

Tape 1 Side B Bernard Foster

(Bernard, thank you for participating in this important project that seeks to honor our nation's heritage by preserving knowledge about the history of homesteading on the great planes and the formation of the USDA forest service national grasslands system. The history of homesteading and the national grasslands system are tales that are inexorably intertwined. The goal of this project is to unearth and preserve information that demonstrates the relationship between these two stories. The primary objective of this research is to obtain local knowledge. I will now ask a series of questions meant to informally guide this interview. The interview will be limited to approximately one hour. At the conclusion of my questions, please feel free to add any additional information you have on homesteading or the national grasslands system)

[Chris Rowe]: (We are here with Bernard Foster, age 88, from – where are you from, sir? Right around here? Are you from Wall?)

[Bernard Foster]: I was raised right out here, 9 miles northwest. I told Cheyenne a while ago, my parents homesteaded out here in 1906 before there was a town of Wall, before there was a town of Wasta. Do you want me to...?

[CR]: (Yeah, go for it. This is great.)

[BF]: The first winter, my dad and mother, and his brother and his wife, and a little two year old girl lived in a dugout – about a 16 by 20 foot dugout. And kind of close proximity. And the first spring after they were out here, the closest sawmill was Rapid City. So my dad took the box off of his wagon, took the running gears, and I don't know what he fixed for a seat on it, and a team of horses, and he headed for Rapid City, which is – it'd take you two days. So he got to Rapid City, and started loading his lumber and it started raining and he started home, and – I don't know whether he remembered or not but – he said he got stuck several times, and he'd have to unload or partially unload his lumber. And he had it chained down to the running gears, but he'd have to unload it, and then carry it up and reload it.

[CR]: (Wow, that's a lot of work.)

[BF]: And he'd keep going. And it took him 3 days to – he said when going up, when he crossed the Cheyenne River was about ankle deep to the horses; when he got back to crossing the Cheyenne River was a half mile wide. And, he said he was sitting and wondering what in the world he was gonna do and a half breed cowboy rode up, and he said 'it looks like you have a problem' and dad said 'yeah I sure do'. Well, he said, 'I got fifty foot of rope, I'll tie onto your wagon tongue and wait and cross this if you want to' and dad said 'lets go'. So then, like I said, he had his lumber tied down, chained down to the running gears, so as soon as they got floating down the stream, it started going. And the cowboy was up in front and he finally got footing over his horse and slung dad around and then they had to find a place to get up over the bank. But then he started to pull up off of the river, pull up onto the flats and, I don't know whether you guys have been to – have you been down to Wasta and west of town?

[CR]: (I have not personally.)

[BF]: There's a pretty good pole to get up off the river, to get up onto the flats. But anyway, this cowboy was tied on and helped him came up over the hill. Dad told him, he said 'I don't have much cash, but I'll try to give you something', and he says 'What do I owe ya' and the guy said 'All I want is a home cooked meal'. So that's what he got.

[CR]: (Excellent, excellent. That just is a theme out here, ya know. Helping each other out for the sake of being a good neighbor. So, I assume he got that lumber back out to the dugout, then?)

[BF]: Back to his homestead, the dugout wasn't on dad's land. That was another thing. When he came down and filed on the homestead, they showed him one quarter and giving him the description of another. When he actually got out here to start building and occupying his homestead, half of it was lakebed. He lived there from 1906 til I think it was '15, he moved about a mile and a half west – I don't know whether he created, bought, or what, but he moved over closer to where his brother lived.

[CR]: (Okay. How long after that were you in the picture, then?)

[BF]: Well I didn't come along until 1926.

[CR]: (Okay, okay. So that was after he moved.)

[BF]: Oh yeah, that was after the move. Definitely. I've been here – I remember the dustbowl. I remember the dust storms and the grasshoppers and...

[CR]: (Well, if you'd like to tell us about that, that'd be excellent. I mean, what are your recollections about that?)

[BF]: Well, there was days that you almost couldn't go out with the grasshoppers. Actually, you can look up and see the sun reflecting off of their wings and it was like stars twinkling. And they ate everything that didn't move, I swear to god. They'd eat paint if there was any paint on the buildings. They'd eat the bark off the fence posts. You couldn't eat the eggs - the chickens ate so many grasshoppers that it spoiled the taste of the eggs. ...You know, little things like that. During those dustbowls, my dad would plant winter wheat in the fall and it wouldn't come up, and he'd plant winter wheat in the spring and it wouldn't come up and die, ya know. He couldn't even get enough back for seed for the next year, but there was no grass grown. I remember the kids going off, maybe 6 or 7 years old, and they were plucking up thistles for feed. You got to try to cut 'em green and they'd heat and soften up. They tried to cut 'em while they were still kinda green and[unintelligible-TC-962] but I was a stomper and they would put me to stomp around. It was a tough go.

[CR]: (I can imagine so. It sounds like it.)

[BF]: No one complained much because they were, you weren't envious of their neighbor because nobody had anything. They were all on the same boat and no battles.

[CR]: (Absolutely, yeah.)

[BF]: Knowing everyone's been up the crick.

[CR]: (Your family was doing okay during the dustbowl. How 'bout your neighbors? Do you know people that gave up and left the area?)

[BF]: Most of my close family – they all survived, some way or other. I don't remember ever being hungry – really hungry. ...A lot of times our menu was pretty limited. We didn't have a lot of variety, but I don't – I never suffered from hunger, but the things that the people lived through in order to survive. And... it was quite a go because when my folks came out here, there wasn't a fence in the country. There were no roads. I mentioned the Cheyenne earlier, no town of Wall, no town of Wasta. The closest town was Dakota City and it was south of where Wasta is now about – what, probably about 3 miles. Something up there, something like that.

[Cheyenne McGriff]: Yeah, maybe like five, six.

[BF]: And then there was Smithville – was down the river almost to where Box Elder creek comes under the Cheyenne. So if they wanted anything, they had to go one or the other places.

[CR]: (How long would that take by horse and wagon?)

[BF]: I imagine, well from home to Dakota City was probably about seven or eight miles. So you know, you pretty much used a day when they did their shopping. And of course, they didn't have any money to shop with so. But you could, you pretty much waste a day. And I can remember my folks – my dad – coming to town with, when they did have some crops, a threshing machine, and hauled grain to the elevator in town with a team of wagons. It was – we were nine miles out so it was a pretty much took near a day to come to town and unload the grain. And they didn't have any hoists, you just shoveled it off.

[CR]: (So would they – when you brought in grain, would that be, you'd get cash? Or was it kind of like a barter system? Or how did that work?)

[BF]: No, no. It was – you'd bring it to the railroads, and you might take it out and trade. You might take out some flour or what have you. Ya know. They always bought the flour in hundred pound bags and then ...[unintelligible TC 1016]... they were made into shirts and skirts and aprons. And I can remember my mother going in to get flour and she would find a pattern that she had already had one at home, because there were different patterns on the... And she would try to match a pattern that she already had so.

[CR]: (To make larger garment out of that? So nothing got thrown away?)

[BF]: No, nothing got thrown away. You didn't waste anything. I'm still that way.

[CR]: (Not a bad thing. I mean...)

[BF]: On our home place, we never did find water that was fit to drink. And we hauled our water – my grandmother lived about almost three miles east of where we lived. And we hauled our household water in ten gallon cans from grandma's well. And when we finally – I was probably seven, eight years old – finally dug a cistern, and somebody got a tank so we could haul water from the Wall system or Wasta. Wasta had springs up on the hill that – good, soft water. But it was about nine miles around to Wasta too so.

[CR]: (Yeah, that's a long trip for... So, how far away was your grandma's well that you had to...?)

[BF]: It was about three miles.

[CR]: (Three miles? And how often – would you have to do that daily?)

[BF]: Well, you didn't throw any water out there either. What you don't use, went out to the chickens for them to drink, or the pigs, or whatever. Ya know. And bath water was – the little ones started and then you used it more than once so.

[CR]: (Yeah, wow. Different world.)

[BF]: I had... I had problems with... my first wife was a lady from Alabama. And she had a – I got two for one. I got a fourteen year old daughter along with my wife when I got her. But they were city kids. Actually my wife's dad had a farm at one time when she was a girl. But I had a terrible time with them – telling them 'don't let the water run while you're brushing your teeth'. Ya know, you don't waste that water 'cus we have to haul it. It took a while but I finally got her broke. And I still to this day don't let the water run when I brush my teeth.

[CR]: (Sure. Wow, that is something. I can't imagine that.)

[BF]: Do you wanna hear another story about one of my dad's experiences?

[CR]: (Please. Yes, that'd be great.)

[BF]: When they came out here, they hauled everything that they could, but there was some of the farm machinery and so forth that they – they went together and rented a boxcar and what they called an immigrant car, and they shipped the stuff that they couldn't bring with them to Ender Crack which was east of Kadoka yet. East of Belvidere actually, at Okaton. And... the first spring, my dad – well I gotta back up a little bit. The mosquitos in the first spring, dad says was so bad that at a quarter mile, you couldn't tell a black horse from a white one. They were just – and there was no fences in the country and dad lost one horse. One horse got away and he had no idea where this horse was. But anyway, he took the team and started to Okaton to bring back all of the farm machinery in the spring and he was going down the trail through the prairie and a guy was farming out next to the road and he was using dad's horse. So dad stopped and went over and the guy wanted to know – said 'Can I help you' and dad said 'I've come to get my horse'. He said 'No, that's not your horse' and dad said 'Yeah, I think he is'. He said 'Well you're not getting him' and dad said 'Oh really'. He walked back over and pulled out his old .45-70 from under the seat and came back over and he said 'Now mister', he said 'You take the collar off of that horse and if he's gut-eyed, if I find a star or a scar or something if the harness had rubbed and left a...' – but anyway, he had an idea to find a mark on his shoulder. He said 'If that's there, he's mine. If it's not there, I'll put your harness back on and apologize.' He left the guy standing out in the field with one horse and the other on its way home.

[CR]: (Ended up being his horse. So, wow. That is – I mean you didn't have any recourse except for yourself, really, back then.)

[BF]: No, you didn't. You had to pretty much make a law yourself and you had to enforce the law yourself. But... I was born about fifty years too late, or sixty, I find. I would have loved to...

[CR]: (So what was it like out here when you were born? Was there roads then or...?)

[BF]: There was - the road from Wall to Rapid City, when I was a kid, was gravel. And a lot of the gravel had been crushed and they'd used a lot of flint rock. And I can remember started going to Rapid City and

having two or three flat tires between here and Rapid City. And dad would get out and jack the car up and take it off and pull it out and put a coal patch on the tube and pump it back up with his little hand pump and put it back on and maybe go fifteen or twenty miles and have another flat tire. It was an experience to go to Rapid City. The country roads were all dirt. When it rained, you'd – you didn't go far 'cus once it got wet and started rolling, you'd fill your fenders up and burn your clutch out. I've been there, done that.

[CR]: (Some of those roads get real bad, even now with the rain. What kind of car did you have?)

[BF]: The first one I can remember having is a 1926 Chevrolet. Dad had a couple cars before that, I think. He had a "T" and he had a Maxwell I remember he talked about, I don't remember the cars. The first one that I remember is a '26 Chevy sedan.

[CR]: (Very nice. Kind of along those lines, when your father came out here, was he farming then, or ranching.)

[BF]: It was a combination.

[CR]: (A combination of the two? For the farming, what sort of – I mean, did he start out with horse drawn plows? And then?)

[BF]: Oh, yeah. I worked horses. Not a lot, but I cultivated corn with horses and I followed a drag with horses. They didn't have – I don't remember my dad ever following a walking plow. He had horse drawn plows – all of the equipment was horse drawn. And you – even most of the threshing in the first year, or the few years that I helped with threshing was horses. So the first two or three years and then we finally got smart enough we put our wagon behind a tractor and added a couple spike pitchers to load the wagon so the guy that drove the tractor – the only thing he did was drove the tractor and unloaded the wagon. He had what they called spikers and they had two guys that worked together and they'd – we usually use six racks for – the guy we worked for had the machine – the threshing machine. And he wanted six racks and then there was six spike pitchers and they worked in pairs and they had two – you'd have your two guys that you loaded for them and then when you got the second one loaded, the first one was back out, you could come back to the end of the machine, the crap wagon, and sit in the shade or play cards or whatever until it was your turn to go out and load again.

[Cheyenne McGriff]: (As far as, like ranching... with like, getting your livestock – was that something that they purchased once they were here or something that was purchased along the way?)

[BF]: Well, you raised – they brought cattle with them when they came out. In fact, dad said that that was the young – the boys' job was to herd the cattle – to keep them going. And they left out by Sioux Falls – they left from Howard. And... dad said by the time they got out here, the herd was broke to ride. Because the kids didn't like walking.

[CR]: (I bet. Yeah, that's a long walk from Sioux Falls to here.)

[Cheyenne McGriff]: (So you mentioned playing cards. What were some other things that you did when you had time for fun things? Or things that you did for fun?)

[BF]: If your neighbors came over, you played cards. Ya know. They played pitch or they played euchre or rummy or something. But there was always a – Canasta finally came along, later on it was Canasta.

But there was a lot of cards played. And they get so worn you couldn't hardly shuffle 'em or deal 'em or nothing else.

[CR]: (So... do you remember anyone that, in the dustbowl had to sell their...? Was there anyone that you knew – neighbors or anything like that – in the dustbowl, that had to sell their land and maybe...?)

[BF]: No, I don't remember any of the neighbors actually every leaving because of the dustbowl. Some of 'em went to Minnesota. Some of 'em left but I don't know if it was because of the dustbowl. One of dad's half-brothers went to Minnesota. But I don't know why Uncle Lowell went there. No, the biggest – managed to survive, that was basically about all they did was survive, too. I got nothing but admiration for all of the pioneer women. They had a rough go. They had – ya know – they had a house to take care of and kids to take care of and the laundry and the cooking and the – I remember my mother going out during harvest time and shucking grain and ya know, it was a family – family project. Everybody worked. About six years old, I started milking cows and doing things that I was big enough to do. I was probably riding a horse before I walked. I'm sure my dad had me horseback before I was even walking. I didn't get any bowlegs though. ...Now, I'm not helping you guys a bit with your survey.

[CR]: (Actually you're hitting all the questions without me even having to ask any, you're doing so good.)

[BF]: You're supposed to be asking me questions here I'm sitting here talking.

[CR]: (And this is exactly what we want. This is better than asking questions.)

[BF]: Oh really?

[CR]: (Yup. You're welcome to talk about whatever comes to mind.)

[BF]: It was... a different world back then, ya know. If you made a buck, it was yours. And... my first paying job was a – I was I think eight years old. Eight or nine, I can't remember for sure which, but a guy who lived in town had sixty acres out here, about half way to the – to home. He'd come out and he had oats and it was about this tall and just as thick as it could stand and – and this was, like I say I was probably eight or nine years old. And he come up and wanted to know if dad would – he'd had it bound and he wanted it shucked and dad said 'No, I don't have time to shuck it' and the guy said 'Well, what about the boy?'. Dad said 'Yeah, he could probably do it', so they made a deal that I was to shuck this sixty acres of grain. Dad would take me down in the morning with a lunch and a couple gallons of water and – and had no thought of rattle snakes or anything like this and he'd come back at night and get me. And I shucked that sixty acres of oats at 25 cents an acre. When he paid, my dad got the money.

[CR]: (Wow. So ...how far would a dollar go back then for ya?)

[BF]: A dollar went quite a ways. There not a lot of, ya know – I can remember going into Rapid City when I was a kid and there was a restraint underneath the Kearney hotel – underneath the sidewalk. And they had glass bricks, you could see people walking up and down the sidewalk. But a hamburger was a nickel. And I mean, they were nice – nice big hamburgers. There was five cent hamburgers. But I looked forward to going to town 'cus we got to go down and have a hamburger. And that's where I had my first sloppy joe. I didn't – I just wanted a sloppy joe.

[CR]: (I do love those too.)

[BF]: But I can remember, even like up in the mid – early 40s, I could go into the clothing store and for ten dollars, I could buy a shirt and a pair of jeans. I mean – and it was more or less dress jeans. For under ten bucks, I could get a – and I did a time or two – I'd get caught accidentally in town on a rain storm and couldn't get home.

[CR]: (Right. Sure. So... in your house, what kind of heating stove did you have?)

[BF]: What kind of what?

[CR]: (What kind of stove did you have?)

[BF]: Stove?

[CR]: (Yeah, was it wood burning or...?)

[BF]: Wood burner. Wood burners. We had a warming – oh, I don't know whether it was about yay big around in the living room. And then we had a – mother had a cook stove wood burning with a water reservoir on one end and a warming oven above and... I can remember my dad getting up in the wintertime 'cus nothing was insulated. You didn't have any insulation, you didn't have any thermal windows or... just rags enough to close – to stick around to keep the wind out and the snow. But I can remember my dad getting up in the wintertime and starting a fire in the living room and one in the kitchen and there wouldn't be a few minutes til mother was out and they let me usually let me sleep in a ways. But after I got big enough and started helping with the chores, we'd – mother'd start breakfast and dad'd and I'd go do the chores. We'd go milk and ...and then I'd come in and separate and ...and have breakfast and then we'd go back out and take the skim milk and feed the calves and clean the barns and put in feed for that night. So it was – everybody worked.

[CR]: (Yeah, wow. So you had – did you have trees on your property then?)

[BF]: Very few. Very few. And I never asked my dad why he stopped where he stopped instead of going towards the – or maybe all the homesteads were taken in the Black Hills. I don't know. But why not go where there's wood and water, ya know. But we – I can remember going to the Cheyenne River for winter wood, cutting dead cotton woods along the Cheyenne River and hauled 'em off. You'd stack a big pile of wood and then you'd – all the relatives'd come and you'd sell wood all day long.

[CR]: (Wow. So it sounds like you had – did you have quite a few relatives that had homesteads around there?)

[BF]: Well, when I was a kid you didn't dare talk about anybody around Wall because they were all related. There was about – the Fosters, the McKellans, and the Renners and the – ya know, we were all cousins. And... my dad had one brother and a sister, and his dad past away when he was eight weeks old with scarlet fever. And my grandmother remarried and he had six half- brothers and sisters. Three half-sisters and three half-brothers. So there was a – there was a lot of relatives and they were all fairly close most of the time. During... oh, one of the – some of them during the depression went up to Lead and worked on Homestake Mine. That was one of the few places that hired and – in fact, I had one uncle killed on the mine so. Some of 'em went up there and had [unintelligible TC 581].

[CR]: (So there was a lot of cooperation between – was it way more likely to work with your family, like your relatives, or was it all community effort?)

[BF]: Well... like, when it was time to thresh your grain and – and there was very few combines in the country – and you bound your grain and then the thresh machine came around the whole community and – well, the whole community would work together threshing, and it didn't make any difference if you had 200 acres and your neighbor had 50, or he had 200 and you had 50, you didn't just work alone. If you had 50 and he had 200, you didn't quit when you got 50 of his threshed. Ya know, you went to the job and you did what – and they traveled around the whole area and for, oh probably, I suppose probably ten mile radius, you'd thresh. And it would be a month to six weeks job when you started threshing. Every day, you showed up wherever they were working at and they – if it was at your house, your wife and two or three of the neighbor ladies came over and you fixed dinner for the threshing crew. And wherever you were at, you got fed a good meal. And you got fed well. But you worked hard too. And you had a lot of fun with – out in the threshing field playing with rattle snakes.

[CR]: (Rattle snakes are always a pleasure.)

[BF]: We had a neighbor that had a ...we knew he had a snake den on his property and we started threshing and he had sixty acres of rye, and I don't know whether you know anything about grains or not but rye is so slick you can't keep a string around it so ...so we just – we had piles, and you had to practically wade into the pile to fork it and this neighbor said he'd give a case of beer a day to the two spikers that got the most rattlesnakes. So one of my cousins and I were spiking together and the first day, we got the case of beer. We got thirteen.

[CR]: (Thirteen in one day. Wow.)

[BF]: And we weren't – there was other guys getting snakes too, they just didn't get as many as we did.

[CR]: (So would you just get 'em with the fork or?)

[BF]: Yeah. And I've been – I don't know why I was never bitten. There was so many opportunities. I was laying up on a rack one time, I was first up to the machine after dinner and I'd pulled my wagon up to the machine, ready to start unloading. I ate dinner and came out and climbed up on it and, waiting for the operator to start the machine up and I laid down and I was about half asleep and I felt something move and I looked down and a snake's crawling right across my foot. I let it go til he was out of striking distance and grabbed a fork and threw him off of it.

[CR]: (Yeah, wow. Did any of your friends ever get bit?)

[BF]: Ya know, very few people did get bit. It was amazing, as many snakes as there were that there weren't more people bit. I had one uncle that was bit, but he was gonna show 'em how to pick up a rattle snake.

[CR]: (What was the treatment for it, like for your uncle?)

[BF]: Oh they just cut it and sucked it. Which isn't the thing to do but apparently it must've worked somehow.

[CR]: (Must've worked well enough, I guess.)

[Interviewer 2]: (One of my questions was... about how far would you say most of your neighbors were from you out there? How far were most of your neighbors from you? Like, in terms of – how long would it take you to get over to your closest neighbors?)

[BF]: I'm not understanding you.

[I2]: (Like, from your homestead, how long would it have taken you to get to like, where your closest neighbor was? In terms of walking? How far?)

[BF]: Nine miles. Nine miles from town. Is that what you're asking?

[I2]: (No, your neighbors.)

[BF]: Oh, nearest neighbor? Oh, I could throw a rock to my nearest neighbor. My uncle lived a quarter of a mile. And I had another uncle that lived three quarters of a mile south of me. Well, like I said, five mile radius, there was sixty – I think sixty one or two families that I can remember. And then they – quickly they started moving out and moving on and most of 'em – oh, some of 'em probably left because of – but I wasn't concerned about why they left, ya know. I was young enough, I didn't care much.

[CR]: (Do you know what happened to their land? Who they sold it to?)

[BF]: Some of the neighbors bought it if they had some money. My dad bought – one of my uncles moved over to my grandmother's place and my dad and uncle that lived next door bought what land he had. And... they just kept getting a little bigger places all the time and. But you had to. You can't live on 160 acres. Not out here.

[Cheyenne McGriff]: (You said there was thirteen of you, right? Thirteen of your family that all came?)

[BF]: There was thirteen families that came out. And they were all related somewhere or other. Aunts, uncles, cousins, a cousin's cousin, ya know.

[Cheyenne McGriff]: (Where was your family originally from?)

[BF]: You know, they came from Indiana. My dad and mother were both born in Indiana. And... I don't know how my uncle and – dad's brother and his wife connected because they were both born in Indiana but they connected somewhere or other and moved from Indiana to Southwestern Minnesota – down southern Minnesota between there and Rough Rapids, Iowa. And... my dad left Indiana to be up there with them when he was seven years old. My mother was born about three miles from where my dad was but they never knew each other. But... my uncle, and his wife was my mother's sister, and my mother was raised in Indiana and when she was nineteen years old, two of dad's uncles came back by train to visit 'cus they had a lot of relatives in Indiana where they were from and they came down there by train to visit and

GAP BETWEEN TAPE 1 SIDE B & TAPE 2 SIDE A

[Cheyenne McGriff]: (...communication like we have today.)

[CR]: (Oh yeah, that's a good question. How did mail work out here?)

[BF]: Mail? Rural carrier. Yeah, it was about three quarters of a mile from our house to our mailbox. And my grandfather – my maternal grandfather – that was his job. He walked to the mailbox and back every day to get his exercise. Yeah, there was a rural carrier. And there's still a rural carrier out there.

[CR]: (Huh? Interesting.)

[BF]: I'm a former postal employee. I retired as a postmaster and [unintelligible TC 012].

[CR]: (Oh, okay. Excellent.)

[BF]: I've done a little bit of everything.

[CR]: (Jack of all trades, huh?)

[BF]: Yeah, and I've mastered none. I've farmed, I've ranched, I've carpentered, I – the last eleven years, I wound up as a postmaster.

[CR]: (Interesting. What kind of construction was your house? Was it wood?)

[BF]: Frame.

[CR]: (Wood frame? Was there any soddies out here?)

[BF]: I don't remember ever seeing a soddy. I don't – there were probably some around, but I don't remember ever seeing a soddy. There was dugouts. I remember people digging down and roofing over, and the partial dugouts, but I never saw a soddy.

[CR]: (Okay. That might've just been farther south where there's fewer trees.)

[BF]: They must've been well insulated – well, ya know, you'd get heat, but it'd probably kinda hard to keep from – when it started raining back then. Little difficult to keep the walls up.

[I2]: (About how long did you live in that particular house?)

[BF]: How long did we...?

[I2]: (Yeah. In that particular house, about how long would you say you guys lived there?)

[BF]: The house is still standing.

[I2]: (Oh, it is?)