This interview was conducted with Tom Fulk on March 22, 2018, in the Special Collections Conference Room, WWU Libraries in Bellingham, Washington. The interviewers are Tamara Belts and Danny Beatty.

TB: Today is Thursday, March 22, 2018. I'm here in the conference room with Tom Fulk and Danny Beatty, and we're going to do an oral history with Mr. Fulk. Am I pronouncing that right, Fulk?

TF: Yes, you are.

TB: Okay. And so here we go. Our first question is, how did you get started fly fishing?

TF: I was raised in western Michigan where every roadside ditch had brook trout in it. And so there were thousands of places to fish for trout. So that's how I first got exposed.

TB: So did you –

TF: Including the ditch that ran alongside my uncle's farm which had brook trout in it.

TB: Okay. Did you learn from your uncle or your father or some family members?

TF: No. My father fished and boated, but he didn't fly fish.

I got into fly fishing in particular in 1947 when I was involved in a bicycle accident and was in the hospital for observation for a week. My parents brought me a fly tying kit to keep me occupied. So I tied flies when I was in the hospital. And then on June 20, 1947, which was my 12th birthday, I caught the first fish on a fly that I tied myself.

TB: Nice, nice!

TF: So that was the outcome of a bicycle accident.

TB: Okay. Do you have any other favorite stories or preferences for fishing from your early years?

TF: I've always had a preference for fishing where nobody else was (laughter).

TB: Okay. I think that's common with fly fishermen.

TF: I think so, yes. My idea of a good day of fishing is to go on a lake that has a lot of fish and be the only person on the lake all day, or with my friends, too. That's the way it is in British Columbia some places still.

TB: Okay, nice. Have you done any other, like, destination fishing?

TF: Oh yes, I fished tarpon and shook in Mexico on Isla de Holbox. I also made three trips to Christmas Island to fish for bonefish and trevally. I have fished all the United States practically. I think probably every state.

TB: Wow. And then, have you passed on any of that of your own passion for fishing to any family members or other good friends or something?

TF: Well, I try, but my grandkids weren't very much interested in fly fishing. But a friend of mine has a pond, and he propagates his own rainbows. I took my grandson and granddaughter to the pond one day because they wanted to fish. I had to throw the lines out because they didn't know how to cast, so I cast out my granddaughter's line first. And of course my grandson was standing there, and he's jumping up and down, excited, you know. She caught a 25 ¼ inch rainbow, and we measured it and released it. And the only thing I could think of at the time was how disappointed my grandson was going to be because he couldn't possibly get one like that. But he got one exactly the same size.

TB: Wow! Perfect, perfect. And then your own profession was forestry, so is there any connection between your fly fishing and forestry?

TF: Well naturally, the National Forests offer a lot of places for public access to fishing waters, so almost every place I worked had some kind of fly fishing on public land.

TB: Okay. And then, how did you get started with your woodworking skills?

TF: Oh, I think because my parents encouraged it. They were good about encouraging their kids to try to do things. So I started out using my dad's tools and damaging some of them (laughter) in his shop, but they encouraged that.

DB: Excuse me. Did your time in the navy, with the woodworking, was that any influence?

TF: Well that was a strange thing because usually what happens when you go into the military, they ask you what kind of work you did before. And so they asked me and I said, Well, I did boat repair, small boat repair. Well the usual outcome is if you did boat repair, they'd make you a cook or something else out of you. They didn't hardly ever have you do what you did before. But in this case they did. They put me in charge of a boat repair shop on an aircraft carrier.

TB: Oh wow.

TF: And so, I had two years in the navy of, you know, additional boat repair experience. And I served during and after the Korean War for eight years.

TB: And then, so back to your woodworking skills, you have built –

TB: Okay. You have built boats, furniture, and musical instruments. What type of musical instruments did you build?

TF: Guitars, ukuleles, dulcimers, and end blown flutes.

TB: What kind of wood do you use for that? Is that bamboo too?

TF: No. For guitars and ukuleles, you'd use some tropical hardwood such as mahogany. I made some out of our local birch. It has a very nice grain pattern to it.

TB: And then Bill Kindler wanted to know, could you talk about the development of the Pass Lake pram.

TF: Well the Pass Lake pram was developed by a fellow in Seattle who sold kit boats. He came to me asked: what were the qualities of a good small boat for lake fishing. Previous to that I had built several different models, and I had some ideas of what they ought to be, I interacted with him, and he designed and sold the Pass Lake pram as a kit boat, with pre-cut parts.

TB: Oh, okay, okay.

TF: But since then, I've refined my ideas somewhat, so the Pass Lake pram that he marketed is little bit obsolete now. We've made a number of improvements. And then I've made, no end of these things. I've made, at last count, 56 small boats, and like I said I keep I keep tweaking them.

TB: So how do you kind of tweak your plan? I mean, you just said that you've -- Is that by using them yourself, or do you hear back from people who have kind of told you their experience?

TF: Both of those things, yes. The ergonomics of the seating and the oar position has to be matched to the size of the person who's going to row the boat. If they have long arms, you can't have your oars lock too close. You need the right [spatial arrangement]. And so, each boat, to some extent, is a custom design that meets the needs of a certain person.

Then the other thing we experimented with is that lake fishing boats need to have anchors on both ends, so that they don't move in the wind. And we found that most of the commercial available boats have anchors that go over the tops and down, but the anchors are 10 pounds apiece. When the anchor is retracted and all the way up to the top, it is above the center of gravity, and so it tends to destabilize the boat. It has a tendency to turn the boat over. And so what we do instead is we go through the holes in the middle of the ends, just a little bit above the waterline, and then we have a turning block (a metal fitting with a pulley on it) and the anchor lines go through then. Now when the anchors are "all the way up," they stabilize the boat because they're below the center of gravity.

TB: Okay, okay, okay. Then let's go -- you started building bamboo rods in the mid-1990s. Is that when you retired?

TF: Yes. I retired in 1990.

TB: Okay. And then do you want to talk about how you decided to start building bamboo rods and –

TF: Well, it was something I have always wanted to do, going back to, oh, 1961 I guess. But my income wasn't very great, and I had a young family, and I didn't think I could afford to buy steel planeing forms. But some time around 1989 or 1990, I read a book that, by Wayne Cattanach, who told how to make your own. And so after reading that book, I figured I'd give it a try. So I hand filed and machined my own planeing forms, and that got me started.

TB: Nice. And then, let's see, you've also been to workshops in Merritt and other places. Do you have any stories about that -- Peter McVey, Ralph Moon, and others? The energy that happens around that?

TF: Good people, all. Every one of them. Yes, that's a semi-annual thing, and this year it's being held at Kamloops, and I'm on the program with two other people to talk about square bamboo rods. And that case there has a square bamboo rod in it, for the Libraries collection.

TB: Okay. Now what's significant of a square bamboo rod?

TF: Well, if you make a two-section hexagonal rod, you have six pieces in each section, so you have twelve pieces. Each of them has to be planned on two sides, so that's 24 sides of bamboo that you have to plane. The two-strip square rod, by contrast, only has four sides that have to be planed. And so it's much quicker to make one, much quicker and easier. And so I use it as a teaching tool because the students learn all the basics of rod making, precise measurements, how to sharpen and maintain a plane, how to take fine shavings, and a little bit about the design of the tapers, the varnishing and assembly, and making all the parts. That's the same no matter what kind of rod you make. So it makes a really good teaching tool because it takes about 20 hours to make a rod that way, versus 60 the other way. And so all my students in the last 15 years have made two-piece square rods as a first step.

TB: Okay. And then how did you get into teaching? Did everybody just start asking you?

TF: The people would come in and they'd have their dad's old fly rod, and they'd want me to fix it. And I would say, Well, why don't you fix it. I'll show you how. And so that's how it got started. I try to help anyone with a genuine interest.

TB: Oh, okay, okay. Any thoughts. You've been recognized for your innovations. Do you have any other ideas about, I mean, are you constantly kind of experimenting and tweaking, or kind of what drives your innovation?

TF: Well I've tried for the last ten years to become a proficient watercolor painter, but I think that's a lost cause (laughter). So it doesn't always work out, you know. But I think I've got the bamboo rod thing pretty well figured out.

TB: So it doesn't really change? You think you've got that one?

TF: I think I know how to design them and what makes a good rod and how to make them.

TB: Okay. And is that very personal? Is it important who's going to be casting it? Is there a connection, like your -- or the same rod will work for everyone equally? I mean, do you –

TF: The choice of a rod is very much a personal thing. The one size fits everyone idea does not apply.

TB: Okay.

TF: And the other thing about that is two people casting the same rod won't agree on the line weight to use, because their casting styles are a little bit different. And so one person will pick up a rod up and say, Oh it takes a 6-weight line; and somebody else will say, No, it takes a 7-weight line. And they're casting the same rod, but they just have a different casting style.

TB: Is there anyone that you want to say is your biggest influence? Is there somebody particular that helped you build your knowledge base, besides reading the books?

TF: No, I learned by doing.

TB: Okay.

TF: No. It's entirely self-taught. I didn't have a mentor. But the Corbett Lake Rod Makers were a source of information and inspiration.

TB: Okay. And you've written two books on –

TF: Three actually. I brought you the third one here today, to add to the Libraries collection.

TB: Oh, okay. So does -- the question is sort of, do you think that your rod making continued to change as you craft more? I kind of asked that, but.

TF: It's stayed pretty much the same over the last 10 years. Once I figured things out, I didn't think I wanted to change it.
TB: What about –

TF: But a word about that, I do run into other rod makers, who have entirely different methodology. They get the same result, but they do it a different way. So there's quite a bit of variation between rod makers and how they approach it.

TB: And then what about restoration? You kind of said that you've taught people to fix rods because they did need some repair. But do you have any thoughts about that?

TF: Well I distinguish between repair and restoration. Repair involves repairing things that are broken, but not necessarily with the same materials. But a restoration like you would do, say, for a museum piece or collection item, they have to be done with the original materials. You can't, for example, use nylon thread if the original has silk thread. So that would be the difference between restoration and repair. If it was a repair and some of the guides were wrapped with silk and some were wrapped with nylon, that wouldn't make any difference because they'd still have full function.

And so the restorations are a bit of an art. There's probably, well, maybe 20 people in the United States that are really capable of doing restorations. And I will only take on a very simple one. Anything complicated, I refer to somebody else.

TB: Well you did restore the Lambuth rod for us. Was that –

TF: That was pretty easily done though.

TB: Okay, okay. And then these are questions from Bill Kindler: Your lightweight ferrule development: Why lightweight instead of metal?

I'll ask you all of them: What is the preferred material, fiberglass, graphite, or other? Do you flute them like traditional ferrules? How do you attach them to the blank, with epoxy? And any special instructions when turning them?

TF: Well the casting stroke involves two stops. When the rod is brought back it's stopped at roughly the 1 o'clock position. And then the line continues past, but you have to stop the rod. And then on the forward stroke at approximately the 10 o'clock position, you also make a stop. You quit moving the rod and the line unfurls. Well the more weight you have on the rod, the more it will bend after you make the stop because inertia continues to bend the rod. And so you can improve casting performance of the rod by making it lighter. Especially metal ferrules are extremely heavy, and they are also cantilevered four feet out away from the hand, so it's a heavy weight on the end of the stick, versus no weight on the end of the stick. And so by going to fiberglass ferrules, you make a, let's see, about a -- well they weigh 17% of what metal ferrules weigh, so that's a substantial weight reduction. And it's located at a place where it does the most good.

And so I make fiberglass ferrules, from filament wound epoxy tubes. And that means that the strands are laid down diagonally. The tubes have to have both longitudinal and hoop strength. Longitudinal means they resist bending, and hoop means they resist crushing, by laying the fibers diagonally, you get both. And so we use filament [wound] epoxy tubes to make these ferrules. There's a company in Mount Vernon that sells these products.

TB: Do -- you may have answered this. Do you flute them like traditional ferrules?

TF: I'm not sure what he means by fluting, but I think he means hollowing the rods by fluting. I use a hollowing concept developed by Louis Stoner of the Winston Rod Company. I use a shop made machine for this.

TB: Okay. And then, how do you attach ferrules to the blank?

TF: You use epoxy glue.

TB: Epoxy.

TF: But you have to be careful to remove the parting agent, because tubes are made by rolling material up on a mandrel, they coat the mandrel with a parting agent, otherwise they couldn't get the tube off the form. And you have to make sure you clean the parting agent off before you put them on the rod, otherwise they'll just pull off.

TB: Okay. And then any special instructions when turning them?

TF: Well you want a very close fit, very, very close. So close that you end up with a polishing compound as a last step to take just a tiny, tiny bit off. This is true with metal ferrules too. They have to be fit very closely.

TB: Okay.

TF: And that's got to be done on a lathe. You spin them up on a lathe, and do it by hand.

TB: Okay. My next questions get started with, how did you get started in the organizational structure of fly fishing?

TF: That happened when I joined the Fidalgo Fly Fishers in 1990.

TB: Okay, so you had not, all the other years prior to that, even though you fly fished all that time, you didn't -- you just did it on your own.

TF: I never, never belonged to any organization, no.

TB: Let's see, so what were some of the things that you worked on within the club? And I know that you were important in changing the name to make it more inclusive. Were there some other things involved in the organizational structure of the club that you were proud of?

TF: Well, when I was elected -- I was chosen as president, I wasn't elected. I was chosen as president to fill out a term of a man who died the day before Valentine's Day. And he was supposed to get married on Valentine's Day.

TB: Oh my gosh! Was he a young man?

TF: He died the day before Valentine's Day, the day before his wedding. And so I finished his term out. And so this was all very new to me. So the first thing I did was get the club's bylaws to read. To see what the expectations were of the members. I discovered that the club only allowed men who were over 21 years of age.

TB: Oh.

TF: The last thing I did during my working life was I was an advocate for 8,000 women employees in the US Forest Service. I spent four years trying to break down some of the barriers for women. So this discovery in the club's bylaws was personally significant for me. I petitioned the members to change the name and change the bylaws. I discovered just last week that there are three fly clubs in Spokane, and one of them still does not allow women members. They limit their membership to 148 regular members, and only regular members can vote. They also have associate and honorary members, but they can't vote. And I was, frankly, I was appalled.

The Washington Fly Club was slow to adopt women members too. When I was selected for the Letcher Lambuth Award, the first thing I did was read their bylaws to see if I wanted to accept the award or not.

TB: Nice. Let's see, is there anything else that you feel like's been significant in the either state or national fly fishing?

TF: Well, about the only thing was, that Pass Lake was not catch and release at the time I got involved with it. I petitioned the club, and the club petitioned the state. They changed the regulations to permit only catch and release fishing at Pass Lake.

TB: And then, are there things that you've accomplished that we've not talked about, for which you're very proud of? And I want you to brag. I don't want you to be shy.

TF: Well, I really can't think of anything. I think that small boat thing is very useful because everybody in this part of the world trout fishes from small boats. They don't wade the lakes. So having the right boat I think is important. And I've done a lot of development and work on that. I think they're pretty good boats now.

TB: Nice. Are there things that you think are important about fly fishing, or your experience fly fishing, that we haven't talked about?

TF: No, but I think it should be inclusive. There is a problem with organized fly fishing, and that's there's no entry point for young people. If a young person isn't taken into fly fishing by a relative or a parent -- we don't have any way of recruiting the young people into the sport. I think one of the ways to beat that would be if you worked through the schools with a sort of a life skill sport orientation. The sort of thing that kids could get into and continue to do through their life, like golf and tennis are sports like that. And I think school systems could introduce fly fishing as a sport.

DB: Have you covered your time going to Canada and meeting different people and all the things that you've done up there –

TF: Well some of those places are secret such as Paradise Lake in the Paradise River drainage.

DB: You've had so many experiences with the people and the resorts and so forth. I think British Columbia's such a part of the northwest that there might be some interest in.

TF: Yes. Well when I first moved here, I was a little bit disappointed because all my stream fishing for trout had been out of streams. And other than the Skagit River, in Skagit County, there are not many streams to fish in. And so I had to adapt to lakes. Well once I got into it, I decided I liked lake fishing better because the fish were bigger. I catch more fish, and I catch bigger fish. And we fish some lakes in British Columbia where I'd catch 35 fish in a day that are all over 20 inches long. You'd never do that in a stream. The 20 inch fish in a stream would be the catch of a lifetime. And then, last year I caught a 9 pound rainbow. While I was playing it, my friend from Alberta was in a boat next to me, and he had a thirteen pounder on. You'd never do that in a stream. So the thing that has changed my life is the, you know, I've come to enjoy lake fishing.

TB: So are you going to tell any more of the stories that Danny suggested you might tell?

TF: Meeting, the Cartwright family at Janice Lake was a good experience. They've run a fishing resort for 59 years now at the same location. When it was first built, you had to walk 2 ½ miles to get in there. And they dragged a trailer behind a tractor and you'd load your gear in the trailer and then walk in 2 ½ miles. Now there's the high speed highway within a mile of it. But they had 10 cabins and a wood-fired shower, and it was the only resort of any kind on Janice Lake. And so -- it's a good lake to fish. It has an overabundance of spawning capacity. They spawn more fish than the lake can sustain. And so the fish tend to be small, 14-16 inches, but never larger. But

they're numerous, like the lake just teems with small fish. And then there's three or four places on the lake that are kind of sweet spots. And once you figure those out fish are pretty easy to catch –

DB: Did you ever discuss Cartwright's background with logging, his hand logging? His connection with logging and the forestry and –

TF: Oh yes. Bob Cartwright was a rancher. Just down the hill off the plateau from Janice Lake, they had a ranch. In spring and fall, he would run the ranch. In summer, he would run the fishing camp. But in winter, he would go to the west side of Vancouver Island and hand log. And hand logging was done on steep slopes above the saltwater, by two men who had a 16 foot flat bottom skiff, and a two-man saw, a couple of axes, some kerosene, and a come-along, a little winch. They'd go up along the mountain side above the shore, cut the trees, cut them into lengths, and then with the winch, give them a jerk, and they'd slide down into the water. Then they would corral the logs, and once a month or so, a steam tug would come by and buy the logs from them. Well that's what Bob did in the wintertime, he logged on the west side of Vancouver Island. This is some of the country where Captain Cook and Captain Bligh changed masts in the *Discovery*.

TB: Oh wow, wow.

DB: Did you ever meet another person, all your years in forestry, that operated that way, or anything close to it?

TF: No. The only thing that was close to it is some places where they did horse logging, but not hand logging. In places that have trees that were suitable for telephone poles, they'd be 70 feet long when they were cut. And in order to prevent damage to the forest, they frequently required horse logging to get those logs out of the woods, instead of tractors.

TB: Do you have any other thoughts about the future of fly fishing, the evolution of equipment, or anything else you'd like to share with us?

TF: About the only concern I have is that we don't have enough young people getting involved. That's our challenge for the future.

TB: Do you have some more questions, Danny?

DB: I don't particularly. You did cover the Peter McVey, Ralph Moon –

TB: A little. You didn't talk -- I don't think you said much about, just that you knew them.

DB: You had a correspondence with Ralph, and you met McVey a few times.

TF: Oh yes.

DB: And you did it -- you were a member of that group up there.

TF: Yes.

TB: And you still are, right? Because you're going up this week, in May, yes.

TF: Yes.

DB: I'll send you some pictures of the Pass Lake pram.

TB: Okay.

DB: So you can put that in his [vertical] file.

TB: Okay.

DB: And maybe some explanations, you can get some from what he said plus, and so forth, what people that use them say about them.

TF: I've had some other boat building adventures. In 1960, I got interested in the Adirondack Guideboat. It's a 16 foot [packboat]. It was used in the Adirondack region to guide tourists on the big lakes there. And about the time that happened, epoxy glues had just been introduced to the market. And so I made connections with a guy in Vermont who was researching a book about this boat. And he gave me plans and information, and I gave him several thousand black and white photographs. And so I built one of these things, and it was the first boat in the United States to be built with epoxy glue. It was very much a new thing at the time. And we still have it, it's still hanging in the garage at home. It's just as good as it was the day it was built.

TB: Oh nice.

TF: And one of the interesting things was that the man who helped me with this, we visited him several times, and we got to know him fairly well, but I didn't have any idea of what kind of work he did before retirement. When he died, I got a hand engraved invitation to a memorial concert in Carnegie Hall, and so now I'm really wondering who this guy is, see. Well it turned out that he was a member of the American Communist Party, and he was the editor of *Pravda* in the United States.

TB: Oh wow.

TF: And several times had been expelled from the United States because he was a communist.

TB: Oh, wow!

TF: And then his wife, who was a documentary filmmaker, and she made several documentary films about the Spanish Civil War. And so from that, I got interested in the Spanish Civil War, and I have an extensive collection of books on the Spanish Civil War.

TB: Oh really? Interesting.

TF: And I've visited many places in Spain where, you know, where battles were fought. So it's kind -- you run into some interesting people that way. Nothing to do with fly fishing, though.

TB: Life is just a great adventure, isn't it? You know.

Do you have anything else? I think he's being way too modest and shy. We kind of flew through it.

DB: Yes. He's covered all the points here. And all the rods he's donated, he covered that. Yes, that's our club budget, it is almost [covered by that]. (Laughter) That's a big item in our raffle at our Christmas party.

TB: Okay. So do you do -- you donate rods into the Fidalgo Flyfishers club, for a raffle. Are there other places that you –

TF: I have in the past, but don't anymore.

TB: Okay.

TF: Yes. I think the club shows its appreciation, but some of the places I've donated rods to weren't quite as generous with their approval. They got the rods and away they went. That was the last I heard of them, so.

TB: Oh, that's sad.

TF: I won't do that anymore.

TB: Yes. Just totally shifting gears, but I think it's interesting that you've taken up watercolors?

TF: Yes.

TB: Can you tell me a little bit about what prompted you to do that.

TF: Well, in 1960 I was living in a remote area and I got started doing watercolor. But because it was remote, there was no access to instructors. So I bought some books and tried it and it just didn't come together. The woodworking came together. The rod making came together. But this watercolor thing was, I think it's probably a matter of how you think.

TB: But you said you've been trying it again.

TF: So, here about 15 years ago, my brother asked me to make him an easel. And so, why? Well, I'm going to do some playing in watercolor painting. So I made him an easel. So I figured, well, it's just as easy to make two as it is to make one. So I made one for myself and I got started again. I like to do landscapes painted outdoors, which on a day like this, raining, you can't do.

TB: Okay. And do you like to do fly fishing scenes at all?

TF: People in boats on lakes, yes. Yes, I do that. But mostly -- the one I'm working on right now is Mt. Baker. And I've painted four or five scenes of Mt. Baker in the last month, and they're starting to get a little better, I think. The last one I did is not too bad (laughter).

TB: Okay. Because that's kind of hard to do. Now do you -- do you kind of pencil a little bit –

TF: Just lightly.

TB: Yes, what you're going to do first, okay.

TF: To get the main shapes and arrangement, so you can monkey with the perspective a little bit.

TB: Is the hardest thing the sky?

TF: Well the skies here -- it depends a lot on the picture, you know. Like, you see that photograph, the second from the right there, with the person in the water? Well that sky and the sort of foggy appearance is what gives you an emotional reaction. If that were a blue sky and a green hill in the background, it wouldn't have near as much charm as it does. It has sort of a mystery to it. So the background and the sky is really important.

DB: Are all these Ralph Wahl pictures?

TB: Yes.

DB: And they're all from *Come Wade the River*?

TB: I don't know that.

DB: You came to Anacortes about the time Ralph died, I think.

TF: Yes, yes. I know who he is, but –

DB: You never had a chance to meet him.

TF: No. They're nice photographs.

TB: Well that's all the questions I have.

TF: Okay, good.

TB: Okay. I'm going to shut this off.

The end!