campground was located. Of course it was a large area. It covered a good part of a quarter section, probably, in its ultimate use. But it all centered around Cedar Creek, right behind an existing house, which was the old Ainsworth property. I think the foundations of the house reportedly go back to in the 1850s, shortly after the Kansas Territory formed. It was one of the first homesteads in that whole area. So the house itself is historical. He took us for a tour.

NJ: Was that your first major event there?

RM: That was our first trail event. We had a speaker event before that. Then July 25th, a couple months later, we had the dedication of the Park Service [triangular logo] sign out on 123rd and State Line.

NJ: Oh, sure. I've got a lot of pictures of that. I was there.

RM: The next event, we had the meeting at Barbara's house on July 3rd.

NJ: That event...

RM: I planned that event because I had a listing here of a whole lot of political and public figures we could...

NJ: The trail marking event at 123rd.

RM: 123rd and State Line

NJ: Yes. So the chapter here, you people organized that.

RM: That was an outgrowth of... Audrey Langworthy had just been elected to the Kansas senate and had sponsored a bill to provide for the purchase of 9 inch and 12 inch National Park Service Oregon Trail signs with triangular logos that could be used to mark trail intercepts through the state of Kansas. And this was the first one mounted there on State Line. We dedicated that and in the ensuing months and years most of them got put up finally clear to the Nebraska border. But Senator Audrey Langworthy was the sponsor of that legislation.

NJ: That was a good crowd there that day.

RM: Yes. Actually, I was not there. For some reason I think I was in Atlanta or some place, if I remember, as part of my job. Even though it was on a weekend day, I was still gone.

NJ: So that project got completed.

RM: Oh, I don't think it ever really got 100 percent complete, but nearly so.

NJ: So the next event after that...

RM: After July, the next thing that I have notes on was the September 21st meeting at the Plaza Library, which was our first attempt at any ideas about how to organize ourselves. Then we had a follow up meeting on November 12th at Cave Spring to further organize ourselves and to appoint this steering committee.

NJ: Was Pauline Fowler involved in the chapter by this time?

RM: I don't think so. Pauline was one of our early speakers back at some point but I don't think Pauline was involved in the first year or so.

NJ: So then you did a number of things there while you were actually getting organized. Because we're talking 1985. It was in '86 that you formally organized.

RM: At the February 27, 1986 meeting is where we conducted official business for the first time. We elected officers, adopted our name, and some other, not bylaws, but other organizational rules.

NJ: I see that Barbara Magerl was elected the first president.

RM: No, the first official president was Mike Duncan. This is kind of funny. Mike Duncan. There were six or seven of us that I named off there that were put on the steering committee to enlist some officers. We sort of nominated ourselves, not that I was one of them, because I didn't feel I had the time then to devote to anything. I was very pleased that some other people said yes. Out of that came Mike Duncan as president, Rich Nolf, as vice president, Barbara Bernauer as secretary and John Leamon as treasurer, all of whom had been a part of that steering committee. I'm not sure it was a nominating committee as such. But it was a steering committee.

NJ: And they became the first executive committee.

RM: We sort of nominated ourselves I guess. I don't know.

NJ: Then the next president was Barbara Magerl in the fall of '86.

RM: We set up our bylaws so that officers would be elected at the annual meeting every year in November. So Mike Duncan officially served less than a year. But in reality he was our leader for about a year. And then Barbara was our president the first year from November of '86 to November of '87. Bylaws were first adopted November 10, 1988.

NJ: Then you became president.

RM: Then I became president and served twice up to '89. After that Jim Lee served a year. That brings us up to '90. And then as I recall we elected Bob Hamilton and Bob agreed to serve. But after he was elected and went to the first meeting he changed his mind. Bob's a good guy. Bob's been active in our chapter and all that. But that just wasn't what he wanted to do. So he resigned. John Leamon, who was vice president at the time, actually served as president. I'm getting a little fuzzy here without checking my records. But at some point, probably the following November, Bill Bullard was elected president. This would be '91.

(Actually, Bob announced resignation at his first meeting (December 1990), although he had informed Leamon ahead of time. At the meeting, Leamon became president and said that he did not wish to be president. Leamon said he'd already talked to Bullard who was willing to be president. At that December, 1990 meeting, everyone agreed for Leamon to appoint Bullard as president and for Bullard then to appoint Leamon as vice president. Thus Bullard was appointed president in December, 1990 and then was elected for another term almost a year later at the 1991 annual meeting)

HS: Or '92.

RM: He was elected in November of '91. And then in November of '92 Jim Lee came back for another term. November of '93 I was elected again and served two years until November of '95. Mary Conrad was elected then and is still serving her second term. So that should work out about right.

NJ: I notice that John Leamon was appointed chair of your bylaws committee.

RM: Yes.

NJ: They were drawn up and approved November 10th, 1988. (Originally, President Barbara Magerl appointed Sylvia Mooney as Chair of a Bylaws Committee, and that first Bylaws Committee had not yet recommended bylaws) You were reelected president at the same meeting. This is interesting. You say, "Among other things, we took our first trail trek." Trail trek number one in June, 1988. "On October 5, 1996 we will conduct Trail trek 17." You have had 17 trail treks.

RM: The reason why we are numbering our treks...I'll take credit for this idea. The Wyoming Historical Society back in the 1950s took a series of trail treks on the trail

across the state of Wyoming. And they published accounts of these treks in the Wyoming Historical Society Quarterly. And I have most of those. I was always fascinated with that effort and the recording of all those treks. And they numbered Trek I and Trek II, Roman numerals. So I thought that was kind of neat. We started that here.

The first one started at State Line Road and went through Lawrence, I think, if I remember right. We called it Trek I. We numbered them very carefully. I think we've actually renumbered from 17 on. The reason why we've done that is that Mary Conrad, bless her heart, has been our newsletter editor almost from the beginning. I think Barbara Magerl may have done an issue or two and maybe somebody else in there at some point. But very early on Mary Conrad became our newsletter, our Tidings, as we call it, editor [the first two issues, Vol. 1, #1 July, 1987 and Vol. 1 #2 December, 1987 were done by Barbara Magerl and Mary took it over for the Vol. 2 #1 January 1988 issue].

She has written very careful detailed accounts of every one of these treks. And they are all in our newsletters over time and she's kept careful numbering of these. The intention was that we were going to publish them like the Wyoming Historical Society did. We've never done it yet. We keep talking stronger and stronger about doing that. I think it would make a very interesting publication, only for local interest probably. But probably if we got it put together I probably could even sell it.

NJ: Illustrated?

RM: Yes, some pictures. We could probably do it. But it would take some work and neither Mary nor I have had time to dig into it. But we renumbered because one of the treks that we took with the Gateway chapter, we wanted to include that was taken a year and a half or so ago and she has a good account of it. We renumbered so that that number 17 probably is going to be 18. The one that already has been taken this year here in Independence was again as a joint with the MRO chapter. So our trek from Westport Landing down to Westport in June will be trek number 20, or XX as they call it.

NJ: Westport Landing to?

RM: To Westport.

NJ: Down like Main.

RM: Yes.

NJ: You have to watch those four-wheel vehicles, and I'm not talking about wagons.

RM: We've got a 20 some passenger bus already rented for it. Hopefully, we'll have enough to fill it. If I get time, I'll put a few notes together.

NJ: How would you assess these treks as fulfilling the purposes for which you were founded? What kind of purpose do they serve and do they fulfill your most important objectives?

RM: Part of the objectives are served by treks. The primary goal of any organization like OCTA is preservation of the trail. Well, it has several features to it. First of all, you have to identify where the trail is at and become familiar with it. Second, you got to educate people about the trail, even your own members, for that matter. And third is to draw public attention or public awareness to the existence of a trail. That's fundamental to any preservation work. There's research, of course, mapping, marking and all that can go on

on the side. But this comes under the heading of what a nonprofit 501C3 is founded for, to preserve and educate about the historical resource you are involved with. So, yes, I think they've done a wonderful job. Besides that, they're fun and we've taken on the average two or three per year, and I think they have been very successful.

NJ: What are the other activities that you consider important to meeting your objectives?

RM: Well, obviously, when you take treks around this part of the country, do it in nice weather. So in the winter you've got to find some things inside to do. And we've alternated between a number of ideas. We've tried to meet jointly with some of the other historical groups here in the area, like the Missouri River Outfitters chapter of the Santa Fe Trail Association, since they've been formed in whenever that was, about 1991, I think. And the Friends of the National Frontier Trail Center [now Museum] is another group we've met with.

NJ: What do you think of the idea of these joint meetings between two or three organizations that tend to overlap?

RM: First of all, it saves some of us time because many of us belong to all of them. But, you know, all of the different organizations are really necessary because we here in this area have all these trails that actually began here. So there are, you know, the Oregon and the California Trails' history, climate, culture, which is not the same as the Santa Fe Trail. It's different and deserves its own preservation group. Just the fact that in this particular area is the only place in the world these are in the same place gives you some overlap of people and some organizations. But by and large I think it's absolutely necessary. And this is a little bit of an aside. I became vice president of OCTA in 1989. And the Santa Fe Trail Association at that time was two or three years old and was still in its early growing stages. And a lot of its leadership had formed out of OCTA's leadership. And yet there was no communication between the two organizations. And I thought this was rather odd. Granted, the president up to that time of the Santa Fe Trail Association had been Mark Simmons and the president of OCTA may have been Tom Hunt or at that point was Dick Ackerman, who was in Oregon. Geographically, they were quite separated. So our leadership did not have a lot of exposure to one another. But I thought it was odd, especially by virtue of the fact that in our area they were the same trails, so there ought to be some communication. So I asked Joe Snell, who was the new president of the Santa Fe Trails Association in 1989, to come over or I would have gone to his home in Topeka. But he chose to come over here to the Trail Center. He and his wife and about four or five of us met here about just simply communicating better between our organizations. This wasn't a chapter thing. I was vice president of the national OCTA and he was president of the National Santa Fe Trail Association. So that was the level at which we were talking. And there were several people here at the meeting. I'm not sure I remember everybody. I do remember Sylvia Mooney was here at that meeting. It took place upstairs in the headquarters next door. There was some talk there about establishing a chapter locally for the Santa Fe Trail Association. One did not exist. There wasn't any chapter east of Council Grove. And I remember very distinctly Sylvia Mooney, who I think was still on the board of directors of the Santa Fe Trails Association at the time. She said, "The last thing I need is another local organization to attend." The best that I can recollect is that it may have been her idea that we maybe try to establish

the Trails Head Chapter of OCTA as a joint chapter, our membership locally belonging to both parent organizations. Well, that's a hybrid situation, obviously. But we all sort of joked that that was a pretty good idea. I thought it was all right.

So in the following June or May, whatever the date was, I went to the Santa Fe Trail Rendezvous in Larned, KS where the SFTA had its annual board meeting as was Joe Snell, who was still the president, and I presented this idea of the Trails Head OCTA chapter being a chapter of Santa Fe Trail Association jointly. They thought it was a great idea. They voted the thing unanimously, as far as I know. That sounded good, so I went to Omaha to OCTA's convention in August and presented the idea to the board there about Trails Head chapter being a joint. Well, the reception was a little less than unanimous. Some real discussion because we had some problems. In California, for instance, a lot of the early members of OCTA had been members of the Trails West organization there, which had been marking the trail for years and years. They wanted to be members of this new OCTA chapter that was forming there. Well, they had to be members of the national. So they had to send national \$25 or so. Well, that was quite a hard thing to sell to all these people. But we stuck by our guns and they all had to be members of the national. The same thing had occurred with the new chapter formed in Utah, Utah Crossroads Chapter with all the Mormon pioneer organizations that they had there active in trails. But we insisted, no, you had to be a member of OCTA. This had occurred in several different organizations. And OCTA stuck by its guns and to allow some kind of sharing of dues, this became rather complicated. And the motion carried, but it was like a seven to three vote, which is not a good idea in any organization to have a split vote like that.

There was enough objection after the meeting that a meeting was called that evening by the board, a special meeting. And that vote was rescinded and the idea was voted down, which in retrospect, I'm really glad it happened because right on the heels of that the local Outfitters Chapter did actually form here for the Santa Fe Trail Association, which is by far the best answer. Many of us, of course, belong to that chapter. But it's a long story. It's an interesting side here of our local organization. Each one of these trails organizations needs its own support group and should not try to combine.

NJ: That finally cleared the waters then.

RM: Yes.

HS: I wonder if I could ask you about the matter of forming a Trails Head Chapter and what relationship that may have had to the grouping of people in California, the grouping of people in St. Joseph and what influence those groupings might have had on where the national headquarters of OCTA would end up being. I'm talking about political factors. Were those kinds of political considerations, as far as you know, in this matter of founding a Trails Head Chapter here?

RM: No, Trails Head Chapter was formed before. In fact, by the time Greg Franzwa mailed all the records and his resignation to Tom Buck's garage, or whatever that story was, in late 1987, Trails Head Chapter was already organized, as we've already said here. Many of the chapters were. There were probably eight or nine chapters by that time. There's

only been a couple formed after 1987. So I'm not sure I get the connection of formation of chapters and location of headquarters. I think there's none.

NJ: Now you mentioned this defection, what do you call it? The controversy involving Greg Franzwa. Did he turn his back? What's the story on that, mailing his records and resignation?

RM: Well, any of you who know Greg Franzwa know that he is not bashful. And that action was not a bashful action. I'm not sure all that went into it. But in 1987 the Santa Fe Trail National Historic Bill, as an amendment to the National Trails System, was signed into law. And the first act after a trail bill is signed in is to begin the comprehensive and management use plan. Greg Franzwa was contracted to do the site segments and trail mapping of this new trail as that part of the comprehensive management use plan. He had a new focus and that activity was going to eat his lunch for about a year until he got all of that done and got his books published and all that. So there were a lot of personal and entrepreneurial changes going on. There were also some things going on in Greg's personal life that I'm not sure I even know enough about to discuss. But for a lot of reasons, all of those and maybe some others, he realized he had gone as far as he could go in almost singlehandedly leading this organization. Which was still true, even though we had another president at the time. Greg was still publishing the newsletter, The Overland Journal. In fact, I think at that time he was officially executive director at \$1 a year. I think we had just elected him to that post. When Tom Hunt became president in 1987, I think, he volunteered to serve as executive director for \$1 a year. And just months later he was gone. I can't explain all of that to you. I don't have enough background. But all I know is that that all happened in late '87 and over the next year or so this organization really struggled to right itself. Because all of a sudden we had no editor for our publication, we had no headquarters location. Some of the institutional memory was gone. The finances were very complicated. Greg could handle those somewhere between himself and Patrice Press and he had one pocket here and one pocket here. I think he'd been very generous. I think a lot of the money that OCTA had benefitted from had come out of his own pockets, somewhere through his publishing company, especially in any of the publishing activities. But for all those reasons all of a sudden we had to find some new leadership, a new rudder and a new location. And out of that came the proposal from the city of Independence to furnish a site here. There was also a proposal out of California to furnish a site, but not near the same deal, not even close.

NJ: Had the headquarters been with Greg Franzwa then?

RM: Yes, in Gerald, Missouri. St. Louis.

NJ: Where he had Patrice Press.

RM: Yes.

NJ: But then he moved to Arizona.

RM: Yes.

NJ: When did that happen? After this?

RM: I'm not sure he moved immediately to Tucson. I think he still stayed in Gerald, Missouri. Well, there was a divorce that went on and some other financial changes, I am sure. I don't know the details at all. But his publishing company remained there, but he changed his own personal focus for a period of time. But a few years later he was elected again to OCTA's board and served another term. I'm not sure about the dates. I'm just guessing, like '92 to '95.

NJ: Who did those records go to that he had?

RM: I suppose they went to Tom Hunt, who was the current president. I don't think Tom had room for them and they ended up in Don Buck's garage. At least that's what I always heard.

NJ: What's happened since they were in his garage? Did they come back to the archives here?

RM: Of course. Don Buck was on the board at the time, one of the leaders of the organization and took over the financial leadership in trying to sort out our financial problems and organizational problems, budget making problems for that first year. The board meeting in 1988 in St. Joe was a wild one and involved day and night meetings by the board trying to grapple with, where are we? Where are the handles? Don Buck was at the forefront of all that.

NJ: But those records, as far as you know, are they in the archives here? Or are the current records over in the headquarters.

RM: Oh, yes. They all came back here.

NJ: I see you were elected vice president of OCTA in 1989 and for four years you were vice president or some other...

RM: Or president.

NJ: Or president. In what years was that?

RM: from '91 to '93.

NJ: Then in the fall of '93 you were elected chapter president.

RM: Yes.

NJ: Again. While you were president of OCTA, what do you recall being the most important achievements or progress that was made? What stands out in your memory?

RM: Well, I think what I remember about that period. We had come out of some really, really hard times in 1988 and '89 even after Franzwa left. Financially, we didn't know where our money was or if we had enough money. The 1988 convention in St. Joe didn't make any money. And we didn't have a lot of money. We were hurting. In 1989 we made

good money at the Boise convention. But it was well organized. Larry Jones did a fantastic job there and really established the prototype for what has been terribly successful conventions ever since, in terms of making money, but more than that, in terms of the quality of the conventions. And so by 1989 we had a couple of nickels in our pocket. Money stopped being a primary concern. The 1990 convention in Omaha was very successful. So by the time I became president in 1991, this ship had begun to really right itself. It had always been a good organization but we had to come through that testing, and we did. The thing that I remember about the two years that I was president is we didn't have any controversies. There wasn't anything that really came up that I remember where there was any of the traditional contentiousness. And I tried very hard and worked very hard to develop consensus on everything. And that happened. Mostly it was luck. Nothing really disastrous hit us, as can happen. It was a very peaceful time, a prosperous time. Our conventions were extremely successful. In '92 we were in Rock Springs. In '93 we were in Baker City in Oregon. In '93 we had over 700 people there. Both were very successful, high money makers and this organization was off and running. I was in the right place at the right time. It was not necessarily because...

NJ: You mention some interesting places, Baker City especially with that museum there.

RM: Yes. It's a small town too, just a county seat town.

NJ: How did you find housing for 700?

RM: Well, it stretched everything they had. There was a neighboring town or two that picked up a few. We used every room in town. A lot of people camped, of course. There were some campers there. But it stretched everything Baker City had. I hadn't answered your question. Probably two or three things that I felt the best about and I haven't thought about this. At some point I wrote a little bit of a review of that two-year period. But number one we established the revenue enhancement plan that Jim Budde has since taken the leadership on. And it's raised a lot of money for OCTA through the membership. The only other thing that comes to mind and there's more but you hit me cold with that question and I can't remember now. Enough years have passed. Another thing that I'm kind of proud of we completely rewrote the bylaws. And any time you want to lose some flesh and sleep, just rewrite the bylaws of an organization. But we did that. And in Baker City in 1993 those bylaws were gone over in great detail and passed one by one by the board. Every one of the changes were passed unanimously or very close to it and we didn't vote on anything until consensus was reached. And everybody left the meeting feeling like they were a winner and we left all in one accord. There were no divisive votes taken. And I liked that a lot. I wanted that very much and that did happen. There were three or four things we couldn't come to closure on and sent it back to committee. That came back the next year for the final resolution. But anyway, those were things I felt really good about. And the conventions were highly organized. Rock Springs, by the way, came out of nowhere. The 1989 board adjourned without a 1992 convention site. That's beginning to get a little tight. I was sent home as the new vice

president to find a site and a coordinator. Some suggestions had been given, one of which was Rock Springs. We had no members there. I found a fellow at the local BLM office. He was public relations director. He turned out to be just a lucky gem. Mike Brown was his name and Mike put on a tremendous convention. He was essentially a nonmember of OCTA and it was totally locally done, marvelous convention. So I felt good about that.

NJ: Were there more trail marking that was done? How is that project?

RM: Trail marking in OCTA has been an ongoing project, not so much locally. We haven't done that much. We did the trail marking through the state of Kansas, but that wasn't exactly a chapter project. That was really accomplished by the legislature and city and county entities. But on a national level the Oregon California Trail has been marked heavily, both route marking and interpretive marking and grave marking. This effort has been spearheaded by Randy Brown, our marker chairman from Wyoming. Randy has just done a super... You need somebody who will take it on and say, "I will take care of this." And Randy Brown has done that. That is one of the things I wanted to find in the Santa Fe Trail Association the past couple years and we are probably still looking for that same sort of person. But we are well down the road with the program anyway. But Randy has done such a marvelous job of that.

NJ: What do you see as probably still some important unfinished presence that OCTA has to do?

RM: As a national organization?

NJ: Yes.

RM: Well, right now some unfinished business right on our front burner is the completion of the California National Historic Trail Comprehensive and Management Use Plan, which, and I think this is factual, overwhelmed the National Park Service. And they reached the point where they admitted they couldn't do it. The California Trail includes all cutoffs and all alternative routes. It's very comprehensive. It's not a single track route. I don't have the mileage in front of me but it more than doubles the route of what we know as the Oregon Trail.

NJ: Because of the Gold Rush taking them into all those different places?

RM: And even on our end. The Oregon Trail was a single track out of Independence. It crossed the state line at 123rd and went out towards Lone Elm Camp Ground and Lawrence and Topeka, etc. The California Trail, though, brings in the other jumping off points here, Westport, Fort Leavenworth, Liberty, Atchison, perhaps. Some of this is unfinished business at this point. St. Joe, certainly, the St. Joe road, the Council Bluffs Road, the Nebraska City Road. All these braided ends at our end, and you do that at several places across the country and you've got a lot of miles. And that along with the fact that the Park Service, probably appropriately, wanted to integrate this new California Trail and the Pony Express Trail passing along with it into the existing plans for the

Oregon and Mormon Trail, which had been passed in 1978. Comprehensive plans had been done but were somewhat outdated at this point. So they tried to roll all that and make four corridor trails into one grand plan. It actually overwhelmed them. They had been a couple years at it and still didn't have it done. It was done not too well, leaving a lot of things out, and not satisfactory at all. And at our midyear board meeting here—several of those people from the Park Service were here—and the board and these people had some frank discussions about the seriousness of this situation. They went back home with a renewed commitment to getting this done and getting it done right. And soon after they got home they essentially threw their hands up and said, “This is too big. We are not going to make it.” And OCTA has taken it over under the leadership of Tom Hunt, our preservation officer. And we will get it done and it will be done well and it will be done accurately. So that's some current unfinished business. As far as business for OCTA the ongoing business of trail preservation, mapping, marking, signing and educating goes on. It will never, ever be complete. It can't be complete. Signage, as you know, in just a few years all wears out and disappears and is vandalized anyway and you've got to redo that. But the idea of preservation goes on and education. We have some internal situations that involve the southwest. The southwestern trails are not in any of the legislation to this point. They would like to be recognized as national trails for the extension of the Santa Fe Trail routes and other routes for that matter, and on in to California. That's on the future agenda. I think having an executive director to carry here from the existing staff will be a necessary need here soon on at some point. We have a transition to make, I'm sure. So there are a lot of unfinished agendas that OCTA has. The basic one of trail preservation goes on like it always has.

NJ: I don't know if we've been able to count, to estimate, but the number of tourists, the people who tour the trails, must have increased considerably, largely because of OCTA and its efforts to publicize and educate, and of course Greg Franzwa's book, *The Oregon Trail Revisited*, which did spur, I think, a lot of interest. In fact, we used it when we followed the trail to Oregon in '92 most the way to the Baker City, Oregon OCTA convention. Is there any way of estimating or kind of guessing at the amount of tourists who have resulted from the efforts of OCTA and perhaps other organizations too since the founding of OCTA? Have they done a lot to increase the number of people who do try to follow the trails to the west coast?

RM: Well, I think undoubtedly trail traffic has increased. I'm not sure anybody has any numbers.

NJ: How are they counted? Fort Laramie, do they count tourists there?

RM: That's about the only place that you can actually get an answer to the question, just count the traffic at any particular site. I don't have any of those numbers at hand. The 1993 150th anniversary of the Oregon Trail resulted in substantial increase. I know that. Not only at sites but tour buses and all of that that goes along with it. And also in terms of local events that were started that year that continue on as annual events at all county seat towns along the trail. But as far as numbers, I don't have any numbers. But this has been

the decade of the trails. Certainly trails in the last 20 years or so have enjoyed a far greater prominence and visibility than before. But this particular decade has been the decade of trail anniversaries. The Oregon Trail is probably the first real attempt at this kind of thing. Then the Santa Fe Trail is going through a two-year observance of its 175th. In '96 and '97 the Mormon Trail anniversaries have been ongoing at the same time. Certainly in '96 in Iowa the 150th of the Mormon trek across that state and also it was the 150th for statehood in Iowa. It was a massive thing.

NJ: They happened to coincide.

RM: Yes. And this current year the 150th of the 1847 trek to Utah by Mormon Trail is becoming from all reports probably going to outstrip everything put together. In fact, it is a worrisome thing about how much actual destruction and wear and tear on the trail remnants will actually occur because of several 100,000 people running the two tracks and stopping at trail locations this summer. In fact I talked to a lady who owns the Burnt Ranch in preparation for the preconvention trek in August on the Lander Road in Wyoming and Idaho. I called her wanting to begin the trek there on private property on the ranch. She said, "Well, yes. We'd be glad to have you. We are expecting a lot of Mormons." She said, "I'm thinking about charging a little fee per vehicle because I know we are going to have some gates that will take a beating." She didn't say this, but I hope she wasn't thinking about re-grading some of the roads because the roads are the trail. Anyway, tourism along the trail this year will be much greater because of that. The '98 and '99 anniversaries are coming for the California Trail, which we will begin to feel here. There's going to be a marker [what marker – the T/H Oregon Trail triangle logo at the Square?] erected this year recognizing the beginning of the California Trail here in Independence actually, which we are going to help locate here soon. [The Independence marker was to be provided by E Clampus Vitus, but then they learned that more '49ers left St. Joseph than Independence. That marker was put at Riverfront Park in St. Joseph, but later was destroyed by a flood.] But statehood for California, the 150th anniversary, again, in the year 2000. So we are going to have a two or three year celebration there from gold discovery. And if you think that's big, we will not have seen anything probably until the Lewis and Clark. Lewis and Clark will be, I think, bigger than all of this put together in 2003 and 2004 and 2005 and 2006. I'm not sure how long. So all of these trail anniversaries and the growth of the citizenry support groups like OCTA and the Lewis and Clark groups, Santa Fe Trail Association, are having a pronounced effect.

NJ: And Ambrose's book on Lewis and Clark generated interest two years ahead. But that's the sort of thing that helps generate and maintain interest in celebrating when the time comes. Why don't we maybe just finish up with some comments about... One thing we haven't mentioned is your administration of the Alexander Majors Home. You were an administrator there, right?

RM: Yes, executive director.

NJ: What years?

RM: From '93 to '96.

NJ: For three years. What did you see as your major obligations and objectives there in administrating that site?

RM: Well, the Alexander Majors house is a real gold mine and kind of a well-kept secret here in this town. It had been up to that point. I was the first full-time director they had ever hired. So I brought to it some full-time attention. We were able to do some really grand things as far as tourism, revenue, publicity, events, special events. There were some things that I thought were really rather good and gained some real reputation. Some people knew me in town, so there was a connection made with the place that was positive also. But all of that when I left a year ago, a little over a year ago now, I was not replaced. In fact, the house is not even open now, I am told, for tours. Everything has just been left to go down. I am sorry about that. I'm sorry secondly because while I was there we had the house certified as a site on the Santa Fe National Historic Trail. And that was a certified site there and as a resource is a worrisome thing. What's going to happen to it? I don't think it is permanently closed, but for right now it's closed.

NJ: The association that operates it, it's a not for profit, one of those 503 kind of not for profit organizations?

RM: 501c3. Yes, the Alexander Majors Historic Foundation.

NJ: They are still organized and have their officers, their executive committee, so to speak. So what are they doing, the officers of this association, if this house is closed?

RM: How much of this do you want on the record?

NJ: It's political, I suppose.

RM: It's not that good.

NJ: You're aware, I'm sure that Harry Truman, the last bill that he initiated in the Congress was to make the Alexander Majors Home a historic site. This was in January of '45 before he officially went to the Senate. He had all this correspondence with Louisa Johnston, so there's a Truman connection with the Majors site. And he said that Solomon Young, his grandfather, was acquainted with Alexander Majors. So there's that angle to the story too of Majors. Somebody is going to take hold on that, I think.

RM: Oh, I have every confidence that the site, which is in excellent physical condition and has been well maintained—there's no problem there. That's one of the real strengths. The real developed and restored resource is there. But right now...

NJ: It's in limbo.

RM: Yes.

NJ: What about an historic site on the Santa Fe Trail? Doesn't that make it a site on the Oregon Trail?

- RM: Well, not necessarily. Here are the differences. When the Oregon Trail legislation was passed, it's a single track between Independence and Oregon City, Oregon. The trail comes as close to the house as 123rd and State Line, which is not unreasonable that it could be certified as a site on the Oregon Trail. The problem really is that it has no connection with Oregon Trail traffic, so far as we know. It just does not have documentation. Santa Fe Trail, different deal. First of all, the Santa Fe National Historic Trail also includes the Westport branches, of which there are two. One crosses the state line at 70th, just 13 blocks north of the house, or at that time about a half a mile from the northern end of Majors' property, which is at 75th Street. So that's almost adjacent to the trail, the National Historic Trail. And this history of the house connected to the Santa Fe Trail is there too. So on those bases the house can be certified for the Santa Fe Trail but not so for either the California or Oregon Trails.
- NJ: So it was a connection but not necessarily a tight connection to the Santa Fe Trail. In other words, the traffic for Santa Fe would have come across close to the boundary of Majors' property. But it never passed the house itself, the trail to Santa Fe.
- RM: Well, the 1856 survey located the trail crossing at State Line Road at about 70th Street. Now there are trails all over everywhere. We know that (unclear) and Leawood were used by the traders in early days, even before the house existed. It was wintering for the animals and merchandise that came into Westport. It is a little area that teems with trail history. The basis for the certification of the Majors house doesn't really need to extend beyond the fact that that was the home of Alexander Majors. That alone is enough. There's substantial evidence that there were shipments that actually left the house for the trail, maybe not heavily. That's a little fuzzy. We know that his big contracts in '57 and '58 were out of Fort Leavenworth. We know that. But some of those things are a little fuzzy. But certainly as a trading connection to the trail, that connection is there ever how lightly or tenuously.
- NJ: Now he was raising oxen, horses and mules. What was he doing with that pastureland, the pastureland to the west?
- RM: Well, they had pastureland development on the farm.
- NJ: Were the oxen and mules that he was raising there perhaps used on the trail?
- RM: Yes, in part. But there is a sequence of events. Soon after the house was built, he was gone. He moved to Nebraska City. He had a contract to service the troops in Utah in '57 and '58. He wasn't here anymore. His son-in-law actually bought the house.
- NJ: But he was the one who designed it. The shape of the house was because of his ideas.
- RM: I have no idea.
- NJ: He must have had an architect or builder.
- RM: It's kind of Greek revival stuff that you find out of Kentucky, where he was from, if that means anything.

NJ: Southern, I think, the porch.

RM: He was from Kentucky. As far as who designed it, I have no idea. I never did know.

NJ: There are some interesting records at the Truman Library, correspondence with Louisa Johnston on this.

RM: Historically, the site is very sound. But like any other site if you're not careful, some legends grow up around it. Miss Johnson, she had a favorable slanting toward the history of the house, which might have embellished some things here and there, no question. But the history is solid.

NJ: My wife and I went through it before they did the renovation. It was a mess.

RM: Yes.

NJ: I appreciate your time. Let me get a picture.

RM: Oh, a mug shot. I can hardly wait.