

D O Johnson

Oral History Transcript

Durward (D.O.) Johnson spent his entire Forest Service career from 1925 to 1956 in Grand County, Colorado. He took the ranger exam and served as the ranger on all four districts in Grand County: Williams Fork, Idlewild, Sulphur, and Kremmling. Following his Forest Service career, he served for many years as county commissioner. The interview is conducted by Herb Schwann

Introduction, Johnson's background prior to Forest Service (0:00 – 2:00)

Schwann: This is Herb Schwan interviewing DO Johnson at DO's home in Kremmling on December 10, 1966.

We ought to start somewhere before you went into the Forest Service and find out some of your background

D.O, were you raised in this part area or in Colorado

Johnson: No, up to when I was 11 years old I was raised in the short grass country of the western plains of Kansas. We moved to Denver and spent about a year in Denver. Then my father bought a little place north of Denver and had a little store. We sold that and went up to the Greely District and went into farming. Due to the potato blight and frost and one thing or another he went broke farming there. Then we went into the North Park country in 1914, I was about 19 years old. And he homesteaded there and afterwards bought a sawmill and went into the sawmilling business and the market wasn't very good there.

First FS job – Trail Building (2:00 – 2:55)

Johnson: In the summer of 1925 I went to work for Charlie Kutzleb, ranger Kutzleb, on the Grizzly Creek District. During that time we built 51 miles of trail, the five of us. I noticed that some of the trail that Ed Gamber (sp) and I located, we were the axe men, doing the chopping out and clearing of the trail, the other crew followed making the tread. I noticed the present road they're building towards Rabbit Years, followed it to right in the old trail, followed the grades.

Schwann: There wasn't any road over Rabbit Ears then?

Taking Ranger Exam and Reporting for duty (2:55 – 4:10)

Johnson: Then in that fall, I went over to Steamboat Springs and took the ranger examination, that was the old ranger exam. That probably partly influenced on that. I was going with a Boston school teacher that fall and she mentioned something about that and said that I couldn't pass it. So, it was kind of a challenge and so I took it.

I broke my leg skiing and was in the hospital when the notice came for me to report to the Fraser Ranger District as assistant to ranger Johnnie Johnston. I did manage to get out of the hospital. I had a brace on my leg. At that time I was ordered to have a horse and pack outfit, pack horse, so that was how I arrived, on June 18, 1926.

Summer work – training school, and fire fighting. (4:10 – 7:45)

That summer I served as an assistant to Johnny, until the latter part of September when I went to the training school conducted by Peter Keplinger at Woodland Park, After it was finished Mr Keplinger told me they were going to give me a district right away.

During the summer, Johnny was gone most of that time on land exchange work and other things. Most of the fires I handled myself. I remember the Corona Pass fire, the sheds burned up there. They were building the railroad grade from the west portal of the tunnel to connect up with the old railroad grade over Corona Pass. Ed Hannan (sp?) was doing the building, they had three old Ford dump trucks and a steam shovel and that's what they built that grade.

They were still doing some work on Moffat Tunnel it was nearly finished

It got dry weather and windy with fire danger getting high. I told Ed Hannan he should watch the shovel and keep a man on it at noon. He apparently ignored me and thought I didn't know what I was talking about. One noon, why it took off out of the right of way, a spot fire, with a pretty good wind blowing it started up the hill. It was about the same conditions as the Jim Creek fire the year before that burned most of Jim Creek. I ran on down to Billy Wood's sawmill camp and his crew was eating dinner. We got them out there and started. One thing is cautioned not to do was throw dirt on the fire it crowned in reproduction. But that was the only way we could hold it down to chop enough of the line to stop it. We stopped it at a half-acre. That afternoon Jack Leighou, the supervisor, came up there and looked it over. He didn't say much. But the only thing he started criticizing for chopping too much reproduction out for stopping it. I told Jack I said Jack, reproduction Hell, we were stopping the fire. I've been pretty more or less that way all through whole Forest Service career. As far as telling what I thought.

That summer I scaled logs all summer.

Kaiser Creek Timber Cruise (8:15 -14:00)

Johnson: That fall we had to cruise the Kaiser Creek timber area at the head of the Muddy. And so, Bill Robb and I with two pack and two saddle horses along about the 3rd or 4th of November, started out to build the cruisers cabin. We didn't have only just saws and ax. And Carl Jarner (sp) was supposed to bring the grub up to the Horseshoe Ranger Station. We had enough for a few days. And we stopped at the old Dunham sawmill to pick up some lumber to build the doors for the cabin. Bill wanted to put it on his pack horse, and the horse of course was not used to it so it scattered everything Bill had on its back. And so, we had to repack and put it on mine.

Schwan: At that time, was the old county road that went through Ute Park over Ute Pass in operation?

Johnson: Oh no. It was all trail in there.

.....

So we built that cabin, that was the only lumber we had, we used poles for the roof. I cut the timber and Bill skidded it in. I laid up the logs, Bill didn't know anything about that. When we got to the ridge poles Bill brought in some that were four or five or six inches. I told him those wouldn't do, the roof would come in. He got a little bit mad about it. But we finally went out and brought in some larger logs and we cut poles and put some duff and needles on top and dirt on top of that. We had some screen cloth that's like isinglass. We put that in for windows and built in the bunks. We completed that cabin in about 10 days. Jhanna came up to help us two or three days, but he wasn't much help. And then that winter during the cruise, there was Johnnie Johnson and myself. Carl Jahanna was supposed to be in charge but he wasn't there very much and he didn't know too much about it, and Bill Robb -- there was a little friction between the two of them, and Urban Post, and Frank Smith, Darrel Strom.

.....

We were in there about three months, and along about the second month when Jahanna went out to get the mail... Urban Post sent down an order for him to bring back some firecrackers -- he probably thought we would be there until the 4th of July. In the evening we had a poker game that ran once we got through with our compilations and brought up our tally sheets and maps. We didn't have any poker chips, we used beans for pennies and 44 shells for nickels.

That ran all the time. When the three months were up, I think Johnnie Johnson had won about \$18.

As soon as we got the cabin built, I went down and took over the Horseshoe Ranger District. And then along about the latter part of December they sent up the grub and canned goods that I was going to pack in so I packed that in and the stove. We buried the canned goods to keep them from freezing. The meat we hung up between trees and covered it with canvas to keep out the camp robbers, and the same way with the bread. Next month when we came in there was too much snow to get all the way up with a pack horse even. We had to pack part of it in on our back – the beds and such.

15:45 – 17:45 Snow shoeing and snow survey

Schwan: You were telling me about snowshoeing from Slate Creek over to Horseshoe on the Williams Fork. That sounded like kind of a hazardous trip that the safety people wouldn't permit now a days. Is that right?

Johnson: Oh yes, it was 27 miles round trip on snow shoes. There was no place to stop or stay. I could have gone down to the old Horseshoe RS but there was no food or anything, just beds at the office. So, I would make that trip – get up early in the morning, and maybe 8 or 9 o'clock before I'd get back in. We were also using the tubes at that time. It was supposed to be two men, and later on it was two men who made the trip

Schwan: That was snow sampling and weighing

Johnson: Yeah, I did it all alone on two courses.

Schwan: One day over and one day back?

Johnson: No, all in one day.

Schwan: Well I mean, Oh, you went back again?

Johnson: Yeah, all in one day.

Schwan: Well, that was quite a trip.

Johnson: Yeah, all in one day

Schwan: And not a house along the way? Not a ranch or anything else?

Johnson: No, there were none. And practically all of it had to be broke, new trail. At least 25 miles of it I had to break new trail along the way.

Civilian Conservation Corps (22:12 -)

Then on June 2, 1933 a train load of CCC destined for the Williams Fork. The train had pulled into Parshall and part of the lieutenant and some others had started on up to the campsite and they decided to change the orders and send them back to Tabernash. On the train there were 185 green CCC enrollees, no foreman.

Schwan: Where did they come from?

Johnson: Mostly from Oklahoma, well from all over, but mostly from Oklahoma, and some from Texas and down in that country.

They had one corporal, one sergeant and a lieutenant. The lieutenant was about useless in as far as knowing anything and getting anything done. They had a doctor along with them. They also had their food, tents and bedding. There were seven coachloads of bedding. So we got them turned around and back to Tabernash about 11 AM. We had three old broken down rented Hertz trucks to unload the train and seven baggage coaches.

Schwan: Well about three coaches full of bedding?

Johnson: Yah, about three coaches of bedding.

Well at first, we couldn't get to the camp. There was too much snow. So, we strung them out along the creek along the road going up there. We had to string them out pretty much because there wasn't enough room. We set up five big hospital tents. There were three of us who knew how to do the job. Of course, we used the other kids there. I had two men working for me, Orwell Olsen and his son. They cut poles and tent stakes and stuff like that so we had someone to do that. We had a load of hay hauled in to sprinkle out to make bedding for them. We issued the bedding and fed them and finished up about midnight and had the boys bedded down.

Later on, the next year we had the camps built, and we had the foreman. Regional Forester Dave Nordwall was one of the CCC foreman and Johnnie Johnson came back to be the superintendent in the summer. Dave and I had the side camps, which later on they wouldn't allow. We used them up on the trail on Arapaho Creek and places like that.

Schwan: Now what work did they do.

Johnson: Their work consisted mostly of thinning, we cleaned up the logs along the Berthoud Pass road to the top, and did some campground work. The camp that Dave Nordwall had we used them on the trail that summer.

Schwan: Did they work on the big thinning between Williams Fork and Peege (sp?) ck above Horseshoe Station.

Johnson: No, the only thinning they did was up along Meadow Ck.

Schwan: I've heard that referred to as a CCC thinning.

Johnson: No, they didn't do that one. Also, they helped rebuild the old road up to the old Western Box sawmill up on Meadow Ck.

Schwan: Did they have any equipment or was it all pick and shovel work.

Johnson: It was all pick and shovel work.

Schwan: Well, I was lucky; I had a 25 horsepower Allis Chalmers bulldozer.

Johnson: laughs

Schwan: They worked on campgrounds too, didn't they?

Johnson: Yes, some, but not too much.

We had them on several fires, there was one fire there during that summer, a train coming up from Fraser set three different fires, and one of them ran out where present Hideaway Park is. And I had a crew of them in there. The fire crowned, and came over us 100 feet I saw it the minute it exploded that way. We were about 150 yards from the railroad right of way. And I told them to drop their tools and get the hell out of there and follow me, and we hit for the railroad track and let her go. The road down there stopped the fire afterwards we got out on the side of it and pinched it in and the other fires ran out into the meadow and stopped themselves. They weren't so dangerous so the crews they sent up there were the ones the sent to the upper fire.

And they also cleaned up some of the old flumes that used to go down to the Western Box Mill.

Thinking back, the first summer of 1926 when I was up there, I scaled the last logs that came down the St Louis Creek flume to the old Stephens and Bar sawmill. After that the old flume was never used again.

Schwan: What did you think of the boys, were they good workers?

Johnson: Yes, the boys we had, where they had good leadership were good men. We had very few [problems]. There were some troubles when they first started there, I guess same as anywhere. They didn't have enough protein. I think they were trying to feed them on 19 or 23 cents a day. And that just couldn't be done in mountain country.

Schwan: That's right – it takes food.

Johnson: There was too much starches in that.

Schwan: So, you figure at the end of the season, the CCC work was pretty successful?

Johnson: Yuh, where it was planned, we could use them, they were effective. Of course, some of it was not too effective work.

Schwan: Well, they let me put out side camps, in fact we had some 75 miles from the main camp. Were that is by road where we could get to it. I thought that was very successful where we could get the boys out there in a group of 25 or 30, they could do a lot of work.

Johnson: Well, mine had to be packed in. That was one objection they had to it, because they couldn't get to it by trucks.

Schwan: Well, we had road access but it was sometimes a long, long ways around. But they put in roads to overcome that problem.

Johnson: Well during that time I was scaling about three and a half million feet and marking of timber on that district without any help.

Schwan: Preceding the CCC work there were some other work programs one of which was the NIRA work program. You were telling me some stories about that.

Johnson: Well, we had some trail work that needed to be done, and under the NIRA program we had to pay union wages to the men, and they had to be local men in need of work, so we had the pick of some very good men. Among them was an ex-woods boss, old Gus Every, a famous character around there, and Jim Short who was cook in the camp, and who afterwards he opened La Casa Café which was famous here for a number of years. This camp was back up the trail, everything had to be packed in. We charged the men a dollar and a quarter a day for food. But they could have anything they wanted, in fact Jim Short fed them T-bone steaks until they hollered and wanted some boiled meat. Every week we would send up a hind quarter and beef loin and a couple of pork loins, sometimes fresh pork and all the fruits in season, even cantaloupes, and stuff like that was packed into this camp. For dessert, the crew had choice of two or three different kinds of pie and sometimes other desserts. Jim was a very good cook. He had three camp stoves in the cook tent. We made out tables by tacking lathe to pieces of

canvas which could be rolled out and oil cloth put on top of them and bench seats, which were very comfortable.

Schwan: Those were standard in fire camps in the old days.

Johnson: We got an exceedingly large amount of work done in that time. One of these men that worked on that trail, had a half section of land where the Tabernash campground now is. He wanted to get some money out of it. So, I offered him a dollar and a quarter an acre through an exchange of it for timber on a going sale. He was agreeable, so I surveyed it out, all alone. Had to pace it out making my tie about a mile away from a known section corner I used steel pins and kept pulling the tape and walking back to make sure I had the right place to start. Then I paced it off, made the maps and report. As far as I know it was never changed, went through the Regional Office and Washington Office and the sale was consummated. And today we have the large Tabernash camp in that area. (35:25)

Cutting ski trails, 1st Creek Cabin (39:00:00 – 42:30:00)

Schwan: This is Herb Schwan interviewing D.O. Johnson at DO's home in Kremmling on December 10th, 1966.

Schwan: Now about the beginning of the Winter Park Ski Area

Johnson: Along about 1930 or 31, I'm not just sure, when they started keeping the Berthoud Pass open, the following summer with the help of Col. Peck's son, and there was Frank Ashley President of the First National Bank now, and I believe Darrel (sp?)Phillips and Thomas Dye(sp?) and myself. I don't believe I had any men or any funds at that time. We laid out the first ski trails -- the one down Cooper Creek, and the one went down north from Berthoud Pass to connect up with the old stage road. And we also cleared up on the hill west of Berthoud Pass, and this let the skiers come on up in the winter time with a carload, and one man would drive down to the lower switchback on the north side and the skiers would have a run there of approximately 3 miles. That on the Cooper Creek side, on the eastern slope, was a shorter run of approximately a quarter to a half mile, I'm not exactly sure what the distance was, that we cleared out and this would give them a faster run. As far as I know these were the first really ski runs that were built or long trails. Steamboat Springs and Hot Sulphur Springs had the ski jumps long before, of course.

Schwan: That was what year?

Johnson: It was either in 30 or 31 if I'm not mistaken. I'd have to check back through the diaries. It was before the CCC days and the NARA (sp?) program.

I might make a note that the Arlberg Club was formed by the same group of men.

And then, later on, we built a ski shelter cabin on First or Second Creek, I forget which creek it was, and we also built a ski shelter behind the Idlewild Ranger Station. This one, down there, was built later on. The one up on First Creek was built by the CCC crews. Now I remember, because I packed the boards and [undecipherable] in there for them.

Schwan: The next step after that was to get the rope tows in.

Johnson: Well I left before the rope tows were put in. I left before the rope tows started.