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This interview was conducted with Fenton Roskelley on Friday, July 12, 2012, in Post Falls, Idaho. The interviewer is Danny Beatty.

DB: My name is Danny Beatty. I'm in Post Falls, Idaho, with Fenton Roskelley. The date is July 12, 2012, and we're going to do an oral history of Fenton. I'd like, at this time, for Fenton to start out by talking about his early fishing, fly fishing experiences, and then we'll move on from there.

FR: My father was a dentist in Challis, Idaho. He came to Challis in 1932 or '33 after living in Chicago for a couple of years. I started fly fishing because he was a fly fisherman. I never learned how to bait fish. When I first came out to the little town of Challis, I stopped along the Snake River and fly fished for trout. I fished the Bitterroot River and the streams near Hamilton, Montana, and then up the Snake River into Challis. My father and I frequently fished a number of streams in Montana, Idaho and British Columbia, and then finally I was drafted into the army and was sent to be the sergeant major of my battalion in North Carolina. My fly fishing was over for a little while. My father died, and I was on a troop train, so I couldn't go see him.

But my next fly fishing experience was during the latter part of World War II in the Munich area and some of the other streams in Germany. I fished a few places, but I always, always fly fished because I didn't know how to bait fish for other kinds of fish at that time.

Right after the war, during my last months in the army, I ran a school of journalism in Heidelberg, Germany for several weeks. I finally went back to the United States and I was discharged in late 1945, where I resumed my fly fishing along the Snake River and all of the streams in the central Idaho area. After my graduation from the University of Idaho, I joined the staff of the *Spokane Chronicle*. After working as a reporter and editor for several years, I started writing an outdoor sports column in 1956. I then became outdoor editor. The Cowles family stopped publishing the *Chronicle* and I went over to the *Spokesman-Review*, where I was outdoor editor and assistant to the editor for a while. I always fly fished throughout the area. The Fish and Wildlife Department started a program that treated the lakes with rotenone, which created better fishing. They released trout in those lakes, and I think I fished every lake in the area. I had one very unusual experience. I'm not sure that you would recognize the name, but do you remember the name Frank Wire?

DB: No, I don't.

FR: Well, he was an exceptional rod maker in Portland. He made five- and six-sided rods, bamboo rods. Frank asked me to take him to a place if I had the time. Well, sure I had the time. I made the time. I recognized his name - he was very well known. So I picked him and his friend up at a motel and drove to that lake. I still have the photos of them. They had fantastic fly fishing all day long, and then finally at the end of the day, they got back into my car and I took them down to their motel. And Frank said to me, "I want to show you some of my rods." So I went upstairs to their room, and he pulled out a rod and said, "This is one of my rods, and I want you to have it for the

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wonderful time you've given me." I still have that rod. I looked at it yesterday. My son brought it over. That rod now is probably worth over a thousand dollars. It's such a well-known rod.

But I continued fly fishing, and then steelhead fishing, with salmon fishing on the Columbia River, and then steelhead fishing on the Snake and Grande Ronde Rivers and the Clearwater River. I fished the Ronde starting in 1943 or '44. I fished with some of the most famous of the fly fishermen who fished the Grande Ronde in the early years. Two of them were Californians – Milt Kahl, a directing animator for Disney, and his friend, Ed Ward. They saw me on the river and they asked me for my name. Then they recognized that I was an outdoor writer for the *Spokesman-Review*, so they asked me to show them the drifts and so forth along the Grande Ronde and some of the Snake. I was pleased to do that, and I can remember one time they were on one side of the Grande Ronde and I was on the other side. All of a sudden, the steelhead began moving up the river in almost unbelievable numbers, and if one didn't have a steelhead on, the other guy would. All three of us hooked numerous steelhead. I finally decided I had to go upstream because at that time the Fish and Wildlife Department frowned on catch and release over the limit. They ruled that a fisherman must stop fishing when he got his limit. I left because I didn't want to be accused of breaking the law.

From then on, I had numerous partners in steelhead fishing and fly fishing in the various lakes and streams. I've fly fished about 300 different lakes and streams throughout the Northwest, including quite a number in the coastal area. And I have never given up fly fishing. The only time that I had to bait fish was one day on the Columbia River when my host took me out and all he had was bait, and I mean, the hardware, so I had to fish with that. Well you know, the funny thing was, I never caught a fish. And that's my fishing story.

DB: Now, you mentioned the friend who made bamboo rods, so of course you watched the transition from bamboo to fiberglass to graphite.

FR: Yes, yes.

DB: You also watched the transition of the kinds of lines that were used.

FR: Oh, yes.

DB: Could you give us a little background about some of those rods.

FR: Yes. I avoided the cheap rods. I bought only the well-made rods. My son, coincidentally, came here yesterday with a dozen of my rods, and he wanted to know what they were worth because he said he's going to put them up for sale. So we went through all of them, and we got down to the Frank Wire rod, and I told him that I was once offered a thousand dollars for that, but I turned it down. And then I told him I hadn't made an effort to sell it again, but it's special - a five-sided bamboo, split-bamboo rod. And the others are outstanding rods made by well-known rod makers, and I told him which ones that I felt were worth trying to sell. I told him to put most of them for sale for at least \$200-\$400, because they're all first class rods and manufactured over on the coast. So he's got them all. Now he's going to put them up for bidding.

DB: Are these all bamboo rods?

FR: No, no, they aren't.

DB: Oh. You did make the transition to the other, and you stayed with the quality rods all the way through.

FR: Oh, yes, except one. And when we got to that, I said, "That's only worth, at the most, \$50".

DB: Okay.

FR: The others I gave what I thought—I suggested a sale price for all of the other rods. I’m not going to be fly fishing a heck of a lot, but I’m trying to get into shape so I can resume my fishing.

DB: Oh, good.

FR: I know I can go out on the lake because I have a 14-foot boat, so my son can take me out, and we can fish the lake. I doubt very much whether I will be wading for steelhead in the future.

DB: Well... But, there was transition. You started steelheading in about 1950?

FR: Well, yeah, it was about 1950. It’s hard to say exactly when.

DB: But, you saw quite a transition of the lines in their ability to float and—

FR: Oh, yes, yes. I did an interview of one fly rod maker who lived on the Grande Ronde—

DB: Jimmy Green?

FR: Yes. And he became—

DB: He was with Fenwick and then he was with Sage.

FR: Yes, and I did a story for the magazine *Fly Fisherman*. But Jimmy became a pretty good friend of mine, because every time I would go down there, I’d go up on that hill. His house is high on a hill.

DB: I’ve heard—

FR: And I’d drive up there, and then we would go down and fly fish. I have one very interesting memory of Jimmy, because he was a guy that was very gentle, but he had a sharp tongue. One evening, the steelhead were starting to move up out of the Snake and into the lower end of the Grand Ronde, and there was a line of people. They were lined up along the river. You line up behind the guy, and then get around, go back up and come on down through. Okay, well, I was right behind Jimmy, and there were three guys who walked ahead of him. That was the worst thing they could possibly have done. He got out and loudly criticized them for violating the rule that prohibited them from getting ahead of fly fishermen already wading down the river. He embarrassed them so much that they left and went out of the area.

DB: Did they know who he was?

FR: By that time they did.

DB: Interesting

FR: That was one of my prominent memories of Jimmy.

DB: In steelhead fishing. You were writing for the Spokane newspaper, you were the outdoor editor. Was this in the ‘50s and ‘60s?

FR: Yes, that’s probably right. I think it was in 1956, I was appointed assistant to the editor of the *Spokane Chronicle* as well as outdoor writer. I wore two hats, assistant to the editor and outdoor editor. There was not much of an outdoor page, but I did manage to write two columns a week, and finally three columns a week, for the *Chronicle* first, and then the *Spokesman-Review*. I retired in 1982. Rich Landers joined the *Spokesman-Review* and became outdoor editor, but I continued to write two columns for the paper as a freelancer and helped with the hunting and fishing guides until 2003.

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DB: Oh, okay.

FR: I told my wife, it's interfering with our vacation time, so I resigned. But I do have a great deal of respect for Rich Landers because he turned into a very good writer for fly fishermen and for other kinds of fishing, too.

DB: Going back to your time as an outdoor editor, was this about the same time as Enos Bradner for the *Seattle Times*?

FR: Yes, that's right.

DB: Did you ever get to meet him, or was there any coordination between writers in those days?

FR: Well the funny thing is, one day I was out with a couple of friends at Coffeepot Lake. Do you know where that is? It's on the refuge not far from Harrington. By that time, I and many other fly fishermen developed flies to simulate the midges that hatched there, the chironomids. I had one of my chironomids on a floating line, and I kept casting, and every time I'd cast, I'd hook a big rainbow - so big, you know. Well finally, Enos Bradner approached me. He says, Mister, do you know that you're exceeding the limit there. And I said, I didn't realize that. He said, Well, the Fish and Wildlife Department frowns on people after they've caught the limit to continue to fish. And I said, Well, I didn't know that. That was the first time I knew it. The next day, there was a meeting of the outdoor writers in the Tri-Cities somewhere. I appeared there, and I said to Enos, Do you remember me? And he said, No. And I said, Well, I'm Roskelley. I'm the guy who caught all those fish out there at Coffeepot Lake. And he smiled, and he said, Well, I didn't know that. And he said, What were you using? And I told him exactly. But that was the early use of the chironomid-type flies, and I had success. The last really successful fishing trip I had was in one of the British Columbia lakes. I was invited there by Dwight Tipton, a friend of mine. He had a house up there, and Dwight had gone to one part of this lake where he had caught tremendous rainbows. I began casting out with a floating line and let the breeze bring it across, and I was hooking one after another. Afterward, he said, "What were you doing?" I said, I found out if you just let your line float down with the breeze, just underneath the water, then you'd get 'em. He said, I never thought of that. He was fishing down in the muck.

DB: Which is usually where the chironomid fishermen are, near the bottom, but you were—

FR: Well, yes, chironomid—

DB: You found the zone.

FR: Yes, well, at some of these lakes you get them within six inches of the bottom. But in this case, they were feeding just under the surface, and I was just throwing the line out and getting one after another. He was over in another part of the lake, but he could see me catching them. That was a wonderful trip. But that's about the summary of my fly fishing adventures.

DB: Okay.

DB: We'd also like you to talk about the formation of the Inland Empire Fly Fishing Club. You were one of the founding members?

FR: Yes, I was.

DB: And was there another club that helped you get started?

FR: Yes, one of the coastal clubs. I think it was the Washington Fly Fishing Club.

DB: Okay.

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FR: They were the sponsor of the club, and you probably remember the name Rex Gerlach?

DB: [Yes].

FR: He was one of the founding members of the Inland Empire Fly Fishing Club. I fished with Rex for a long time.

DB: He was a good friend of yours, wasn't he?

FR: Yes, he was. He moved down to California, and we kind of lost touch with one another over the years.

DB: Distance.

FR: Yes, and then he died in 2008.

DB: Over the years that you were in the Inland Empire Fly Fishing Club, you won some awards and you were quite prominent in the operation. Would you talk a little bit about that?

FR: As a matter of fact, I put out their first newsletter, *The Fly Leaf*, and then finally the annual club report. I edited *Flies of the Northwest* for several years. Frank Amato eventually published it. After that, I authored two articles in *Flies of the Northwest* and then I was not involved any longer.

DB: But you were the original editor of *Flies of the Northwest*.

FR: Well, I can't say I was. Rex Gerlach put out a couple of them, and then he wanted so much money that I took it over as editor.

DB: Okay.

FR: And from then on, I also wrote the newsletter every month.

DB: You were there during the transition when *Flies of the Northwest* went from black and white to color, and became—

FR: Yes.

DB: --quite a bit bigger, and more of a slick publication.

FR: Yes, that's right.

DB: I have two or three copies, and the early ones were quite simple, looks like they were little booklets.

FR: Yes, they were like a lot of things that evolve into pretty good publications. And the latest *Flies of the Northwest* is really a good booklet.

DB: Yes.

FR: It's got a lot of information in it.

DB: Yes. Do you want to talk about your writing for the magazines of the area?

FR: Well, I've written for *Fly Fisherman* and Clear Creek's publications, and when I retired, I decided I wanted to start writing more for magazines. But one thing you might not know is that the *Spokesman-Review* had a policy that you could not write for an outdoor publication. I had this one major article in *Fly Fisherman* magazine, and when I

came down to the *Spokesman-Review*, the managing editor called me into the room, and he had it on his desk. He said, "You know the rules, Roskelley. I don't want to see any more of that." And so, I couldn't do it. But then they changed the policy. Landers writes for any magazine he wants. I could never do that.

DB: Did you attend the first conclave, the first big federation meeting in Eugene, Oregon?

FR: Yes, I did.

DB: Do you have any memories, comments, you'd like to--?

FR: I think that I was impressed by that world champion caster. What the heck is his name?

DB: Well, Jimmy Green was one of the big—

FR: No, it wasn't Jimmy Green. It was—there's another— Well anyway, he was there.

DB: Maybe we can get that name.

FR: Yes, and he was going to give a demonstration, and what impressed me was he threw that fly line over a building. I couldn't believe that anybody could do something like that. I don't know how big the building was, but he threw that line all over the building.

DB: It wasn't Hedge?

FR: Yes – it was Marvin Hedge.

DB: That was one of the things, the casting, that they brought some people in that—

FR: Well, they brought in a lot of people who were a heck of a lot better casters than I am.

DB: Did you get to meet Lee Wulff or any of those--?

FR: Yes, I met Lee Wulff.

DB: --they were there and—

FR: Oh, yes, yes. As a matter of fact, one day when I was fishing the Grande Ronde, I saw a tall guy coming down the middle of the Grande Ronde, tipping and almost falling, but going like this and like this, and then I found out he was Lee Wulff. I talked to him afterward, and yes, he was one hell of a caster, and he was also a world famous fly fisherman.

DB: Yes.

FR: But I didn't get to know him after that because he came from the East somewhere, and I doubt he probably ever fished the Grande Ronde again.

DB: The method was really not your method of catching a steelhead. Was that the truth?

FR: Yes. Now I always used a floating line to catch steelhead, but a lot of people used sinking tips and the sinking lines. But I always used the floating line. And I have some of the last—do you see that picture of me?

DB: Okay.

FR: I caught that two years ago. Can you see it, on the wall?

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DB: --picture at the top.

FR: Yes, that's on the Grande Ronde. That's the last—

DB: That was two years ago.

FR: Yes, that's the last steelhead I caught on the—

DB: On the Grande Ronde.

FR: --on the Grande Ronde, right.

DB: That was your last steelhead.

FR: Yes, uh-huh. I took my son and grandson down there a couple of years ago, and unfortunately they didn't hook a steelhead.

DB: Of all that you've said you've fished, hundreds of lakes and many streams, the Grande Ronde - that's kind of home waters, that's probably—

FR: Yes, to me that was the—

DB: --that's the number one.

FR: A funny thing happened there. For a while, some fly fishermen wanted to keep it a secret, but the secret came out. Rex Gerlach wrote the first story for a magazine on the Grande Ronde, and he was so proud of himself for writing it. This was in the middle of August, I think, when it came out. He and I went down to the Grande Ronde, and we set up the tent, and he's real proud of himself. He walked over to a group of guys that just set up a tent right below us, and he says he's the writer that wrote that article on the Grande Ronde for the *Fly Fisher* magazine. And this one guy says, Oh, you're the son-of-a-bitch that—

DB: Nailed him, huh? Well, you know there's a film out about that—you said they didn't want anybody to know, and there's a film out, it's titled, *Never Name the River*. Have you heard about this?

FR: No, no.

DB: The focus of the film was the starting of the federation, and my understanding is that it included some of those fishermen who you talked about. They would get together on the Grande Ronde, and then it talked about bringing all the clubs together - your club, the Washington Fly Fishing Club, and others in California and the East—

FR: When I first started to write for the newspapers in Spokane, I got a chance to go back to my home town in Challis, which is in the central part of Idaho. My brother-in-law, Frank, was a bait fisherman, and he said, Well, let's go—I know a stream where the trout are so big you'll be flabbergasted. I said, Okay. So we went up there and it was just—we were in the White Clouds area, almost straight up to the place that I could see this nice stream coming down through there.

DB: Oh, yes.

FR: And he got bait out and I got my fly rod out, and what do you know, I got twice as many fish as he did. I never will forget that.

DB: Did you ever do any steelhead fishing on the rivers—on the west side?

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FR: Oh, geez, definitely yes. I fished quite a number of the rivers, really.

DB: Did you fish the Stillaguamish and--?

FR: No, I didn't fish the Stillaguamish, no.

DB: Skagit?

FR: Skagit, I fished, and I fished several other rivers. There's one up there that's well known for fly fishing, and I just can't think of it offhand.

DB: The Snoqualmie?

FR: No. Well, I'll think of it after you go.

[These rivers are excellent for fly fishing, and I've fished all of them: Yakima, Cle Elum, Quinault, Klickitat, Kalama, and Toutle.]

DB: I'm getting close. Well, we've got a little more time on the tape. Let's see if I have some -- Oh, you've developed some fly patterns.

FR: I have—yeah, I developed about half a dozen. The May Fly caught on, and it's still used periodically. I've created my own chironomids—

DB: Oh.

FR: A lot of fly fisherman have done that. Coffeepot Lake up there in the basin, that's one of the nicest places for chironomids. Just about everybody fishes with chironomids of one kind or another, and everybody has his own chironomid pattern. So I developed patterns for that lake, and I've got to say that I've developed some that took a fish when the other guys couldn't touch 'em. Have you been to that lake? You can see it from above, Coffeepot Lake.

DB: No.

FR: Well, anyway—

DB: I've not fished much over on this side. We have a lake near where I live called Pass Lake, which is fly fishing only and very popular.

FR: One day when I went over there, nobody was catching them in the shallow waters where they usually are, and so I went into the deep water, and it was 22-feet deep, and I set out an anchor, and then I let a weighted chironomid go to the bottom. It would be about that far off, then I'd give it a few twitches, and Bang, I'd have one on. And all these other fly fishers would say, What the hell are you using? I said, It's a chironomid. But I didn't tell them exactly how I was using it.

DB: Is there anything we've missed that you'd like to mention?

FR: Well, one thing. I just rewrote the story that I wrote a long time ago, and it needed updating. As I told you, my family lived in Chicago for a while, and my father was dentist, and nobody was getting their teeth fixed in the depression years. So he decided to go to Challis where one of his sisters lived, and we would follow later when he set up a dental practice in Challis. So I did something that teenagers don't do. I was only about—I couldn't have been more than 12, and I began riding freight trains, and I rode freight trains out of Chicago. I sort of got acquainted

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with all of the bums on the railroad and the kind of cops that tried to enforce the rules. But everybody was riding freight trains. They were packed with people moving from job to job, or trying to find jobs. Finally in Missoula, I got out and I hitchhiked down the valley there, and the first thing I did was buy some flies and a cheap rod, and I stopped in Bitterroot and I caught several really nice rainbow, and I cooked those up—

DB: Oh, my—

FR: --and then I continued on, over the top, into the Salmon River, and then I fly fished my way up to Challis. And every place I could catch fish there. In those years, there were not very many fly fishermen. They were bait fishermen. But fly fishing paid off wonderfully.

DB: You have a lot of wonderful memories. I think we've covered pretty much your life story. Do you feel pretty comfortable with this?

FR: Yes.

(End of recording.)

