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This interview was conducted with Clay Findlay on March 26, 2013, at his home in Spokane, Washington. The interviewers are Tamara Belts and Jerry McBride.

TB: Today is Monday, March 25, 2013. My name is Tamara Belts, and I'm here with Clay Findlay and Jerry McBride, and we're going to do an oral history with Mr. Findlay about his fly fishing experiences. So our first question is always, how did you get started fly fishing?

CF: Oh, I had an uncle who was an avid fly fisherman when I was a kid. He started me out actually fly fishing, and I was only about six years old. Fly fishing was kind of odd in those days. There were more efficient ways to catch fish, you know, spinners and bait and so forth, but he was a fly fisherman. And he kind of got me started. My father passed away, I never did know him. He died before I was old enough to know him, but I was fairly close with this uncle, and he'd take me fishing all the time. So that's how I got started.

TB: Okay. Well, you were born in Idaho, so tell me a little more about how that progressed and how you became very involved in the club? And how you got into organized fly fishing? Also, you were in the military, you were all over the place, so tell us of some of the places that you went fly fishing?

CF: Oh, not many, not one of the things to do in the military, unfortunately. Let's see I did have this tour in Alaska along 1950 that Jerry was talking about. And of course in Alaska, particularly when I had my own airplane, I was able to get a lot of fishing up there, and that was four years, a wonderful time. Other than that, as long as I was in the military, I was pretty busy doing other things I guess, didn't really do much from the time I went into the military until I got out, which was 32 years, so there's a blank spot there.

TB: When you were in Alaska, so you had an airplane and you flew into some spots to go fishing?

CF: Oh sure.

TB: Yes, so do you just want to talk a little bit about that or what kind of fishing that you were able to do up there?

CF: Oh, the usual Alaska fish, you got grayling, you know, or there are the four kinds of salmon, and I guess that's about all we caught in Alaska, as in types and kinds of fish. That's all I can think of right now.

TB: Okay.

JM: I like one of your stories about when you were in that airplane, that floatplane and you were in a river and the engine quit on you. I thought that was kind of an interesting adventure there. And you were trying to restart it and you were going down the river.

CF: Yes, yes, I was going into—well, I was in a military airplane at that time, taking a bunch of guys, generals and so forth, into a rather remote spot up there. And we were fishing at a place where the Talachulitna River, which has become quite well known, runs into the big stream, the Yentna River, and it runs into the Susitna. The Yentna's a big, brawling, Alaska river, and the Talachulitna is too small to land a plane on with the floats, so we landed on the bigger river, which was still pretty rough and bouncy, and taxy into the smaller river. I had landed and I'm taxying in, and I'm actually below where I'm going to turn into the little river, and I'm going back downstream a little bit as I was taxying, and the engine quit. I had nowhere to go but downstream, and I fiddled with it a minute or something like that, and fortunately got it started again and went on my way. It was exciting there for a few minutes.

TB: So, you didn't really then get too active fly fishing really until after you retired from the military?

CF: Yes, so really day after day after day, that's true, mostly after that, which would be starting about 1971, that's when I retired.

TB: Okay, so could you tell me how you got involved in—are you in the Inland Empire—

JM: Yes.

TB: So can you tell me a little bit about how you happened to join the Inland Empire Fly Fishing Club?

CF: Oh, I had read all the usual fishing magazines. And there was a fellow here named Rex Gerlach, a friend of Roskelley's, and he was a writer just like Roskelley, and he had just published a book. He lived on the other side of town, seems like that at the time I somehow knew that he lived here, and so I called him and I wanted to get a copy of this book that he had just written. So I went over to his house, and we got to talking, just chit chat and all that sort of thing, and he could see I was pretty serious about it, and so he said, "Why don't you come down and join our fly club?" So he's the one that actually sponsored me into the Inland Empire Club.

TB: Okay. Already in 1976 then, you were named Fly Fisherman of the Year, so do you want to talk a little bit about what kinds of things that you were involved in that led to that award?

CF: Oh, what was I involved in?

TB: I'm trying to get you to brag about yourself.

JM: Why did they give you the award?

CF: Oh, well of course I was an officer in the club, which you normally are. I guess I became kind of known as a wild, avid fisherman about that time. I think it was just about that same year that I fished for 57 (sic) days out of one year, which that's not missing many.

JM: How many?

CF: Oh, in winter and in summer, spring.

JM: No, how many days out of the year?

CF: I think it was 257.

TB: Yes, that's pretty good.

CF: The next year was about 240, something about that. I was busy. I was going fishing every day. And we fished a lot over in Montana, particularly the Clark Fork River, or in the kind of off season when it's cold, then, you know, we're not going up there to the hinterlands of Montana, and it's only two hours from here, so we fished a lot there. This one year I had on my little car 42 trips in one year between here and the Clark Fork. Okay, the next year I had one more or less numbers of trips to Rocky Ford, which you're probably quite familiar with that, because that's about the same distance, a couple hours, now the other way towards Seattle. And so between the two, I say 257 a year, this is not all day long from dawn until dusk. I lived down there about half a mile of the Spokane River, and I spent a lot of evenings and mornings and whatnot down there. I'd count it as one of the days that I went fishing. It was about that time I guess, the guys started to kid me about going so much and all that sort of thing. I had a daughter who had MS, still does, I guess I always do, it never goes away. And for several years, I ran a little drive within the club saying, let's see, how did I do it? If new members joined the FFF, I would give them \$20, and so I paid for quite a number of the guys to join the FFF. And then in turn, I said I would match it with MS, which I did, interesting project and got a little publicity, and things like that. I guess that was about it.

And then I got to traveling quite a bit. I used to know a wonderful person, old Dave Holmes. You've probably heard his name come up. We fished a lot together, and kind of started traveling, and we went to a mountain in Chile and Patagonia, and we went twice to New Zealand, and of course enumerable--every year we went to Alaska. And so we got around quite a bit. I was active in the club and stuff as well as traveling, and so I guess maybe that's—they probably ran out of people to give the award to, and finally got to me.

TB: You're credited with a couple of other things. One of them is the infamous Bailey Lake plugging effort that you were involved in. Do you remember that?

CF: The what?

TB: The Bailey Lake, tried to plug the leak in Bailey Lake.

CF: Oh, yes.

TB: We just kind of heard some stories about that. Do you want to tell your perspective on that?

CR: Well, just like any of those projects, we'd meet up there, a half a dozen of us at a time usually, with pick and shovel and whatever, and had big ideas of how to put a tarp down through it and down in front of the outlets to stop the water from going out. Though we never did really stop it, but we put in a lot of time up there mucking around doing that. But I think that was one of the club projects at the time.

TB: And also I think you're involved in teaching, teaching a fly fishing course at Ferris High?

CF: Yes, Dave Holmes and I first started that, taught several years, I don't recall how many. I guess we must have been the ones that started a fly fishing course for—

JM: I think you were.

CF: --people in the wintertime, and it's carried on since then I guess. Guys still do it. Although the other club, Spokane Fly Fishers, really are more active in the teaching end of it now, I think, and they have a lot more new members. We've always had a bunch of old time fuddy duddies in the Inland Empire Club, and we don't really encourage new members. Of course we've never had the family members in the club, and so they all go to the other club, and there's a lot of teaching you get, they do it, again, over there. Of course I belong to both outfits, so I can—

TB: Oh okay.

CF: --so I can say nasty things about both of them.

TB: Okay. So is the Inland Fly Fishing Club, then, does it still have a limited number of people that can belong to it?

JM: Yes, we have 135, and then we have an associate member status which the only difference is they can't vote. And we don't ever vote on anything, so it doesn't really mean anything.

TB: Okay, and you just mentioned the Inland Empire Fly Fishing Club doesn't have family events. Did you also say that it didn't have women? And do you had any thoughts about that, or since you're a member of both clubs you just felt like the Spokane Club made up for the Inland Club not having—

CF: Yeah, in the early days, the Spokane Fly Fishers, there were several members in our club who weren't overly satisfied with the various things in the club, and they stayed members as I recall, Don Deluca and a couple of guys like that. Lee Gomes is another one. But they decided, we'll start another club. We can't get our families in this one and this, that and the other. So that was one of the reasons that they started it. So they started with the idea that they would welcome all family members and it would be more of a family oriented organization than ours was.

TB: Well, why don't you tell me a little bit more about places you've fished; can you talk a little bit more about what were some of your favorite places to go fishing, and just some more of those kinds of experiences?

CF: Well, favorite places, I find it hard to choose, I think most fishermen would, which they thought was the better fishing, then a more desirable place to go. Chile or New Zealand, or Alaska I guess would be thrown in there but it's a different kind of thing. That would be a hard choice to make because both places are wonderful in their own way.

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TB: Why don't you kind of elaborate and describe maybe what Chile's like?

CF: Well, it's about like Montana was 30 or 40 years ago. We were in the southern part, down by the Andes, Patagonia, and thousands of acres in one ranch. They got to us on their beautiful horses and good horsemanship and everything. The river is running from these high mountains, just like they do here, and then beautiful streams, any type you wanted, big roiling, fast water, stuff that was even too high and tough to float, down the spring creeks and so forth. It's kind of similar to New Zealand in that there really aren't the vast numbers of fish, either salmon or trout, where we were. It's more one big fish per hole. You go around the bend and there's another 8 or 10 pounder in there. It's not stand in one hole and catch 10 or 15 little fish. I don't know just why that it is. But that was an interesting experience I had--the Mohaka, I believe, River runs directly into the saltwater down there. At that time, I don't know how it is now, but at that time they were just starting farming sea trout and raising rainbow trout for sale, in big pens you know. They had a lot of losses, kind of like Rufus Woods. So they had regular runs finally establish themselves in these rivers, and I think I caught four species in one afternoon. Now let's see, there's Atlantic salmon, Chinook salmon, brown trout and rainbow trout. I guess that was the four, all on the same river. All on the same fly, in one afternoon.

The Atlantic, he was, oh, about 16 pounds, and the Chinook was, I don't know, 12-14 lbs, something like that. Some of the rainbows normally are that big (hand motion). So of course the country, oh my goodness, it probably is the most progressive country in South America. At least it was at that time. Children all dressed in their little uniforms, Catholic schools and everything, marched to school. The whole country loved Americans. Clean and wonderful food, wonderful wine, great people, and we just liked Chile very, very much.

Whereas New Zealand, it's almost like the United States, except some of the people have a rather strong English accent. But when we were down there for instance, we stayed at the home of the fellow who is head of Ernst & Young accounting firm in New Zealand, and he's a big fisherman. He took us everywhere. We floated in some wonderful rivers there, as well as—that's the way he fished and so forth. So you don't get the foreign feel and atmosphere in New Zealand that you do down in Chile. The only difference of course is their seasons. They're roughly 180 degrees from ours, you know, winter-summer, summer-winter. But we sure had some fun times in New Zealand.

And then of course Alaska, I lived there obviously for, well, four years. And then after that I came back and I lived in Tacoma for four or five years. Every summer I'd head back to Alaska, you know, just on fishing trips. That's a different sort of thing, you know, with wall to wall salmon, once you find them and once you get into them, they're pretty easy. Even the grayling are very easy to catch in those instances. So they were all great, all fun. I spent a lot of time, even while I was in the military—I guess I did do a lot of fishing, come to think of about it. I spent five years in Great Falls, Montana. My wife was from there and all of her folks. In five years, of course I was deep into fly fishing then, and I was able to do a lot of good fly fishing. I used to hit the Madison River every weekend. We'd get off work about 5 o'clock in the afternoon, drive until 8 or 9 o'clock in the evening, fish for a couple days, and then fish all day long of course on Sunday, right up until after dark, and then drive four hours home. That was the weekend operation. Well of course the Missouri; and I guess five or six years ago I had my 50th anniversary of fly fishing on the Missouri. So I fished that a lot. There are a lot of them I still missed.

I should throw in one incident that I think the guys enjoy hearing. I claim that I'm the inventor of chironomid fishing. That makes Erv Ross and some of the guys in British Columbia and Seattle perk up their ears. I tell this tale that I was stationed at the time they were doing the atom bomb test down in

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Enewetak. I was stationed on Kwajalein for a year doing support stuff. They didn't have any permanent forces at Enewetak because it was pretty hot. So these four forces were at Kwajalein and it was kind of a dreary existence. We didn't have a whole lot to do.

We fiddled around and we got to looking at this typical atoll, a nice, smooth, calm bonefish-like water on one side, a roaring surf on the other. We noticed that the garbage trucks from the camp had a ramp on the windward side, where this strong wind blew from the atoll out into the sea. That's why they chose it to put the garbage, and the garbage washed out to sea. We got to thinking: how do we catch all these big fish? We didn't have much in the way of tackle either. No fly fishing there. But anyway, what we ended up doing, we got an empty, 50-gallon, oil drum, you know they're great big old things and hold a lot of air, and we took it to the machine shop where they maintain all the vehicles and so forth, and got them to rig a couple handles on each end of it. Then we went to another place where they had these steel cables, like you see on a car these days on the front of, a winch, a real fine but small diameter steel cable, and we cut a piece of that, oh, I don't know, 10-15 feet deep. On the end of that, we welded a hook about, oh, 2 feet long, I guess, with a gape in it about this size (hand motion). That was our hook. Then we go to the mess hall and we get some of the guys to give us a great big roast, and that was our bait. So we strapped that on to this big old hook, onto the cable, onto the drum—that was our float, float for fishing, chironomid style. On the other end, we took a 6 x 6 truck that had the same cable on it with a big winch on front, and hooked it to the whole rig, and backed it up so the wind blew this thing out to sea. So we started unwinding the winch, and it would inch further and further out, I don't know, a couple hundred yards, something like *pong*, just like that old trout that you pack, it pulled it and pulled that thing under, and he went round and round for a while. Finally, we wound up the winch in the truck and wound him in again, and got him up to the ramp and pulled him off the truck and up the ramp, and it was a 680 pound jewfish, sort of a sea bass sort of thing.

TB: Wow.

JM: Wow.

CF: So that was the start of chironomid fishing before they ever heard of it around here. Of course I didn't know what it would lead to, but it was interesting. I gave the fish to the natives to eat and they were happy.

JM: Oh, I bet, that was a lot of food there.

CF: Yes. That was, well, the timeframe that the atom bomb test, I forgot when that would be, early Fifties I guess. Anyway, back to your questions.

TB: Well, do you know some more stories about him? One question, we like to sometimes ask people about other people that they've know, like can you tell us anything more about Rex Gerlach, who—

CF: Well, he was a very well-known writer. He wrote *Field & Stream* and *Outdoor Life*, 30 or 40 years I suppose. He's sort of a protégé of Roskelley's. I think Ross got him started writing. So, anyway, he's well known. All his exploits and so forth.

TB: But if he sponsored you for the club, you must have become pretty good friends.

CF: Yes, you know, I fished with him a few times, less even than I've fished with Jerry, and that's not enough.

TB: Okay.

CF: Actually, he left Spokane, oh, within two or three years, and moved to California, continued writing down there, soon after I got here. So he wasn't here very long.

TB: Okay, okay. Just some other things that I haven't asked you that are kind of important to your fly fishing experiences that you think are really memorable

JM: Well, he was a very determined fisherman, and a lot of times he went by himself, and he worked out ways like when he floated a river—well, you tell them what you did with your bicycle and so on. I always thought that was quite clever.

CF: Well, when you only got one car and you're by yourself, and you want to float. So you got to figure some way to get your car downstream. Or get yourself downstream and then the car eventually has to be downstream. So one thing of course is to take your little raft and throw a bicycle in it and take it with you. Then you ride the bicycle back up to get your car and so forth. Or you could tie the bicycle to the other end, but either way that's one way to solve the problem. Yea, being alone, that's about all you can do, and it worked pretty darned good. You know, you bite off maybe eight miles or nine miles, something like that, you know, just an hour or two ride on the bike. And then you can float anywhere you want. You have your own shuttle.

JM: You and Dell Coppock used to—another way you did it was one guy would drop a guy off and then drive the car halfway down, and then put in. Then of course, that meant you were fishing by yourselves.

CF: Yes, we still do that. On the Coeur d'Alene, well the Coeur d'Alene and the St. Joe, both, yes, we'll drop one guy and his outfit at the top, and then the other guy takes the car and his outfit in the car, and at the halfway point he leaves the car, gets in his boat and goes on down below. So then the first guy, he floats down, he gets the car, goes down and picks up the second guy.

TB: Okay. What's your favorite—do you prefer to dry fish, wet fly fish, or do you have a preference?

CF: Oh sure, anybody has a preference for dry fly fishing. I don't know, maybe Bill Butler or something like that that grew up on a lake might go for woolly buggers or something like that, but yes, man, dry fly fishing on the St. Joe, oh, 15-20 years ago when it wasn't crowded. Jerry and his dad had some wonderful trips up there, and I used to run into them up there all the time. And Coeur d'Alene had some darn good dry fly fishing.

TB: Could you talk at all about the evolution of equipment that you've been able to take advantage of?

CF: Well, let's see, I started off with an old steel rod, yes, steel telescoping rod. They pulled apart, and I guess they were, after you get all the sections out, they must have been, I don't know, six or seven feet long, something like that. Then they had a two-way handle. You could put either a bait catching reel on them or a fly fishing. And that's what some people were using when I was a kid in Utah. But I started pretty early with a conventional fly outfit when I was maybe 10 years old. And you know, I had various

fly—the usual fly fishing arsenal since then. There's not really anything unusual there. Dell of course is the guy to talk to about rods.

TB: Yes, we did, we did. [Did you ever initiate any flies yourself?]

CF: Tie flies?

TB: Tie flies too.

CF: Oh sure.

TB: Did you have a special one that you were recognized for, or you just tied the ones you were going to fish with?

CF: Oh, no, I had a couple midge patterns that the guys were kind of interested in, but we sort of looked to the experts like Jerry for our pattern and so forth. He's the one that originated and copied many fine patterns. Fortunately, most of them are recorded in our fly leaf. Yes, I tied when my eyes were a good deal better, oh, a few 22s and stuff like that, and of course lots of woolly bugger type stuff and muddlers and the usual actually. Of course chironomids by the ton. But yes, I used to tie. In fact, I've got a fly tying set up here now. I still tie a few simple flies, some chironomids and so forth.

TB: Oh good.

JM: You're still getting down to Browns Lake, aren't you?

CF: Yes. I had a bad year last year. I was in and out of the hospital and so forth, and my balance has kind of gone to pot. I used to like to fish actually from the bank, walk up and down the rocky shores, you know, and cast from various places. But now I'm afraid I'll fall off those big old jagged rocks, you know, and break a leg or chomp the hell out of your—you know those rocks are just like knives, they're so sharp. I still have a little boat and all the stuff to go with it, but I, oh I guess I had it out a couple of times last year, but I've got it in storage this year, and I don't think I'll be able to-- I actually loosed the battery, and my boat trailer's not the best. So when you're alone, it's kind of hard to do that. Someone fishing I suspect be more or less be able to go with some of the other guys. But Browns Lake, yeah, I've put in many an hour out there. Of course it's right down the freeway, 30 minutes and you're ready to drop in the old boat. And it has had in some years some darn good fishing. Great place.

TB: Any special thoughts about the future of fly fishing?

CF: Oh, I think perhaps our young people as a group are not as interested as they used to be, and that's why Jerry and his people do so much traveling and teaching, you know, with the kids, and the kids day thing that we do. But I think more and more of the young people are interested in playing games on the computer and smoking pot, and all those good things that somehow I missed along the way. So it's more of a challenge, I think as far as to get younger people into the sport. Older guys, I don't know, they either fish or they don't. You don't seem to get them once they're 25 or 30 years. From then on for a guy to start fishing is kind of unusual I think. Most people kind of grow up with it.

TB: Well is there anything else you think that we haven't asked him that we should be?

JM: No, I can't think of anything at the moment. We pretty well covered, I think, I don't know. Clay, do you have any other thoughts?

CF: Not really, not really. It brings back some great memories.

JM: Oh, yes. Bill Butler mentioned that, and some of the people that he mentioned, he said he hadn't thought about for—you know, they're long gone, he hadn't thought about them for years, hadn't even thought their name or anything.

CF: Let's see, Larry Morris, I don't know if you knew him when he was in—

JM: Yes, I knew Larry.

CF: --a good fishing friend of Al Steer. He lives here in the complex.

JM: Oh, does he?

CF: And Bill Eldenburg. Bill was the treasurer when I got in, and he lived here, but he passed away a couple years ago.

JM: Yes, I remember that.

CF: But yes, there are still some old timers around.

JM: Yes. Well now, where does Frank Feyta (sp?) live around here?

CF: He lives here in the complex, you know. We have the big building, and then there are individual homes here and there.

JM: So he has one of the individual homes?

CF: Actually, I think he and his friends have a company, a building company, that they actually built most of the homes around Rockwood.

JM: Oh really?

CF: Yes. And he has a very nice home of his own that he built at the time.

TB: So, anything else? Otherwise, I'll say thank you very much.

CF: Well, I enjoyed it. Thanks for taking the trouble to come. I don't think there's anything notable about my fishing, but as we say, it brings back some memories just to sit down and talk about it.

TB: Okay, very good. I'm going to shut this off then.

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