

CERMAK, Bob  
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**U.S. Department of Agriculture  
Forest Service  
Region Five History Project**

**Interview with:** Robert (“Bob”) Cermak  
**Interviewed by:** Jerry Gause  
**Location:** Cermak residence; near Oroville, California  
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Transcribed by: Mim Eisenberg/WordCraft; April 2004  
Corrected by: Linda Nunes

JERRY GAUSE: I’m Jerry Gause [pronounced GOSS], retired Forest Service, and I’m here today with Bob Cermak, former Forest Service employee, worked in numerous regions throughout the United States in the national forest system. He worked in the private sector, and even a job or two with the state. He is a native Californian, and he’ll tell you about that. I guess to kick things off, we’d like to know where you came from and how you got into forestry, and any sequence you want to put that into is fine.

BOB CERMAK: Okay. I’ll start off. I’ll try to keep it in some kind of a chronological order.

GAUSE: Great.

CERMAK: Born on April 13<sup>th</sup>, 1927, in San Diego, California. I was the second of six children. My mother Ida Lee Anderson was from north Georgia, an old gold mining town, Dahlonega. She grew up on a farm, moved to Atlanta, where she went to high school at night. She had an outstanding memory: My dad, Frank Cermak, was born in 1894 in New York City and raised in Czech neighborhoods in Chicago.

GAUSE: So Cermak is a Czech name?

CERMAK: A Czech name, right. His folks were Czech and German; my mother’s —her mother was half-Cherokee Indian, and there was also Scotch-Irish and English; and her father

was Swedish. One grandfather had been in the Civil War in the 43<sup>rd</sup> Georgia Infantry, and the other grandfather had mined in the gold rush over on the Yuba River, not far from here. He supposedly died out here.

Well, Dad was in the Navy. Actually he was kind of a roughneck as a kid, and his older brother enlisted him in the Navy in 1913. He started out in a black gang on the *U.S.S. Delaware*, shoveling coal into the ship's furnaces. He served on many ships, but the aircraft carrier *U.S.S. Lexington* was his favorite ship. He went into the Reserve in 1934.

GAUSE: *Lex*: Queen of the sea, queen of flattops.

CERMAK: Yes, she was a beauty.

GAUSE: Yes.

CERMAK: And then he returned to the Navy in 1940 until after the war. He was a guy who would do anything for his family. He was a tough guy, a loving guy. So we lived in San Diego, Long Beach, two years in Hawaii, and that two years, I was five to seven. We were the only Caucasians in the neighborhood. Everybody else was some kind of a mix of—every kind of mix you can imagine.

GAUSE: [Chuckles.]

CERMAK: I went to the first grade there. Dad retired into the Naval Reserve. We went back to San Diego, and Mom and the family went on the *S.S. Malolo*, one of the Matson liners, first class. The cruise ships in those days were a far cry from what you have today. Instead of thousands of passengers you had maybe 150.

We moved into an area, kind of dispersed area, which as I was telling you earlier, kind of reminds you of Dogpatch, if you know Al Capp and that crew. But it was a great place to grow up as a kid. There was no Little League coach to tell us how to play ball; we just played ball.

When somebody got mad, they took the ball home and we did something else. We looked for snakes and looked for trapdoor spiders, threw dirt clods at each other, just had a wonderful time.

When I started school that fall, I was skipped from first to third grade, and I emphasize that because afterwards I was always at least a year younger than everybody else in my class. As everybody knows, boys are socially way behind girls to begin with, and also we lived out in the country, which meant that we bused to school. So from the standpoint of school, I went to school; I was never part of the social thing there.

The next big thing that happened was in 1938, one of my brother Frank's friends came by, and he had a backpack on him. He was going down in the Sweetwater Valley. So we asked where he was going. He said, "I'm going on a camp with the Boy Scouts." And so we got very interested in that, and Frank joined the Boy Scouts that year, and I did the next year, when I was twelve. Boy Scouts—these were a scruffy bunch of kids that didn't have anything to do, and just a great guy named Clyde Woodsum was our scoutmaster. He cared for these kids. We went on hikes and camps, and that's what I lived for. I didn't care about merit badges or all that other stuff. My brother, Frank, became an Eagle Scout, and I had a helluva time getting past first-class scout. [Chuckles.]

GAUSE: But you had your heart in it.

CERMAK: I really enjoyed the hiking and the camping. The summer of '41, about a dozen of us got to go to Sequoia Park and Kings Canyon Park. Frank and I decided the next summer we were going to hike the John Muir Trail. Of course, World War II intervened, but...The place we liked to hike to most was a mountain on the border called Otay (pronounced O-tie) Mountain. We hiked up there first, with an old miner.

GAUSE: On the border of?

CERMAK: Mexico.

GAUSE: Oh, Mexico. Okay.

CERMAK: The border of Mexico. And so we hiked up there, and one day we looked over into a deep canyon on the other side from where we camped and decided we'd try to go down there and see what's down there. We hit upon a trail. The trail led up the canyon and got up to the canyon and kind of opened up, and here are all these mines, mine dumps, just probably half a dozen of them, I guess. Oh, boy. I had started reading early, and I read every sort of thing I could find: history, adventure, all that sort of thing. This was just living an adventure.

So we looked in the mines, we talked to the old miner, and he said these were gem mines: jasper, tourmaline—

GAUSE: Wow. Wow.

CERMAK: —that sort of thing. We brought some home for him to see. A couple of weeks later, we were up there, and we found a trail going down the stream and followed the trail and came to an opening, and here was this little flat and a little cabin, built out of little cypress logs, only about four inches in diameter, and a cook station outside and then a trail that led out to the main trail...It was kind of like a little dream, you might say. So at any rate, I got interested in the outdoors early because of that.

I did okay in schools, B's and C's mostly, except history and English; I got A's in those. I got a job in '42 working in a bakery, just cleaning up. That same year, I was riding down to a friend's place where we used to get the milk, down a rough trail on my bike. I didn't have any fender on it. I had a kid sitting on the bar, you know? Well, I hit a bump, and the wheel flew out from underneath the forks of the bike, the front wheel. The forks came down. I went over the top of him and hit right on my face and skidded a few feet. Everybody was laughing at me

because my face was all battered up. But we went down and played football anyway. But at that time, I damaged my neck pretty severely. I never knew it until thirty years later.

GAUSE: Oh, boy.

CERMAK: My best friend and brother Frank went in the Navy in 1943. In 1943 I worked in an aircraft factory, Solar Aircraft in San Diego. They had a helluva time finding a good spot for me because I was [chuckles] incompetent, really. But they did find a place for me.

High school was frenetic. It was half-day sessions because there were twice as many kids as the school was meant to hold, with everybody moving to Southern California during the war period. And so I graduated in June, early June of 1944. On June 24<sup>th</sup>, I joined the Navy. I told my dad I was going to join the Marines, and he said, “No, you’re not.”

GAUSE: [Laughs.]

CERMAK: He said, “You’re seventeen.” I was seventeen in April, and I joined the Navy in June.

GAUSE: That’s not bad.

CERMAK: And he says, “I’ll sign you into the Navy, but you’re not going in the Marines.”

Thank God he said that!

GAUSE: [Laughs.] That’s right.

CERMAK: So I went to boot camp along with a bunch of other kids, some of them younger than I was, sixteen, maybe, fifteen. You know, some of those Okie, Arkie boys—they wanted to get away from home, even if it meant going in the Navy. They gave us a general classification test, which is supposed to separate the people into categories. Basically it was a vocabulary test. The highest score you could get was 76. Nobody had ever gotten that in all the Navy. One of the

guys in our group was a little older. I think he had been going to college or something. He got a 74.

GAUSE: Ooh!

CERMAK: And two of us from San Diego got 71s. We were going to go to school after boot camp. Incidentally, in boot camp I got into trouble once, when I didn't show up on time for guard muster and had to go see the lieutenant. And I'm telling you, when he was chewing me out, my knees were literally knocking. He had me scared to death. [Laughs.] And then another time, standing for review, the lieutenant would walk by with a chief behind him, taking names. He walked by me, and he just said, "Stand closer to your razor, sailor." I had never shaved, and I had peach fuzz on my chin. So I bought a razor as soon as that was over. To give you an idea of just how young I was.

GAUSE: I'll be darned. [Chuckles.]

CERMAK: I was slated for radio school. The thought of it just drove me nuts. I didn't want radio school: dih-dah-dah-dah and all that stuff. So I was complaining when I was home on liberty, and my old man, who had hash marks up to his shoulder, just about, all gold, unbeknownst to me went down and had a talk with the chief in classification, and they reclassified me to fire control school.

GAUSE: Ah!

CERMAK: Gunfire control school. So I went to fire control school. I started Class 12. I got cat fever, which was very common in those big recruit depots, very high temperature, and I was sick for a few days. I couldn't get away to get back to Class 12, so I had to start over again in Class 13, and then I had a relapse. Finally I got going in Class 14. The reason this was important was that Class 12 and Class 13 went to sea on destroyers before Okinawa, and in Okinawa—the

history books talk about the Marines and the Army and all the horrors they went through, but there were actually more sailors killed than either Army or Marines, 5,000 of them.

GAUSE: Egad.

CERMAK: Suicide planes.

GAUSE: Yes. This was '45.

CERMAK: One aircraft carrier had more people killed than this Iraq war has had to date, just in one event. So it was, I've thought to myself since, just damn lucky, that's all. So they sent us to school back in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, to learn how to operate a gun director for a new rapid-fire 3-inch gun which would reach out further and higher in time for the invasion of Japan. Fortunately, that never happened.

Okay, the war was over, and I was in Newport, Rhode Island, waiting for a ship. I was probably the only one from California on the entire base. Everybody would go home on a weekend, you know?

GAUSE: Yes. You had nowhere to go.

CERMAK: I had nowhere to go. I went to the library, which I'd go to anyway. I found this book over here [goes to get book] by Stewart Edward White. Obviously, I took the book because I still have it. It is a trilogy. Two of the three stories are about the Sierra Nevada, the Sierra National Forest, specifically. I got to thinking about that, and I thought, *You know, I think I'd like to go into forestry.* I looked in a catalog of different kinds of occupations, and I thought about that and what I had done as a boy, and I said, *You know...* So I wrote to UC, Berkeley. It was the only place that had a forestry school in California. They sent me an application. I had to give them my high school transcript. I was enrolled before I ever left the Navy.

GAUSE: Wonderful!

CERMAK: Went aboard ship, the *U.S.S. Navasota*, a fleet oiler, a big ship, and we shook her down in Chesapeake Bay. Got all the bugs out of the running of the ship, and then we left off of Norfolk [Virginia] down to Mona Passage, between Haiti and Cuba, to Aruba.

GAUSE: Mona Passage was where—Isla Mona is the island between Puerto Rico and Honduras. Okay.

CERMAK: So we went to Aruba, which was in the Dutch West Indies, and was a big oil refinery port, and we took on a load of oil, and everybody left the ship and got drunk.

Everybody. [Laughs.] It was pretty nasty. We went on to the Panama Canal. I could talk about shipboard life, but I'm not going to do it, except to say this: I've listened to a lot of people and read a lot of accounts of life during World War II, by enlisted men. The thing they leave out is c.s., and if you know what b.s. means, just substitute the word "chicken" for "bull," and you'll know what I'm talking about, just the kind of arrogant running down of everybody underneath you that took place constantly. I didn't like that very much.

GAUSE: Uncomfortable.

CERMAK: We went through the Panama Canal, sailed—took sixteen days to get to Pearl Harbor.

GAUSE: [Whistles softly.]

CERMAK: Without any sight of land. And we were moving right along. I had enough points accumulated by then so that I could get separated, so they put me on a troop ship with 5,000 Army and Marines and shore-bound sailors and—God, it was awful! Guys were sick all over the place. Anyway, we got to San Francisco and stayed overnight at Treasure Island and the next day to San Pedro, the separation center, and I was out. Thirty-two hours. Out of the Navy.

GAUSE: Really. That's because you had pre-arranged to go to college.

CERMAK: No, no, they were trying to get rid of people.

GAUSE: Really!

CERMAK: Yes, they were just trying to get rid of people.

GAUSE: I'll be darned.

CERMAK: Because I had signed up for what they called a minority cruise (enlistment), which was from age seventeen to twenty-one. They could have kept me in if they wanted to. But the Navy smartened me up a little bit. I was nineteen when I got out. I had almost four years of GI Bill, which was just a miracle.

GAUSE: Wonderful.

CERMAK: I got out on July 10<sup>th</sup>, '46, and the first week in September I was starting at Berkeley.

GAUSE: Gee, whiz.

CERMAK: [Laughs.] The first two years at Berkeley in the forestry curriculum were everything: English, chemistry, surveying, physics, all kinds of junk, which really bored me to tears. But I got good enough grades. All I had to do was maintain a C average, and then I was a regular student, because I didn't have a B average in high school when I entered. I was a special student. As soon as I showed I could do the job, why, they made me a regular student.

The summer of '48 they were switching forestry camp from after the junior year to before the junior year, so they split the camp in two parts. The first part, I had a job found for me by the university at Scott Lumber Company in Burney, California. Just running property lines on a crew and chopping brush and locating logging roads and that sort of stuff. That was really a rough town, a rough town, I'm telling you! [Laughs.] You go to town, there was a couple of bars you didn't go to because the gyppo loggers liked those bars and you worked for the

company, and the two didn't get along very well. I recall one time being at this one bar, just sitting there talking to this gal who was with her boyfriend, and this kid comes up to me, Indian kid in an Army uniform, and he says, "I'll give you five minutes to get outta here." I said, "What???" [Laughs.]

GAUSE: Yes, "What did *I* do?"

CERMAK: This girl's boyfriend was his half-brother. He said, "Aw, don't pay any attention to him. He's just drunk." But she got up and started dancing with one of the other guys from the mill, and this kid came up to him and kind of pushed her away and punched the guy right in the nose, and there was blood everywhere.

GAUSE: Aw, gee.

CERMAK: Bodies started flying. You're headed for the wall. You don't want any part of that stuff.

GAUSE: No.

CERMAK: It was an interesting experience.

I went through the summer camp composed almost entirely of veterans who were a bunch of just crazy people, who made life kind of hell for some of the instructors, really. I had very good grades, though, some of the best in camp.

GAUSE: Great.

CERMAK: We got back to school, why, the camp director had each one of us in for kind of a briefing. He said, "Well, Bob," he said, "you did a good job." But he turned the paper over, and he says, "One of the instructors said you had a tendency to fool around too much." [Laughter.] I think he meant me and my bunkmate because we used to go to town, to the basement of the Quincy Hotel, into the bar, which they called the Sump. So I looked at him, and said, "That

would be you, wouldn't it?" [Laughter.] And he said, "Well, as a matter of fact, yes." But I applied myself one semester. Happened to be the semester we had the most difficult classes. I got three A's and two B's.

GAUSE: Wow.

CERMAK: And so, on the strength of that one semester, I got invited to the Forestry Honor Society [laughs], which I always thought it was unusual, later.

But anyway, the summer of '49 I worked for the Winton Lumber Company out of Martell, near Jackson. They had some beautiful timberland above town. There I had another experience which shook me up. I was supposed to be a fire prevention patrolman. Finally, in the middle of the summer we had a lightning bust, so I went up to the CDF lookout to see where the fires were. I spotted one of them, on the company land. I went down there, and the company manager was there, along with my boss, the forester. The manager chewed me out. He said, "How come you aren't on these fires?" And I said, "I wanted to find them first."

GAUSE: Yes! "Where the hell are they?"

CERMAK: That wasn't a good enough excuse for him. He said, "Well, start throwing dirt on it." I mean, he was working me over pretty good, and I was feeling a little bit insulted, you know?

GAUSE: Yes.

CERMAK: I didn't know how to throw dirt. I wound up getting part of it on him and the forester. [Laughs.] And he was an ex-Forest Service guy.

GAUSE: Oh, gosh.

CERMAK: Oh, man! Then he really got mad. And I was humiliated and angry. But after I cooled off, I began to think about it, and I realized that I really hadn't asked for instructions on

how to do my job or what would I do in case of a fire. The forester hadn't given me any, but that wasn't—I mean, I hadn't done my part. I decided, *I'm not going to let anybody catch me like that again.*

GAUSE: Yes, live and learn.

CERMAK: Yes. That was one of those times when you tell yourself, *Okay, don't let that happen again.*

GAUSE: Yes.

CERMAK: So at any rate, I graduated in June of 1950. [Robert] "Bob" Ray, who graduated the previous year, was a friend, along with Billy Lunsford, Jack Sweeley, Doug Leisz, Max Doner, a bunch of others. That's the largest class the university graduated in forestry. There were 100 of us.

GAUSE: Really?

CERMAK: I don't think half of them even started in forestry after graduation, and out of all of those, I think maybe Max Doner and I are the only ones still doing it. [Laughs.]

GAUSE: Is that right?

CERMAK: Yes. But anyway, Bob Ray was working for the Bakersfield Box Company in Woodlake, California. He talked to the boss, and the boss was going to talk to me. He had a job for me and all that. The middle of June, I got down there. That's just north of Porterville. They had a sawmill there and drying yards. When I got there, why, the boss was in the hospital with a leg operation. Nobody knew what to do with me, so they put me to work in the yard in 100 degree heat, pulling lumber off the dry chain. They dried the lumber and then they put it on the chain and we sorted by grades into piles. Sometimes I worked on the planer chain doing the same thing, pulling boards off a continuous chain behind the planer. But after I'd worked just

one day, the next morning I woke up; my arms were numb up to about the elbow. That was due to the neck injury—

GAUSE: Neck injury.

CERMAK: —that I'd had in 1942. I didn't know what was wrong. So that's what happened every day for several weeks. I'd get up in the morning, and my arms would be numb. They'd take, oh, a half hour to an hour to get feeling back in them again. The middle of the summer, they sent me up to—the boss got out of the hospital, I guess—sent me up to their sawmill up in Greenhorn Mountains, within the Sequoia Forest.

GAUSE: Yes, southern end.

CERMAK: Yes. They were cutting the timber from a cattleman's property there. So my job was to manage the lumberyard, do the bookkeeping, be the relief man in the mill and the buy for the whole outfit: go down to the valley about once every week or two weeks and buy supplies, food for the kitchen. Of course, they had a cookhouse there. It was an old double-circular sawmill with a carriage that had a block setter, a man who moved the blocks, which moved the logs on the carriage, and then a dogger, a guy who actually set steel spikes into the log to hold it on the carriage.

GAUSE: Oh, God.

CERMAK: And then, of course, the carriage would go by the saw, and the saw would cut off a board, and the board would fall off, and the carriage would go back, and the blocks moved the log forward for another cut.

One day a kid from Oklahoma who was the dogger on the carriage, didn't show up, so I got the job of being the dogger. My friend, "Smoky" Pease, whom I bunked with, was the block setter. So my back was to the sawyer. I made a stupid mistake because we were going to turn

the log over. We had sawn one face of the log, and the idea was to turn that down and then saw the next face of the log, saw the slab (bark) off, and then start sawing boards. We turned the log over with a steam-powered winch with a hook on the end. I grabbed the hook all the way around the shank and put it up into the flat face of the sawn log. My fingers were between the hook and the flat face of the board, and he started taking up the steam power on that hook, and my fingers were mashed.

You couldn't hear anything in that mill, it was so noisy. I was about like this [demonstrates]. Smoky saw what was happening and signaled to the sawyer, and he stopped right away. When I got my hand out from under the hook, the fingers were—it looked like they were about a half an inch thick. I almost lost all four of my fingers on my right hand.

GAUSE: Ooh.

CERMAK: Just luck. And in the lumber industry in those days, it wasn't unusual for workers, particularly those that worked in planing mills or box factories, to be missing a digit, a finger or something. That was one thing that happened.

Another thing that happened was one day I was on the carriage, and we hit a nail in the log, and you know the teeth in those old big circular saws are inset teeth; they were inset into the sawblade. And they started flying in all directions, right through the mill—I mean, through the steel roof [laughs], and everybody was ducking. It was scary.

GAUSE: Yes, I should say.

CERMAK: It was late in the fall and cold. I had the job of buying the grub for the cookhouse and all that, and I thought, *You know, it would be nice if I tried that idea of a coffee break for the crew*, because they had to change saws at about ten in the morning, and so I did that for a couple of days, and one day I couldn't find the cups I was looking for, so I reached up in the cupboard

and got some other cups, took them out there without realizing what I got were the wax cups, for cold drinks. I poured a cup of—

GAUSE: Hot coffee.

CERMAK: —hot coffee to give it to the old sawyer. Shirley Seldomridge was his name. He looked at the wax floating around on the top, and he said, “Huh, huh! A fellow drink enough of this, he’d pass a candle.” [Laughs.] [Slightly squeaky door opens.] But that winter we stayed in there late, and one of the guys shot a bear that was raiding the garbage cans. The cook came to me a few days later, and said, “Now, Bob,” she says—I got in there before everybody else—“there’s two plates here of meat.” She says, “Now, this one’s beef, and this one’s bear. I just wanted to let you know. Don’t tell anybody else.” [Chuckles.] So we had bear for dinner.

That was a crazy place. I wrote some stories about it because they were so—just really crazy folks. But after the second year, we came out in October of ’51, and ’51-’52 was the big snow year. It snowed in the Union Pacific passenger train up on Donner Summit that winter.

GAUSE: That’s right.

CERMAK: You had snow all around the Bay Area.

GAUSE: Yes. That was in *Life* magazine. I remember that.

CERMAK: Yes. Well, we just barely got out of the mill. I had a pretty good feeling that probably I wasn’t going to be coming back. We got down to San Diego, and went to work for lumber yards during the off season. I stayed at my parents’ place. I gave them room and board. My younger brother, Mike, said, “Hey,” he said, “I got a blind date for you.” He said, “She’s a really nice gal. You’ll like her.” My sister is married to a lieutenant in the Navy, and she said, “We’ll go over to the Admiral Kidd Officers’ Club there on San Diego Bay,” a really nice place. So we went to this place, and we picked up this gal. Her name was Ethel Close. And so

[chuckles], we ate dinner and danced and had a good time, and we rode the ferry over to Coronado, where the Hotel Del Coronado had a nice lounge set up in 1890s style. We danced some more, and then for quite a while after that, Ethel and I went out to dinner. I spent all the money I had. We went to plays. Saw *South Pacific*, *Mr. Roberts*, all kinds of plays and other things. Just had a wonderful time.

GAUSE: Yes.

CERMAK: And became engaged.

GAUSE: That's a beautiful story.

[Tape interruption for a break.]

GAUSE: I need to add a little more regarding the beginning portion of this interview. It's Tuesday, March 30<sup>th</sup>, 2004, and we're at Bob Cermak's residence, about eighteen miles east of Oroville, California. So we can move that up front, and we'll continue with Bob and his narrative.

CERMAK: Okay. I might mention again the fellow that I worked with there in the Greenhorn Mountains, Smoky Pease, P-e-a-s-e. I bunked with him for two years, but he was a friend for life, just a wonderful guy. He died last year.

So I had the blind date, and Ethel was working for a title company, getting a hundred dollars a month, and I said, "You know, that's slave wages. Let's look in the want ads and see what's there." There was an ad for a test for the county assessor's office for a draftsman, which is what she was doing. She took the test, passed it first, and got a job at \$311 a month.

[Laughs.]

GAUSE: Two hundred percent.

CERMAK: Yes. That was the start of her drafting career. She was always the best. She hadn't been there too long when they had her do the Book of Standards for the drafting department, because she was that good.

But I decided to give the lumber industry one more try. I wrote a bunch of letters and sent them to various companies around the West Coast and Alaska. I didn't hear from anybody but an outfit in Sitka, Alaska.

GAUSE: Sitka?

CERMAK: Sitka, yes. The Columbia Lumber Company of Alaska. I said, *Well, I'll try that.* [Chuckles.] I went up there. They paid the way up, on the understanding that you had to stay a certain length of time or else pay your way back. So I got up to Seattle by train and flew to Juneau, and then from Juneau to Sitka in a Grumman Widgeon—you know, the amphibian?

GAUSE: Yes.

CERMAK: We were flying over these ridges. I swear, we just barely cleared them.

GAUSE: That's a beautiful airplane.

CERMAK: Yes.

GAUSE: Powerful, powerful.

CERMAK: I'm glad that it was! [Chuckles.]

GAUSE: They have these holes in the clouds, and they're called sucker holes.

CERMAK: [Laughs.]

GAUSE: The Widgeon goes through them.

CERMAK: Yes. [Laughs.] Well, southeast Alaska, and Sitka is southeast Alaska—it rains virtually all the time. I think the time I was there, there were two or three days when it was clear. Was in the throes of problems with a longshoreman's strike on the West Coast, so nothing was

being imported, included food. They had this sawmill sitting on the edge of Sitka Sound, cutting as much lumber as fast as they could so they could send it up to Anchorage for government construction there, and private, too.

Well, I had gotten a letter from the president of the company. I had the letter in my hand. I went into the office, and this sour-looking character looked at me, and he said, "Well, he's in the hospital." Another boss in the hospital!

GAUSE: [Laughs.]

CERMAK: He said, "I can't give you a job here. I can't give you any kind of a manager's job." He said, "You'll have to work on the dock." And I was back to handling lumber on the dock, only this time it was raining every day. It was a six-days-a-week, ten hours a day. I really wasn't quite prepared for that.

GAUSE: No.

CERMAK: I lived in a Sitka hotel, and at the end of the day, it was like having been in a bath all day. My hands were all wrinkled, and I was cold, and I was pretty miserable. I hadn't been there very long, and Saturday came along. It was a rare sunny day, so I walked into the mill to punch my timecard. Somebody had left the grease pit open, and I didn't see it because I had been working out in the sunshine, and it was dark in there. I stepped right into it. I fell into the pit, hit my right side and tore the ribs loose from the sternum. One doctor in town. I went to see the doctor, and he just strapped me up with tape just as tight as he could, and he said I could take workman's comp, but workman's comp wouldn't pay my bills. I couldn't afford it. So I laid off one Sunday. It was the off day. And I went back to work on Monday.

GAUSE: Mmm!

CERMAK: At any rate, it went on like this, and I never got to see the boss, and finally I decided—I'm missing my girlfriend. I'd been writing her every day, and she'd been writing me. And so I quit. I went back to San Diego, where it was warm and dry. [Laughs.] Got a job with the county surveyor, San Diego County. Same salary as Ethel. As a chainman. It was not a bad job. We did a lot of work surveying roads around the county. On August 9<sup>th</sup>, 1952, the most important day of my life, Ethel and I got married.

GAUSE: Hey, wonderful!

CERMAK: So there we were, and I wasn't giving up on forestry just yet. So I applied for the examination for forester, and I took that in the fall. In the winter I got a notice. Ethel met me at the door in the little place we lived in, and it said I had gotten an 85, five of which was veteran's preference. Seventy was passing, so I was going to be all right. And in early May, I got an offer to Region Six—it was one telegram with about twenty names on it. My name was in there. It didn't say where or anything.

GAUSE: That's typical.

CERMAK: "You want a job?" And at the tremendous salary of three thousand four hundred and ten dollars [\$3,410] a year, and pay your own way up here? Here I am, about seven or eight miles from the Mexican border, and I am so stupid that I didn't go to the local forest office and talk to them about jobs or go to the regional office in San Francisco. I didn't know anything about the Forest Service. So I said, *Well, you know, it's a job. I'll take it.* I got a letter from the supervisor of the Chelan Forest, which is now the Okanogan. They had a job for me at Tonasket [Washington], which was twenty-five miles from the *Canadian* border. [Laughs.] Oh, well. I was determined to be a forester, though, so I went up there.

Well, I had to sell the car, my car, and I bought a train ticket—really, we didn't have any money. We had very few furnishings, too. Had just been married a short time. Ethel was still working, and she was pregnant. So I stopped in Okanogan at the supervisor's office and, unlike my previous welcomes, this one was with, well, open arms. The administrative assistant was just great. Told me all about the Forest Service, gave me some things to read and told me where I was going to work and all that sort of stuff.

GAUSE: That was rare.

CERMAK: Yes, it was great. I thought, *Well, gee whiz, these are pretty nice guys*. I was thinking, of guess, of the Navy, when I thought about another government organization. But they assigned me to Tonasket as one of the two timber sales officers. I got up there and lived in the barracks with the other guy, Bert Wells, who was really in charge of the job. The ranger was named Everett Lynch, and he was in his last year. He retired the end of the year. Everett had come from Lakeview, Oregon, and started working for the Forest Service in the middle twenties. He was an old-timer, and he worked his way up to ranger. He wanted you to work eight hours on the stump; in other words, travel time's your own time. The job is out there, and I soon found out that if it took an extra hour or even two to finish the job so's you didn't have to go back to the same place again, why, you did that, too. It was all right with me, as long as I understood what the rules were.

We were marking tree measurement, which meant we had to supposedly measure every tree. And in order to determine the volume of the timber that we were marking, why, we had to number them. We used a paint can, put a number on the stump and a stripe on the top to show that it was marked. And then we'd use the Table of Random Numbers and come back and pick those trees on the ground after they had been felled that were in that selection and actually scale

(measure) them to determine what the volume was, and then apply that average volume to all of the other trees, which meant we had to carry a book with us, in which we wrote down the—

GAUSE: Tree numbers.

CERMAK: And the height, the diameter, the form class (which is a relationship between the tree's diameter at the base and at the top of the first log), and volume. So we had to compute the volumes ourselves, after work.

GAUSE: The first log would be thirteen feet?

CERMAK: Sixteen.

GAUSE: Sixteen.

CERMAK: Sixteen feet, yes. That was homework, so to speak. We also had a slash crew, cleaning up logging slash, to supervise, and we had to cruise timber as well. It got so we had to go so fast that I memorized—how many tables was it? Fourteen volume tables. Each one of them had thirty-two items. Most of the trees were small—under 24 inches in diameter.

GAUSE: Gee!

CERMAK: In order to make the job go faster. We seldom actually measured a tree in diameter unless it was over, say, about twenty-four inches, and estimate it with our eyes close enough.

And the same thing with the form class. You had to do that that way. By memorizing the tables, I was able to cut some time off the job.

On top of that, the company that took most of our timber was the Biles-Coleman Lumber Company. They had an operation which utilized trees down to six inches in diameter, and so we wound up marking 400 trees a day routinely. I mean, we were practically running from tree to tree. [Laughs.] There were two of us, financed half a year each. Over on the West Coast—on

the west side of the Cascades, why, they had big timber operations going—that's where the timber sale money was going, of course.

GAUSE: Yes.

CERMAK: We understood that. But in the wintertime, we pruned trees, along with the rest of the crew they were trying to keep. For me, this was really pretty bad because any time you've had a neck injury and you have to do any work over your head—

GAUSE: Oh, yes.

CERMAK: —it's painful, but when you have to do it with arms extended, time after time after time—I couldn't figure out why everybody else was able to get more trees than I could, and they couldn't, either. They kind of felt that I was slacking a little bit. I wasn't. I was pruning as fast as I could.

GAUSE: You were hurting.

CERMAK: Oh, God, I was hurting.

GAUSE: Not slacking, hurting.

CERMAK: Some days I'd come home, after Ethel got there, and I was hurting so bad I'd just go to bed. It was a very hard time.

Anyway, Bert got transferred the next spring—Burt had driven down in August of 1953 and picked up Ethel at the airport in Spokane. She had this fat little baby with her. I didn't pay much attention to him to begin with because I wanted to see her. [Laughs.] But I began to realize that I had a son. The forest had a house for us, and in this house they had a table similar to this, only a Forest Service table. They had a Forest Service chair and lookout bed. We had a double bed, a rocker, a big print by Van Gogh, all our cooking equipment, some books, and a baby buggy, and that was our furniture.

GAUSE: Gee, whiz.

CERMAK: Even then, we had a hard time getting it up there, because it cost us everything we had to get it shipped. But we were together again.

GAUSE: Yes.

CERMAK: Ethel never had been in a small town in her life, never been out of San Diego except to go fishing or something. We had some great neighbors on one side and the ranger on the other side. She was real busy with the baby, and before long, why, she was pregnant with another baby.

GAUSE: Oh, my gosh.

CERMAK: This continued. [Laughs.] Let's say it was the cold winters because two more boys got started in January. [Laughter.] And it was cold up there. In town, it wasn't unusual to have ten below zero; out in the woods, twenty below, and sometimes even thirty or forty below.

GAUSE: Oh, Mack!

CERMAK: My old friend Bert had left, and I was in charge. My new friend Dale Farley was his replacement. We went to work one morning, it was a bright clear day, went out to mark some lodgepole pine. It was too cold to use paint cans because the paint just curdled up, so we used a marking ax. You know, it had a hatchet on one side and a U.S. stamp on the other. So I went out. We stopped at this one place, and I hit a couple of lodgepole pine, and they went CLANG. They were frozen solid.

GAUSE: Yes.

CERMAK: And the next one time I hit one, the whole blade of the ax just snapped out.

GAUSE: Oh, really?

CERMAK: Crystallized and broke. So I said, “Well, Dale, I don’t think we’re going to do any marking today.” [Laughs.] You know, when you think back on it, it was really kind of stupid. I wasn’t dressed for this kind of weather, either. But we went over to the logging operation. They logged in wintertime because we didn’t normally get much snow. Talking to the side rod there, the guy in charge, and he said, “Yes,” he said, “we keep our equipment running twenty-four hours a day there.” At Disautel. That’s on the Colville Indian reservation. He said, “This morning when we left it was thirty-five below zero.

GAUSE: [Whistles softly.]

CERMAK: I said, “Dale, I think we ought to go back to the office.” [Laughs.] We didn’t have a clerk. We ground out our timber sale reports, and we had the biggest timber sale program on the forest, with 26 million annual sales. But there were sales all over the place, and none of them were less than an hour away, so we always had a ten-hour day at least. One of them was up near the Canadian line, on Nicholson Creek. That was an eleven-hour day. But we camped up there a few times.

GAUSE: When you say “26 million,” you’re talking board feet?

CERMAK: Board feet, 26 million board feet, yes. That’s what we were supposed to sell. And then we had timber sales that were actually operating, and several different operators. We also had a crew of kids that were working as a slash crew. You remember how safety was so important. On one day, we got a radio message. One of the kids had cut his leg with an ax, so we went roaring over there. I had already learned a few things. One was to document things. I had documented the safety meetings we had with the crew. Everett Lynch was already there, and he was really upset because a lost-time accident is the worst thing you could have in the Forest Service. He asked me some questions. I said, “I wrote a memo to the files on this one, Everett.”

I said, "It's there." He said, "Thank God." [Laughs.] Everett was really good to me. He was a hard taskmaster, but we worked hard for him, and I thought that he gave me the right foundation in the Forest Service.

GAUSE: That's great.

CERMAK: Want to take a quick break?

GAUSE: If you want.

CERMAK: Yes.

[Tape interruption for a break .]

CERMAK: Okay, let's go.

GAUSE: We're on.

CERMAK: Okay. I went to a couple of lightning fires that summer. That was the second summer. No, that summer. It was that summer, first summer. One was down on the Colville Indian reservation near the forest boundary that we had to take action on. Everett gave me a temporary or "pickup" that had fought a little fire, and a two-man smoke chaser pack. This two-man pack had a crosscut saw. It was supposed to have saw oil and two days' rations and, of course, you had your hand tools and water, and also a rubber sack, back pump. [Laughs.]  
Okay?

GAUSE: Yes.

CERMAK: Anyway, so we went down to the San Poil River in the south end of the district.

GAUSE: Which river?

CERMAK: San Poil, S-a-n P-o-i-l. So late that afternoon, we climbed up this high ridge, and when we got to the top it was dark, so we had one of the rations. They were C-rations, 1944 vintage from World War II.

GAUSE: Yes.

CERMAK: Okay. So we had one of those.

GAUSE: [Chuckles.]

CERMAK: The next morning we got up, woke up early. It was daylight, and we could see the smoke from the fires on the next ridge over, a deep canyon between us and the fire. Went down. There was a big stream down at the bottom. I filled the bag up with water to take it up above. I carried the bag because it was heavy and I'm supposed to be in charge, and he carried the other stuff. We got up to the first fire, where lightning had struck some high-elevation white fir, just blown it to pieces. It didn't take long to put a line around that. He said, "Hey, look up. There's another one." There was another fire up the hill. I was already having problems because of hemorrhoids as I carried that heavy bag up the hill.

GAUSE: Oh, boy.

CERMAK: We got up to the other fire. It was in the top of a green ponderosa pine, and it had scattered fire around an area of about a quarter acre, I guess, in old stumps and all kind of down and dead stuff. We knew we had to get the tree down first, so we got the saw out, looked around for the saw oil to keep it from binding when you're sawing.

GAUSE: Especially wet wood.

CERMAK: Yes, particularly green wood. No saw oil.

GAUSE: Oh.

CERMAK: So we chopped an undercut in the tree, and we started sawing a back cut, and we could only go a few strokes before the saw would stick and we'd have to stop. He said, "You know, let's put the saw blade in the fire and burn that pitch off." I said, "Smart idea." So we had to do that repeatedly, and we eventually got that tree down. It was really labor, though. I mean,

it was tough. Put the fire out in the top, and then we started putting the fire out on all the dead material laying around. There were a number of stumps, and fire was starting to burn down into the stump. Well, we didn't have a radio. Everett had said, "Don't come out until the fire is dead out or you're relieved." I said, "Okay." We found we only had one man-day's rations instead of two, so that after breakfast our rations were gone. We kept on working, and we dug down below the surface of the ground, so we were standing down in these pits and digging out roots where the fire had gone out into the roots, you know.

And a plane flew over. Neither of us was smart enough to throw some green brush on a hot spot and create some smoke. They flew over us and never saw us. So we kept on digging, wondering—he said, "You suppose we can go back now?" And I said, "No. Old Everett said to put it out or wait to be relieved."

GAUSE: Yes, [unintelligible].

CERMAK: We kept digging, and then finally the next day—we didn't have anything to eat except the sugar packets and the coffee packets, so we had that. And we did have water. Used the water from the rubber bag to drink. It had talcum powder in it because you put that in there to keep the rubber sides from sticking together. [Chuckles.]

GAUSE: Oh, that's right. I forgot.

CERMAK: Anyway, after working for a couple of days, we were getting kind of hungry. The plane finally spotted us. Finally spotted us, and they came back a little later and dropped some supplies. They were down the hill from where we were. We got them, sat down, and started eating. Then went back to work. And about an hour later, why, a crew came in.

GAUSE: And relieved you.

CERMAK: And relieved us. The fire was 95 percent done. They quickly finished it up, and the crew leader said, “Why didn’t you come out?” And I said, “Everett told me to put it out or stay until relieved.” So I went back, and Everett said to me, “What did you learn, Bob?” I said, “To check all my equipment before I go, for one thing, and when a plane flies over to throw some dead green brush on the fire to make a signal.” He says, “Okay.”

Well, anyway, that was a tough way to get into the fire business.

GAUSE: Golly.

CERMAK: Everett retired, and he was replaced by O.W. “Pete” Foiles, F-o-i-l-e-s.

GAUSE: I know him.

CERMAK: Old Pete was a great guy, just really a nice person. He and his wife, Becky, had three children at the time. By contrast with Everett, he was a guy that was easygoing. He’d worked in the Park Service and had a college education at Colorado State and was just a real good guy to work for. We still know them. They stopped to see us here a few years ago.

GAUSE: I know the name.

CERMAK: Meanwhile, Ethel was having babies. You know, for a young woman who had never been out of a city in her life, she did an amazing job. She learned how to cook, she made a rag rug for the front room, she made that old lookout bed into a couch with a cover she made. She had a sewing machine. She was a good seamstress. And she did a lot of things that made it a home instead of just a place to stay. But we had a lot of fun with our children, too. They were babies, of course, and I love babies. There’s never another time in their life when kids are so delightful, really. And, of course, there were diapers. You had cloth diapers in those days, and I washed hundreds and hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of diapers. I washed the dishes every night. I helped her every way that I could. She had a couple of friends. They had a garden club

a friend got her to join, so she did get some time away from the house once in a while, but it was difficult.

We continued on. It was like this. You know, it was a tough time to work in the wintertime for me, and she was pregnant and babies—it's almost like having triplets to have three kids in three and a half years.

GAUSE: Yes, that's about right.

CERMAK: But we survived, and I think it was probably the most important part of our life because as tough as it was, instead of flying apart, we just got closer together.

GAUSE: Dependency, you got closer.

CERMAK: Yes.

GAUSE: That's wonderful.

CERMAK: Yes.

GAUSE: That's what makes strong marriages.

CERMAK: Yes. You don't really grow until you've faced some tough times. That's all there is to it. At any rate, I asked for a transfer to Region Five, and the reason I did was because I was afraid they were going to send me over to the west side of Region Six, into that rain country. I had my experience with that in Alaska. I went to talk to the supervisor, with Pete, and he said, "I'm going to have to get somebody from Region Five that wants to come up here, because you're an experienced TMA," timber management assistant. I said, "Okay."

About six months later, why, Pete called me in. He said, "There's a guy who wants to come here, and he's from the Lassen, but the job they have for you on the Plumas at Quincy. You know where that is?" And I laughed. I said, "Yeah, I know where it is." I went to summer forestry camp near there. Well, let's see, let me back up a little bit. Frank was born in

September of '54; Daniel was born in September of '55. By that time, we had managed to get enough money together to start buying a car, a two-door Ford. I remember bringing Ethel back from the hospital with Dan one day. Robert, the oldest son, was running towards the car when he saw his mother, and then the door opened, and he saw that she had a baby in her arms, and all of a sudden his face just fell. You could just see him think, "Oh, no, not another one!"

[Laughs.] More competition.

GAUSE: Yes. [Laughs.]

CERMAK: So in May of '56, we put everything we owned into the smallest U-Haul trailer we could find, I put it behind the car, and we drove south. Arrived in Quincy, and they had a house for us. The ranger had written me a letter. He said it had six bedrooms. I thought he must have made a mistake, you know? The Quincy Ranger Station had been the old Feather River Experiment Station, which had been closed. And ours was a six-bedroom house. We pulled up into the yard there and went down to this big old building, the staff house when it was the experiment station. [William] "Bill" Peterson was living there, the forest supervisor at that time. I didn't know who the forest supervisor was.

So I knocked on the door, and this nice lady came to the door. I told her who I was and wondered where our house was. And she says, "Well, I'm Mrs. Peterson, and your house is right there," just above theirs. She said, "When is your van going to arrive?" I looked at her, pointed to the trailer, and said, "There it is." [Laughs.]

GAUSE: Six bedrooms.

CERMAK: She gulped a little bit. The staff house also had a lot of excess furniture in it. Some of that furniture, we got in the next few days to help furnish the six-bedroom house. So we had a

room for all the kids and then some. We got settled, and I went into work. The first person I met was [Harold] "Hal" McElroy.

GAUSE: [Chuckles.]

CERMAK: Hal was the FCA, fire control assistant. He handled all the fire and all of the recreation and all the other jobs but timber. Been there for a few minutes, and just before eight o'clock, why, in walks this little guy with white hair, just looked like he stepped out of the band box for the Forest Service, with a Forest Service uniform, sharp as could be, shined shoes, hat, the whole business. He kind of took a look at us. [Chuckles.] I had these grubby old greens on. So he went in there and sat down. Hal said, "That's P. D. Hook." I said, "Okay." So I went in there and introduced myself. P. D., or as I called him later, Pete, didn't say much. He wasn't a talkative guy, but he was like Everett Lynch. He had started in 1925, on the Stanislaus. He had worked for years in timber on the Lassen. He worked his way up to ranger, and it was no nonsense with P. D. You do your job, and everything is fine. A lot of people got crosswise with him because they just didn't do it the way he wanted them to do it. So he said, "Okay," he says, "you be here Monday morning." This was a Friday, I think. "Monday morning at seven o'clock. We'll go look at timber sales." And I said, "Okay."

So I was there at seven. He had a dark green Jeep pickup, just spic and span. I got in the truck, and we started visiting timber sales. We did that for about ten days. Every sale we went to, up the skid trails and down all over, everywhere. And man, you had a hard time keeping up with Pete Hook. He must have been sixty at least then. My, he could walk like a champion, and he wanted to know about trees and logging. I told him what I thought. We talked to the loggers. We talked to the fallers. Everywhere we went. He had had trouble getting a TMA because they just weren't experienced enough or they just weren't up to the job. There was about a 35 million

foot sell on the district. It was spread all over the district. It was a big job. Nobody else. One person did the job.

And so he'd had to do a lot of the work himself, which made him unhappy because he had a lot of other work to be done. After this tour of ten days or so—and I'd been through all of the files, all the timber sale folders, and all the Region Five manual supplements—he said, “Okay,” he says, “the job is yours.” I never heard from Pete unless I had a problem that I thought needed his attention. He let me do the job, and that was it.

That was appreciated because for me it was like falling into heaven. In eastern Washington, the trees averaged 250 board feet each. Here, the average is maybe 1,000 or 2,000 board feet each. So I could mark more in an hour than I'd mark in a day up there.

GAUSE: Yes. [unintelligible].

CERMAK: Old P.D. was kind of a legend in the region. In '57, the next year, we had a fire at Chambers Creek in the North Fork of the Feather River Canyon. It was 4,000 feet from the bottom of the fire to the top.

GAUSE: Oh, jeez!

CERMAK: I got down there. Good ol' Bill Pete got there in a helicopter right away, and radioed, “Tell Hook and Cermak to get down here right away.” So we were on our way down there. I took a crew. Started up the hill. That country has a lot of DG, or decomposed granite, with rocks embedded in it. When the fuel burned, why, the rocks would start rolling. Well, they were rolling down the hill, and I knew that we were going to get somebody hurt, so I pulled the crew out of there. There was two ways up the hill. One was a trail to the top and you walked about four hours, and the other was by a helicopter, and if it was a hot day the 'copter wasn't powerful enough to reach 6,000 feet. They hadn't had the helicopter very long on the forest.

But I did get a ride up there, and I worked on this one line as a sector boss. The first thing I did when I got to Quincy was to volunteer to go to fires, all forests, anywhere, because I knew in Region 5 that was the way to be a ranger, and I needed the money for our large family. So I went to a lot of large fires.

On the second day, we had these crop duster planes dropping retardant on the fire, just the second year they'd been in operation, so this is the second year of organized air-drops. They parachuted some smoke jumpers in there, and they weren't worth a damn. They dropped cargo to us. It was a regular air show. [Both chuckle.] But we got the fire. We had about 1,500 acres, and here, a couple of years ago, they had a similar situation, and the fire turned out to be 48,000 acres. Because they were afraid to fight the fire.

GAUSE: Yes.

CERMAK: I won't say more than that. But I had one of the best compliments I ever had years later. Annually we have a retiree meet for Plumas retirees at Quincy, and Al Weisgerber was there. He had been a ranger on the Modoc. I had worked for him when he was division boss, on the Chambers Creek fire.

GAUSE: Didn't he retire out of Redding?

CERMAK: Probably. So Al says to me, he says, "You know, Bob, do you remember the Chambers Creek fire?" I said, "Yeah, I remember that." He says, "Well," he says, "Pete Hook said 'I'm going to give you Cermak for a sector boss. He's a good man.'" And Al said, "I looked at Pete, and I said, 'What did you say, Pete?' And he said, 'He's a good man.'" And Al said, "Well, I never heard you say that about anybody else." He just—[chuckles]. Well, that was really quite a compliment.

GAUSE: I should say.

CERMAK: But P. D. almost lost his head there because he got out of the helicopter, and fortunately he made a habit of wearing his hardhat at all times on a fire, but the pilots hadn't learned to tie down the rotor blades at that time, and a wind gust caught the rotor blade. It came around and hit him right on the side of the head, on the helmet. Creased the helmet, mind you. Didn't knock him out, but I think it must have given him a mild concussion. It would have taken his head off if it hadn't been for the hardhat.

GAUSE: "Where am I?"

CERMAK: [Laughs.] Yes.

In '58 they made a big change in organization, and upgraded district timber management assistants to GS-9 and fire control assistants and assistant rangers to GS-9. Hal McElroy was transferred to the LaPorte District over here at Challenge, Yuba County. I became the assistant ranger in Quincy. I still did a lot of timber work because [Robert] "Bob" Entzminger came in as TMA, followed by Gerry Ingco, and they both needed some orientation and help, although both of them did very well.

That summer of '58, I had to do the outdoor recreation review for the district.

GAUSE: Oh, yes.

CERMAK: When we went to every potential recreation site, made a map of it, filled out a form on all its attributes. By agreement with the LaPorte District, which shared the Middle Fork of the Feather River—I would inventory the Middle Fork on both sides of the river. So I'd go down there. To begin with, I started out at No Ear Bar, I think it was, up near the river crossing of the Quincy Road. Yes, No Ear Bar is the name of it. I went down there and looked at that and made a sketch, and filled out a form. Then I climbed back out again or I went down the river to the next bar. I had to go to a place where there would be a trail in and down the river, and a trail

out. I started doing that, and I'd have to go across the river, and this was the middle of the summer, so I just waded the river, which really was not too smart.

GAUSE: No.

CERMAK: [Laughs.]

GAUSE: Even in August.

CERMAK: [Laughs.] Even in August, because the water is cold. It wasn't all that deep. It was only maybe three feet deep, but—there were holes—it was a lot deeper. And it finally dawned on me that wasn't a very good idea, so I took another guy with me, and he fished while I—

GAUSE: [Laughs.]

CERMAK: —did the surveys. We got all the way down to Bear Creek, and where we walked out of the Middle Fork Canyon, it is about 2,500 feet deep, so it's a *long* walk out of there. But it was an interesting assignment, and that paid off in a couple of years to come.

I went to many fires on the Angeles and went to one on the Modoc. I went to some of San Bernardino, and the Cleveland. I went to the Gale fire on Thanksgiving 1957, on the Angeles.

GAUSE: That fire started when a diesel-fueled heater spilled at a road job..

CERMAK: Yes, an inmate road crew, and blew over. The Gale fire was named because the wind was blowing 70 miles per hour.

GAUSE: It was a terrible thing. Low on the ground, too.

CERMAK: Yes. Some guy from the Angeles hadn't really cleaned up this one spot. He was a relative of one of the county supervisors, so they kind of treated him a little easily. At any rate, they asked me to go down there with a crew and clean it up, so I did. I came back, and everybody else from the North Zone was gone. The plane had taken them away. The forest

supervisor came around and said, “How are you guys doing?” I said, “Not worth a damn.” I said, “I’m from the North Zone, and The North Zone is gone.”

GAUSE: Was that [Richard] “Dick” Droege?

CERMAK: Dick Droege was the supervisor.

GAUSE: He’s still alive.

CERMAK: Yes. He says, “Okay,” he says, “I’ll see what I can do about it.” About a half hour later, this guy comes along. He says, “C’mon,” he said, “we’re going to fly you back”—one guy to the Sequoia and me, all the way to the Plumas in a—I don’t know, it was a Cessna or something like that.

But the factor that really I think maybe made a difference for me was fire behavior. The Region had a fire behavior program which trained a bunch of us as trainers, and we’d go back to the forest and train other people.

GAUSE: Good. Train the trainer.

CERMAK: I got called to a fire in December of ’68 on the Cleveland, out of Lake Elsinore up there. I’ve forgotten those mountains now. At any rate—

GAUSE: Oh, that’s the Santa Ana Ranger District.

CERMAK: Santa Ana. Yes, that’s the one.

GAUSE: With Cliff Stevens.

CERMAK: We started out real early in the morning (2 a.m.) from home and flew from Chico. When we got to the fire camp, we were fresh compared to what they had, so they sent us out on the line. Hal McElroy was along. We went down a trail that a couple of cat skimmers had made down into the Santa Margarita River Canyon, the deepest part of the mountain range. There was

a down-canyon wind blowing, very strong, fortunately because the fire was absolutely crazy. I mean, there were areas of twenty or thirty acres just exploding.

GAUSE: That's near the town of Corona.

CERMAK: Yes, exactly. The fire would burn, and the gases would accumulate underneath the ridge in that down-canyon wind, and the flames were actually going over the top of us and then going back because the wind would blow them back, and then they'd explode. I thought it was the marines at Camp Pendleton, you know, having artillery practice for a while! We held the line all the way down the canyon. The next day, we came out of there. We evacuated the fire camp, and then came back again. The fire jumped the river and had gone to the south. They gave me the last open sector right near the fire camp. Most of it had the road for a line except a stretch where the fire was coming straight up the hill.

I looked at the smoke column to the north, and I could see that it had changed direction, so I went out into the brush and looked, and this fire was running straight up the hill. It wasn't spreading laterally at all. It was just running straight at us, pretty hot. So I went down to fire camp, which wasn't very far away, to plans, and I said, "Can you guys give me a bulldozer so I can make a line out there? We'll fire this thing out." A C&M (construction and maintenance) foreman from the Cleveland was there, and he said, "No," he said, "you can't get a tractor in there." I said, "I was in there. I know I can get a tractor in there. I know about tractors. I've been working with them for years." He said, "No, you can't do it." The plans chief was reluctant to do anything about it, and I said, "Well, at least get the Cats going up the road." So as they came up the road, I stole two of them.

GAUSE: [Laughs.]

CERMAK: I just took them and put them to work.

GAUSE: You commandeered the pilots of the dozers.

CERMAK: Right. We built the line most of the way out there, to the point where it had to be hand lined. I had an inmate crew, and they started building a hand line down to the point where the hill really broke off. The zone boss was Rowdy James. He came by and said, “What the hell are you doing?” I told him. He said, “Well, okay.” He says, “I’ll tell you what: I’ll go up to the top of the hill and I’ll let you know when to pull out of there and start firing.” It wasn’t ten minutes, and he said, “You better get ‘em outta there.”

So the CDF [California Division of Forestry] foreman and I started firing out the hand line, with fusees, and then we started running, firing as we ran. They had already started building a secondary line right above Lake Elsinore because they figured we were going to lose this one. That’s where the Cats were going. And when they found out I had a couple of their Cats, they got pretty irritated with me. But anyhow, Phil Intorf from the Plumas was over there with Craig Chandler, who was with fire research. Phil took several pictures of the backfire. It was a textbook backfire, and operated perfectly. That fire came just roaring up the hill, and our backfire met it [claps hands loudly] in the middle, and a second later there was nothing there but smoke.

GAUSE: A column going up and that’s it?

CERMAK: Yes, that was it.

GAUSE: Ran out of fuel.

CERMAK: Yes, and the crew went on down the hill alongside the burn. It still wasn’t spreading laterally. They just went on down and cold trailed it. That was that. So they kind of let me rest the next day, and the following day they sent me down to the South Zone of the fire, and they attached me to [Donald] “Don” Biedebau. Don was in charge of a big hose lay—they had

established a line down into the canyon, just about to the point where we had come down the first night on a ridge that rose up and down as it descended. They were going to put a hose lay on there, so when they fired it out, we'd be able to catch any slop-overs. So including the laterals, we laid we 13,800 feet of hose.

GAUSE: Gee!

CERMAK: Don put me in charge of laying the hose. Twenty-five hundred feet of it was laid by helicopter. They laid it backwards, so we had to put adapters in every so often.

GAUSE: Couplings.

CERMAK: Yes, to make it useful. And every couple of hundred feet we'd have a Y or a Siamese valve, for one-inch hose lateral lines. We had each crew member carry a length of hose as they went down. So they started firing it out, but they fired it out too far down the hill. I was on the top of one of these summits that the fire line went over, with an Indian crew.

GAUSE: By "firing out" you mean?

CERMAK: Backfiring. They used smoke grenades, and they'd fire down in to the brush. The idea was to burn up to the line that was already built, and then the fire would be contained. The trouble was, by firing too far down the hill, the backfire got too big a head start, and it burned right over the top of us, burned my eyebrows off. The crew scattered. Burned our hose in two, the main line. I shut off the Siamese valve, so we still had water, so I got the crew back together, and we put a line around the slopover. That was it

GAUSE: Whew.

CERMAK: So when I got back home, I was given a copy of a form that was filled out if somebody did good on a fire. I never had seen one before, but Rowdy James had sent one to the forest supervisor, telling him, "Cermak did a good job on that fire." Well, I think that had

something to do with the following spring. Pete Hook called me into the office, and he said—I knew the LaPorte District at Challenge was open, a GS-11 district, and he says, “You’re going to Challenge.” I said, “Wow.” I didn’t expect that, really. So we were going to move again, this time to Challenge.

Maybe I better take another break.

[Tape interruption.]

GAUSE: We’re on.

CERMAK: One other thing I need to mention about living in Quincy happened in ’58. I was looking out the window, and the boys were playing down in the yard. I noticed Frank limping, our second son. So I went down there to see what was wrong. He didn’t have a bruise or anything, and I wiggled his foot around. It didn’t seem to hurt him, but it really bothered me. This was Saturday. I talked to Ethel about it, and we talked about it in bed. I said, “I think I better take him to see the doctor tomorrow.” We had a doctor who was a Seventh Day Adventist, who had office hours on Sunday. So I took Frank in that morning. He looked at it, and he says, “I’m going to get my X-ray technician out. We got to take a picture of this.” And he did, and he showed me the picture. He said, “Frank has a giant-cell tumor on his ankle.” The big round bone in the ankle was half gone, and the end of the large bone of his leg was half gone.

GAUSE: Gee!

CERMAK: My heart sank. The doctor said, “We got to get him to surgery right away.” He called up an orthopedic surgeon at home in Reno. A friend of mine from college lived in Reno, so we called them, and he said, “You come stay with us.” So we took Frank over to see the surgeon, and he said, “We’ll operate on him tomorrow,” Tuesday. “And what we’ll do is cut a

window in the bone above this and scrape out all of the tumor and then put in a bone-chip graft made from cow bones.” And so—

GAUSE: How old was Frank then?

CERMAK: He was three.

GAUSE: Oh, my gosh.

CERMAK: I said, “Okay.” He said, “Do you have health insurance?” And I said, “No, I don’t.” He said, “Well, we’ll make it easy on you.” So I went home to take care of the kids, and Ethel stayed with Frank. Had his surgery. I went over to get them. He had to wear a walking cast, but he really couldn’t walk. He kept that on for several weeks and then the X-ray showed that everything had taken, and it was okay. A month or so before we left for Challenge, why, I met the doctor on the street in Quincy. He asked how Frank was, and I said, “Just fine.” He says, “You’re really lucky. If you waited another week, he would have lost a leg.”

GAUSE: Oh! Whew! Boy!

CERMAK: We thought it was bone cancer, and we knew bone cancer was death [voice cracks with emotion], but fortunately it wasn’t, and he recovered.

GAUSE: Yes.

CERMAK: Anyway, that’s kind of getting ahead of myself, but they all tie together.

So the LaPorte District was pretty good-sized, about 35 million timber cut, timber sales. No recreation to speak of. A lot of mining claims, a lot of timber trespass, some unhappy people that the previous ranger, Jack Moore, had managed to cool off a little bit. McElroy was the assistant ranger. A little bit later, I had Gene Murphy as my assistant ranger.

GAUSE: He’s a wonderful guy.

CERMAK: And [James] “Jim” Toland was timber management assistant. Been there a while. Worthy Veerkamp was our top technician, and Maxine Arrendale was our district clerk, who was just great. Chet McElwee was acting as—he was a road man, really, but he was acting in fire. I remember one thing he said to me—I was on fires for the first three months I was on the district. Just every week I was on a fire on the forest. That was in ’59. I was trying to get things done and going. Chet said, “Bob,” he says, as we’re going out the door, “you’re spinning your wheels.” And I kind of laughed, but I listened to what he told me. I went home. Ethel had been complaining that I was never home, and I realized what he was telling me was I was trying to do everything myself. I wasn’t getting anywhere.

So ’59 was a bad fire year. That was number one. We had at least one bad fire every week from the last part of June until the first part of September. On one siege, I went over to North Folk of the Feather at Twain on a Sunday and got there about two in the afternoon. Bill Pete put me in charge of the division on the top of the fire, where the fire was heading, and he had [William] “Bill” Turpin on one flank and one of the other rangers on the other flank. Bill Pete sent me bulldozers, and I said, “Send me more ‘dozers,” so we got a line around it, but it was a long way back to the fire. It had to be burned out. I said, “I’m going to need about a hundred guys to burn this thing out.” He said, “A hundred guys?? Where am I gonna get ‘em?” I said, “I don’t know, but if you want this thing burned out, get ‘em to me.” So he sent a hundred guys from Stead Air Force Base, and they were in low-cut shoes. But I told the crew bosses and the sector bosses what had to be done, and we fired that thing out that night.

GAUSE: The timber?

CERMAK: Yes, we had a line around it that night. By ten in the morning, we had a line around that fire. Well, they kept me there—you know, it was so noisy in camp, with trucks and

helicopters and everything, I didn't get any sleep. So, I went on the line the next night again. It was routine stuff. They had another fire that night in the Greenville district. I left—let's see, that would be Tuesday, and I went to Quincy and stopped off at the supervisor's office. Oh, gosh, what is the present chief's name? Bosworth. Irwin Bosworth.

GAUSE: Irwin, yes.

CERMAK: The present chief's father. He was the timber management staff officer. And he was dispatching. As I walked in the door, he got a call from Greenville that said, "We got a fire at Lights Creek on the Greenville District." And I looked at "Bos," and I said, "I guess I better go, huh?" He said, "Yeah." And he says, "And pick up that crew from Herlong. They've been released, and you'll take them with you back up there." I found them along the road, signaled them to a stop. We went up to Lights Creek, where the fire was going absolutely crazy. I mean, the temperature was 100 degrees. It had been that hot on the Twain fire, and it was still 100 degrees.

GAUSE: Is that east side?

CERMAK: Yes, east side.

GAUSE: Yes, that's terrible.

CERMAK: But it was partly cut over and partly old growth. I started with a crew up one side of the fire. I went ahead to scout it out, and I came back. There was no crew. God, I went into the fire, trees 150 feet tall, and the fire going through them. I thought I'd lost the crew. I went down to camp. They were smarter than I was: they had pulled out. Well, we got some Cats going on it—the wind was blowing against my side of the fire; Turpin had the other side. We got a Cat line up to the top of the fire, ahead of the fire, and we had it pretty well finished off but it was

continuing to slop over the line because of the wind. We had to build more Cat line. I knew we had to get the line fired out, but—I was so tired. I hadn't slept for at that time maybe sixty hours.

GAUSE: Whew!

CERMAK: I talked to the ranger, and he said, "There's a road down there. You can get across to the middle of the fire. It's heavily cut over, lots of down logs and stumps." So I got my truck down to the road but I didn't have a light. I fell down probably twenty times before I reached the fire line.

GAUSE: Oh, God.

CERMAK: Finally got over there, and one of the fellows from the Lassen was there with an Indian crew. It was a Hopi—no, not a Hopi, a Zuni crew, Zuni crew. I said, "You start now and fire it all the way to the top," Then I went back to another road that cut through the fire. I went back down to the road, and here "Bill Pete" [Bill Peterson] had scoured out all of the bars in Greenville to come up with some pickup firefighters. Half of them were drunk, and they were giving the sector boss a hard time. I was dead beat and not ready for backtalk. I just chewed their ass out from one end to the other. I told them, "You can either fight the fire or go to jail, and if you don't stay awake you're going to get burned up, so you pay attention to what this guy tells you." And they calmed down.

We corralled the fire about 2 a.m., so I came down off the fire. The next morning about nine AM—this is a Wednesday, and I hadn't slept since Sunday morning. Really had hardly any sleep at all. Bill Pete was so excited that we caught another fire. It was 2,500 acres.

GAUSE: Gee.

CERMAK: We caught it the first night. And he says, “Well, buster,” he said, “are you ready to go to another fire?” And I said, “Bill,” I says, “you know what you can do with your fires. Just stuff ‘em”—and you know what the rest of it is.

GAUSE: Yes.

CERMAK: He said, “Oh! We better get you some sleep.” [Laughs.] I said, “Okay.”

GAUSE: This is Turpin?

CERMAK: This was Bill Peterson.

GAUSE: Oh, Bill Pete.

CERMAK: The forest supervisor, yes. [Both chuckle.] “Bill Turp” [Turpin] is on one side of the fire; I was on the other. We contained several fires like that. The last one was in September, and this one was over 3,000 acres, and we got it the first night. I was coming back down the next morning in a helicopter, and a little weather front came through. It just picked up a big piece of brush and threw it right over the line, and the fire burned another 4,000 acres. He sent me to another couple of fires off forest that year. I went to the Woodwardia fire in the Angeles.

GAUSE: October of ’59.

CERMAK: Yes. They wanted me to be a line boss, but I realized I really wasn’t equipped for that, particularly in Southern California, where you needed to know the people from the various agencies, and I didn’t. So I came back and I told Bill, “I don’t want to go to any more fires off forest. I’ll fight fire on our forest, but no more off-forest fires.” My best job was division boss, where I could see what was needed and get it done right away.

But anyway, we did a lot of things. In ’62 we had to do our district multiple use plan. Just before that—let me back up a second. Let’s go back to the Middle Fork of the Feather River, the Richvale Irrigation District down in the Sacramento Valley. They were a bunch of

rice farmers who had filed for a permit to develop the Middle Fork of the Feather River for power and water. One of the first things [William] “Bill” Peterson had me do was to go to a meeting of the State Water Rights Board in Oroville and support the California Department of Fish & Game in saying “no” to this project. Bechtel Engineering was pushing the project for the irrigation district. The engineer in charge had been regional engineer for the Forest Service in the thirties. We didn’t have a say in the water rights proceeding except to support Fish & Game, and I did. I stood up and said the Plumas National Forest supports the position of the Department of Fish & Game. Boy, this guy from Bechtel just went ballistic. [Imitates an angry voice, but in a choked manner]: “I’ll call Bill Pete and raise hell!” blah, blah, blah. He turned red in the face. I said, “Well, go ahead and call him. He sent me down here.” He said, “What??” Okay.

Then we had to prepare a report to the Federal Power Commission on this proposal, and the work that I had done a couple of years previously in locating all of the recreation sites was part of the report to the Commission. This was followed by a report that made the Middle Fork one of the first seven Wild and Scenic rivers under the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act in 1958.

The point of this: there were power projects going on all up and down the Sierra Nevada. In one case—some guy filed a preliminary power permit on Feather Falls. Feather Falls is 640 feet high, highest in the national forests. It wouldn’t take much to develop a power plant: just run Fall River into a pipe and put a power plant down at the bottom. You already had the drop; you didn’t need to build anything else.

GAUSE: It’s all there, except the turbine.

CERMAK: The proposal really worried me. So I looked in the Manual to see if there’s anything I could do to stop this. I noticed that the regional forester had the authority to approve a scenic

area, so I wrote up a report for a scenic area for Feather Falls and the falls on the South Branch of the Feather River, which are just to the east of there, and the nearby canyon of the Middle Fork Feather River, and got it up to “Bill Pete,” and he approved it. He said, “We’ll have to take this down to [Charles] ‘Charlie’ Connaughton, the regional forester, for approval.” And so we did. We went down there. Charlie said, “What is this?” he says. “I don’t have any authority to approve this.” And I says, “Yeah, you do, Charlie.” And I showed him the part in the Manual. [Chuckles.]

GAUSE: Wasn’t it that old “U” sections?

CERMAK: Yes.

GAUSE: Huh?

CERMAK: Yes.

GAUSE: Yes.

CERMAK: He said, “Well, I’ll be damned.” [Laughs.]

GAUSE: I’ve got one I’ll tell you later.

CERMAK: Okay. So he approved it. Then in ’62 I did the district multiple use plan, and I had two special areas that the multiple use coordinator up in the supervisor’s office said, “Ah,” he says, “what are you doing with all these special areas?” I said, “Well, the scenic area is a special area, and this area is in Valley Creek.” He said, “What’s special about that?” “Well,” I said, “it’s about 350 acres of old-growth, mixed conifer: sugar pine, ponderosa pine, red fir, white fir, incense cedar, Douglas fir, and some of those trees are probably 280 feet tall.” I said, “We need to keep a sample of that.” He really didn’t believe it because we were cutting timber that was very large. Sugar pine containing 20,000 board feet in a tree was not unusual.

GAUSE: Jeez.

CERMAK: Thirty thousand board feet. I remember one time on one timber sale, there were four trees, laying it down there. The company would cut them into sixteen-foot logs if they were forty-eight inches on the small end.

GAUSE: [Laughs.]

CERMAK: There were seven of these logs in each one of these trees.

GAUSE: Forty-eight plus.

CERMAK: Yes. So each one of those logs was over forty-eight inches on the *small* end. The trees—each had between 31,000 and 28,500 board feet in them, those four trees. Each one of them. One tree was cut on the district which, if I had known about it, it would never have been cut. Had 46,500 board feet in it. One tree. That's enough for more than four houses. So it was big timber.

GAUSE: Two, three hundred years old?

CERMAK: Oh, older than that. I'd say 400. Sugar pine will grow pretty well even to its 300<sup>th</sup> year, according to all of the studies that have been done. We were making big sales and big timber, and we had off-highway haul trucks hauling—oh, there were 10,000 to even 15,000 board feet per truck. It was a pretty high-volume operation, a lot of private timber being cut on Soper-Wheeler land and also on Georgia-Pacific land. So, there were a lot of logging trucks going around the countryside. And in the middle of this, in 1961, the South Fork of the Feather River Project was started. This project included two major dams, four powerhouses, four other dams, four tunnels, a major canal. A major reservoir was near LaPorte, in Little Grass Valley, had 1,600 acres. Another one further down had 650 surface acres. They sold the construction bonds on July fifth; they started work with 1,500 men and Cats all over the place the next day.

GAUSE: Jeez.

CERMAK: I mean, they were going everywhere.

GAUSE: [unintelligible].

CERMAK: Before I arrived at Challenge, Jack Moore and Hal McElroy had done a lot of work to come up with a cooperative fire plan—they worked with the irrigation district—to be paid for by the contractor. So the contractor paid for two additional fire crews, four additional patrolmen and an assistant fire control officer, so actually the district had nine patrolmen and six fire crews; five lookouts. We did a lot of work ahead of time, talking with the unions, talking with the company, impressing on them the importance of fire prevention. Very cooperative. We went through three years without a single man-caused fire. At this time, Interstate 80 was being built over Donner Summit, and they had a contractor, a debris-burning contractor, who left a fire. It got away and caused the Donner Fire to burn 40,000 acres. We had the same contractor on this project. I didn't trust him across the road, even.

In September of that first year, we had about three-quarters of an inch of rain. I told the contractor it would be okay to burn small hand piles in the little dam projects, and I told one of our patrolmen—I said, "Now, you go out there tonight to the Sly Creek reservoir site, because he's going to try to burn a big pile, I think." Sure enough, the lookout called me at home. "Herb says he's burning one of those Cat piles."

GAUSE: Monsters.

CERMAK: I called—

GAUSE: Full of dirt.

CERMAK: I called the project manager; told him about the burn and asked him to meet me there. He was with the grandson of Guy F. Atkinson, the big contractor. The grandson was supposedly in charge but he manager was. Had to meet me out there, and I showed them the

pile, and I said, “I told the folks they could burn only small hand piles.” And I said, “That has to be put out right now.” And I said, “If it happens again, I’ll shut the whole job down.” This guy that was the real boss—he knew what was going on. He said, “It won’t happen again. Don’t worry about it.” It never did.

This introduced a whole series of other problems. We had to develop a recreation plan for this project. I did that personally, partly because I wanted to but partly because there was nobody else to do it. That plan was used as the basis to get funds from the state, \$2 million. The irrigation district contributed part of that to building recreation areas around Little Grass Valley reservoir and around the Sly Creek reservoir, the smaller one. There were 250 camp and picnic units built up there. I never saw them built, but the money came from that plan.

Then the community of LaPorte was only six or seven miles from Little Grass Valley reservoir. People were living on Forest Service land and had been since they’d been born in the 1800s, you know?

GAUSE: Trespassers.

CERMAK: The Forest had been trying to get this property into private ownership for years and years, and finally Everett Jensen down in the Regional Office said, “Let’s try a land exchange.” So he came up and provided the help, and Gene Murphy did a lot of the work. We came up with a land exchange proposal, and Bill Pete found some land that the water district in LaPorte could buy that would serve as offered land. This whole thing was finally completed July 14<sup>th</sup>, 1963. The reason I know the date is that one of the people up there told me, “That’s Bastille Day,” the day the French got their freedom from the king. [Laughs.] [Joseph] “Joe” Flynn brought the patent to the land up and presented it, and everybody had a good time!

GAUSE: Had a good time.

CERMAK: Yes. Well, it was such a hard-drinking community anyway. It was the first time a town had ever been exchanged by the Forest Service. We were quite proud of that.

GAUSE: Do you need a break?

CERMAK: Yes.

[Tape interruption.]

GAUSE: Okay, we're back on.

CERMAK: I was offered a transfer to the fire control officer job on the Sequoia, and I turned it down. Bill Pete told me that was not a good idea; Ethel said, "You better not." I was highly rated in just about everything, and I felt they had just offered the first job out of the box. I wasn't going to take it. I didn't want to be in fire in the first place. Bill says, "Well, Charlie Connaughton, the regional forester, is the one that makes these selections. He's not going to be happy." I said, "Well, I'm sorry." So word came down from Charlie: Write him a letter and tell him why I turned the job down.

GAUSE: [unintelligible].

CERMAK: It was a hard letter to write, but I did. About a year later, why, I was offered a job as the recreation, fire and lands staff officer on the Inyo, at Bishop. I accepted that. That's exactly what I wanted. Went down there, and Roy Feuchter, who had preceded me, had done a good job, so I just kind of followed up on a lot of things that he was doing. Hal McElroy was ranger there on the White Mountain District in Bishop. He was concerned about recreation vehicles and that were getting too close to the streams, polluting the water and making a mess everywhere. I made the rounds of the districts and took a lot of photographs. I went back, and wrote a paper called "Campground Crisis." It was illustrated by Rocky Rockwell, who did a lot of the

photography, and Wayne Iverson did a lot of artwork on it, gussied it all up and sent it to forest supervisor Joe Radel, who was very happy with it.

What it proposed was moving a lot of the RVs away from the streams, building new campgrounds, rebuilding the ones we had, and preparing to build others in the future by planting trees. Joe was thrilled with it. He sent it to the regional office, where “Slim” Davis was in charge of recreation, not a friend of Joe’s or the Inyo’s, even though he had been the supervisor there.

GAUSE: [Laughs.]

CERMAK: He kind of pooh-poohed it.

GAUSE: Who had been supervisor of the Inyo, Slim?

CERMAK: Slim Davis.

GAUSE: He had been supervisor?

CERMAK: Yes.

GAUSE: Jeez, that’s way before me.

CERMAK: But anyhow, the regional forester saw it, and it was sent on to Washington, where the deputy chief in charge of national forests, M.M. “Red” Nelson, saw it. Reportedly he said, “Hmmp, ‘Campground Crisis.’ Hmmp.”

GAUSE: Yes, that’s Red Nelson.

CERMAK: But he read it anyway, and so did his staff, and here was something—this was a proposal all ready for money. Well, it didn’t happen while I was there, but it did happen a year or two later. A lot of things proposed in that paper were done.

GAUSE: That’s great.

CERMAK: I also wrote an article on the bristlecone pine. It was published in *National Parks* magazine. At the same time, some guy on the Humboldt Forest had cut the oldest bristlecone pine. [Laughs.] It wasn't funny!

GAUSE: [Edward] "Ed" Cliff gave him the permit.

CERMAK: He did? [Laughs.]

GAUSE: Yes, he wrote and signed the permit.

CERMAK: Oh, God!

GAUSE: Yes.

CERMAK: Well, anyway, this kind of took a little bit of the heat off, I guess, and they were happy about that.

GAUSE: That was on the Humboldt.

CERMAK: Yes, Humboldt Forest, yes.

GAUSE: I'm sorry, you did mention that.

CERMAK: Yes. Well, I met you and Edward "Ed" Schneegas and a lot of other good people there, on the Inyo, [William] "Bill" Murphy and others. Joe wanted me to work on a program for a visitors center at Mammoth, which was probably the best place in the Forest Service for a visitors center. I did some work on that. Did a lot of land exchange work, exchanging forest land around Mammoth for private lands at Lake Tahoe; a lot of the public lands there resulted from the land exchange work started by Roy Feuchter and completed by us at Bishop. I had been there three years, and I was enjoying the work, but I knew that I couldn't get a deputy supervisor's job in Region Five. The region wouldn't allow it. No one from within the region at that time could get a deputy's job. I was offered a promotion to a GS-13 deputy's job on the

Black Hills Forest [South Dakota] in Region Two. *Oh, God! Region Two! I mean, Black Hills? South Dakota? Where is that? I'd have to leave California. Will I ever get back?*

GAUSE: [Chuckles.]

CERMAK: I was dithering around there, and Ethel got tired of it. She'd been back to work, by the way, working for Inyo County as a draftsman and later worked for a bank in Bishop. She said, "What's the matter with you? Don't you have any sense of adventure? Take the job!"

"Okay," I said, so I took the job. This was in February. The kids were in school and they were going to be in school until May.

GAUSE: Whiteout.

CERMAK: Yes. So I drove there, and the forest supervisor was a great guy named [Kenneth] "Ken" Sholes. I was a GS-13 deputy, and there were only two GS-14 forests in Region Two.

It's a big forest, a lot of things going on, similar to a typical Region Five forest: recreation; a big fire job; big timber job; range, wildlife. My duties were to be acting forest supervisor and to do the inspections. Ken had some ideas on a different kind of multiple use plan, which integrated everything into one product, and I was to come up with that plan. My family and I were apart for four months. I wrote a letter every day.

GAUSE: You and your wife.

CERMAK: Yes. I wrote a letter every day, and she wrote almost every day. We telephoned back and forth some, too. It was really hard for her because she had the kids in school. Robert was in high school. She was working. She was trying to sell the house. When we arrived in Bishop, there were no houses available, so we had to have a house built. In the interim, why, there had been ninety houses built, so now houses were for sale. So was ours. So it was difficult.

Anyhow, I went ahead with the job. It was cold up there. That first year in Rapid City [South Dakota], somebody had a betting pool in the paper: the person who guessed the first day the temperature reached 80 degrees won the pool. It never got to 80 degrees that summer, although some summers reach 100 degrees. Anyway, finally we were able to sell the house within the year allowed to get reimbursed for real estate costs. We took a loss of \$3,500, which we couldn't afford. In the Black Hills we lived in a tiny ex-Air Force Base house at Hill City Ranger Station, supposedly three bedrooms. [Chuckles.] That whole house was about as big as this room. We did have a basement, though, and we put the boys in the basement. We struggled there. The kids liked the school. All the grades were in one school at Hill City, from kindergarten through high school.

The ranger at Nemo was the same guy who had cut his foot on a slash crew at Tonasket years before. [Laughs.] We met, and he said, "Do you remember me, Bob?" And I said, "No, I don't." He says, "You remember that guy that cut his foot near Tonasket?" I said, "Oh, okay." GAUSE: [Laughs.] He was still kicking around.

CERMAK: I also had gotten started, while at Challenge, on work planning, and I kept on with that. We got the Black Hills people producing work plans on time and budgets on time, and also got the multiple use plan—land-use plan is what it really was—doing that Ken wanted. And then about May of '69 I was offered the supervisor's job at Pueblo, Colorado, for the San Isabel National Forest, a very small workload forest, probably not a helluva lot more workload than my district had here.

GAUSE: Was that later merged with Uncompaghre?

CERMAK: No, with the Pike, when I left.

GAUSE: Pike, okay.

CERMAK: Yes. Well, here was a forest that was big in everything but workload. One and a half million acres and over twenty of 14,000-foot peaks, and beautiful, roadless country.

GAUSE: Wow.

CERMAK: And we also had 500,000 acres of national grassland, so it was 250 miles out to Elkhart, Kansas, to the Cimarron Grassland, and it was 160 miles in the other direction to the Leadville district office. The travel time was fierce. I mean, you had to fly out to the grassland. The U.S. Bureau of Reclamation had just finished a project up near Leadville. They built Turquoise Lake, and they had put in—of all things, at 10,000 feet elevation, they put in a sewage system and flush toilets and everything. That meant you had to have extra personnel to take care of the plumbing. So the money that financed a whole bunch of engineers and landscape architects and other people was gone, and I had to get rid of them.

GAUSE: Oh! [He sighs, in sympathy.]

CERMAK: So my first job was to pare the organization down, which was not much of a fun job, I can tell you.

GAUSE: You were very popular.

CERMAK: The organization kept going down, but I didn't cut anybody from the districts. Finally, we didn't have any administrative assistants. We had a two-man road crew, one engineer, one landscape architect, and a couple of general staff and me. That was it. But nonetheless, we did a lot of good things. I decided that one thing we could do is make people aware that there was a national forest there, and I started an information program. I wrote a one-page plan. I never had done much public speaking until then, but I spoke to groups, sometimes two a day, usually three or four a week. It was one of the first public involvement programs in the country.

GAUSE: Gee.

CERMAK: For the best part of a year.

GAUSE: Gee.

CERMAK: One of the reasons was that this was the time when the big Spanish land grants were going into private ownership, like the Forbes Ranch, and people were cutting them up into little pieces, and it was a horrible use of land.

GAUSE: I think Doug Leisz got involved with one of those, didn't he?

CERMAK: Yes.

GAUSE: Didn't he, when he was associate chief?

CERMAK: Yes, down in New Mexico.

GAUSE: In New Mexico, yes.

CERMAK: One of the mountain counties was Custer County, 1,000 people, with just a fantastic view of the Wet Mountain valley and, in the background, the Sangre de Cristo Range, 13,000- and 14,000-foot peaks.

GAUSE: Beautiful.

CERMAK: Just beautiful country. They had asked the state for a county land use plan, but there were only two people in the state planning office. They came up with a typical plan, and asked me about it, and I said, "Jeez, you know, this is going to wind up with subdivisions all over the place." He said, "Well, the other thing we could do is declare everything agricultural, which means that the planning commission"—which was the county supervisors—"have to approve any kind of construction, any new construction or reconstruction, because the zoning is all agricultural." You have a minimum size lot, in this case a minimum of forty acres for any particular building.

So we went up to Custer County, and they had a meeting with all the people they could find, probably half the people in the county. We talked about it, and there were a couple of little resorts that weren't too happy about the idea, but after it was explained to them fully, they said okay. The last thing I heard, it's still that way. I mean, they still have a beautiful valley and beautiful peaks.

The ski area business was in a big rush at that time. Vail and Aspen were going great guns. One day a developer came to the office, and he said he was from Nebraska, a friend of the U.S. Secretary of Agriculture; had been a state senator in Nebraska. He had bought land at the base of Mount Elbert, the highest peak in Colorado, and he wanted to develop a ski area. This was on the east side of the Rockies, where the snow is not nearly as deep or reliable as it is on the west side. So I said, "Let's talk about it." He said, "We'll talk at the hotel tonight."

So I went out to his motel, me and Walt Litwicks, our lands staff officer and his man, a financier, who was with him. That guy figured out within the first ten minutes that I wasn't going to go for this, but the developer kept telling me, "Yeah," he said, "we can do this." I said, "Well, we'll have to see whether or not this is an appropriate land use before I even issue a special use permit application." I was just flying blind, really. So the developer says, "Okay." So he goes up the valley, the Arkansas Valley up to Leadville, and at every small town, he stops in and tells them that I was against progress and jobs. So I had to follow him up [chuckles] and talk to all of these people all the way up the valley.

And then I got a letter from the chief, asking me to write a letter for the Secretary saying why the developer shouldn't have a ski area development on the slopes of Mount Elbert. So I did. And that was the last of it. But I'll show you a picture in the other room, Mount Elbert as it is today still. It's wilderness now, by the way.

GAUSE: Those guys are—the guy at the [unintelligible] was that way.

CERMAK: Yes. Well, Squaw Valley—he was even worse.

GAUSE: Alex Cushing.

CERMAK: [Laughs.] Yes, Cushing, okay. This goes right into the next one.

GAUSE: They just kill a good land [manager?].

CERMAK: There was big uproar about having a Denver Olympics that year, and our regional forester was on the Denver Olympics Committee. A local—

GAUSE: Was it Craig Rupp?

CERMAK: No, Bill Lucas was his name.

GAUSE: Lucas, yes.

CERMAK: The local state senator, whom I knew fairly well, called me. He said, “Bob,” he said, “what do you know about Winter Olympics?” I said, “I really can’t say anything about the Denver Olympics because my boss is on the committee, but if you want to find out about past Winter Olympics, why don’t you call the State Division of Beaches and Parks in California and ask about Squaw Valley?” He said, “Okay.” He called me back about a week later. He said, “I not only talked to him about Squaw Valley,” he said, “but I called Chamonix in France and I called this one in Switzerland and that one in Italy and so forth, and,” he said, “they all told me the same story. They all lost a lot of money.” [Laughter.] So he and another state senator, named Richard Lamm, who later became governor—helped stop the Denver Olympics based upon what had happened elsewhere. Now, saying this, I didn’t do anything except give him some information. I didn’t have really an ax to grind on the Denver Olympics at all, because I wasn’t anywhere near them, but that’s what happened.

We were moving our office to another site. I found folks throwing away old files one day, and one of the things they were throwing away was the first recreation plan ever made on a national forest, of the San Isabel. The plan was made in 1919, by Arthur Carhart, one of the best known early conservationists. So I rescued it, and met Arthur Carhart, and became friends with him, and we exchanged letters and tapes. He was in his eighties at the time and had had a stroke. I wrote an article about Carhart and the plan, which later got published.

We had a lot of other things going on. [Thomas] “Tom” Nelson, Deputy Chief in charge of national forests, was out to inspect the region. We went out to the national grasslands. The grasslands had scattered parcels all over the place, the idea being to show people, a lot of different people, how to manage cattle on a grasslands. The ranger and I both thought that wasn’t a good way to do it; you needed to bring them together as a unit, which is the way the ranchers would operate it. And Tom thought otherwise—no, we argued about that, and argued about it [chuckles]. Tom, you know—when he got an idea, he wasn’t very easy to change.

GAUSE: Well, he didn’t—

CERMAK: He didn’t change my mind, anyhow.

GAUSE: Tom didn’t come out of natural resources.

CERMAK: No. [Laughs.] I know he didn’t.

GAUSE: [Laughs.]

CERMAK: Okay. A little bit later, I was playing volleyball in the back yard with the kids, big kids. One of them hit the ball hard, a big guy, with his fist, like this [demonstrates], at me, and somebody said something. I turned my head, and I got hit in the head. This re-injured my neck. It was so bad I just could hardly do anything, so Ethel convinced me to go to the doctor. I went

to an orthopedic surgeon. He took an X-ray. “Ever had a neck X-ray?” I said, “No.” He took an X-ray, and one disk in my neck was gone.

GAUSE: Jeez!

CERMAK: And a couple of more were badly damaged. And he said, “You’ve got to have a cervical fusion.” And so I went into the hospital. This was about the time the regional office decided that they needed to combine the Pike and the San Isabel, to make a GS-14 forest. I had surgery, and the next morning I was fine. And I really haven’t had any problem since then—

GAUSE: Wonderful.

CERMAK: —except that I can’t tip my head back very far.

GAUSE: But you’re out of the agonizing pain.

CERMAK: Yes, yes. So they combined the forests, and Regional Forester Lucas offered me a transfer to the George Washington National Forest in Region 8. It was a good forest, and it would be a promotion to a GS-14. He was a very confrontive [sic] individual. I didn’t back off from Bill at all. I think he thought I was a good employee. I thought he was a pretty good regional forester except when he criticized people in front of others, which I didn’t think was a good thing to do. But I was promoted and transferred to the George Washington—I thought the combination of forests was a bad idea, but that’s another story.

GAUSE: To combine the GW and the Jefferson, you mean?

CERMAK: No, no, the Pike and the San Isabel.

GAUSE: Pike and San Isabel.

CERMAK: Pike and the San Isabel, yes. Well, I had a brace on my neck, so Ethel took [Judith] “Judy” back to find a house, to Harrisonburg, Virginia. She called me on the phone, and she said, “Oh, the houses cost \$10,000 more here.” I said, “Well, you’re there and I’m here. You

just go ahead and make the decision.” So she did. Bought a nice house. Went to Harrisonburg in the beautiful Shenandoah Valley of Virginia, where the humidity is a lot less on the coast but it’s still up there around 50, 60 percent a good share of the time.

GAUSE: Oh, my God.

CERMAK: We left two of our sons in Colorado. Took Dan and Judy with us. But the George Washington is 1.1 million acres of forest in Virginia and West Virginia. Big controversy over clear-cutting in the Appalachians and also the Blue Ridge.

GAUSE: Senator Jennings Randolph.

CERMAK: Yes.

GAUSE: —got that going.

CERMAK: Yes, that’s right.

GAUSE: West Virginia.

CERMAK: And deservedly so because one of the first things that happened on the forest, the wildlife staff officer took me for a ride in his airplane, and showed me a devastated area below me, and I said, “What happened? Is this where one of the hurricanes came through?” Because Hurricane Camille came through a year and a half before; and Agnes, just two months before we arrived. He said, “No, that’s an 800-acre clear-cut.” I said, “Oh. I understand why we have a controversy.” Eight-hundred-acre clear-cut, mind you. So anyway, I got busy on that right away, and I also got busy with—(I had done some training at University of Chicago)—a management by objectives program. The deputy supervisor, [Donald] “Don” Percival, had already gotten things pretty well going on that system.

GAUSE: He’s a Region Eight guy.

CERMAK: Yes. Yes. Later he was in Information & Education staff for a while down at Region Eight in Atlanta.

GAUSE: That's right.

CERMAK: Yes.

GAUSE: Did you replace [Stanley] "Stan" Adams?

CERMAK: Yes, I replaced Stan Adams, right. Well, these were a good bunch of people. I didn't know anything about hardwoods, and so I didn't pretend to know anything. Whenever we went on a sale, which was often, I went to every clear-cut on that forest. I asked the technicians about species of trees, what they were doing, how they were doing it, and why they were doing it. Everybody figured out pretty soon that I wanted to know, and that I wasn't trying to pull the wool over anybody's eyes. I got people together, including technicians. They had some problems with lack of training, and they had some problems with lack of advancement. We tried to deal with those things. We had some really good people there. My secretary, Ruth Lineweaver, was an old hand and just a wonderful person. The rangers were a pretty good bunch of people. There were some really interesting citizens there.

One I have to mention is [Williams] "Captain Billy" Massey. Capt. Billy was eighty-one or -two years old. He lived in Nelson County, which was the site of the TV show [*The Waltons*] where they had the family that used to talk before they went to sleep, you know?

GAUSE: Oh, yes.

CERMAK: They lived on a ridge not far away from where he lived. He was named Captain Billy when he was a child, and he was the postmaster of the—I don't know, either a fourth- or fifth-class post office in Tyro, Virginia, where he lived. But he was such a man that at one point he was the president of the National Postmasters Association. This is the kind of guy he was.

He was a wonderful old gentleman, interested in promoting Crabtree Falls [Virginia], the highest waterfalls in the eastern United States, which was finally done, after I left. There were a lot of other good people. A lot of things going on.

I learned a lot about clear-cutting, about what was good and what was bad. Max Peterson, who was the regional forester at the time, said maybe I ought to consider going to the Washington office. I said, "Max, I don't think I'd thrive very well there at all. I think I do the best job for the Forest Service as a forest supervisor." And he says, "Okay, Bob. That's okay."

So we had done quite well in just two years, and the forest was doing very well. People were happy. We were a team. We really liked and respected each other. Then the supervisor of North Carolina retired. Here's a GS-15 forest and the biggest in Region Eight.

GAUSE: He was an engineer.

CERMAK: I don't know what he was, but he was retired for quite a while before he retired.

GAUSE: [Laughs.] One of those early recipients, self-proclaimed. [Laughs.]

CERMAK: I shouldn't say that, but it's fact.

GAUSE: Well, it's according to—

CERMAK: Everybody knew.

GAUSE: Yes.

CERMAK: Everybody knew it. They asked me to take the forest, the job. I was away from home and didn't get a chance to consult with Ethel. Our kids had all been to at least two high schools. Robert had been in three. Judy was in high school. Dan had just graduated. Ethel was not really too happy about moving, but I said, "I don't think we're going to get back to California by staying here," which is what we wanted to do eventually. So I accepted the job, which was really quite an honor for me because there was only four or five GS-15 forests in the whole

United States, and quite frankly, I think this was probably the biggest. We had ten ranger districts, two job corps centers; we had work programs which employed probably 800 people in addition, and included all the forests in the entire state. It was so different in Region Eight, where a supervisor was expected to represent the Forest Service in an entire state. You had to keep contact with the congressional delegation and the state delegation and all the pressure groups, as well as your forest.

GAUSE: Jeez.

CERMAK: I went down there, and I decided the first thing I had to do was to know the people on the forest because the morale was at rock bottom. People were not producing. And so I started making the rounds of the forest. I went to all ten districts, I met as many people in the districts as I could. In one case, on the Croatan District on the coast, why, this fellow whose job was running a drag line came up to me. We shook hands and were having a fish stew, by the way, and he said, "Well," he says, "you're the first forest supervisor I ever saw and I worked for the Forest Service twenty years." I said, "It won't be the last time that you see me." And it wasn't. [Chuckles.]

GAUSE: Twenty years?

CERMAK: I spent a couple of nights overnight in the job corps centers, and met a lot of the foreman, the corpsmen, and the people who were doing the work. About then, I was called and asked to go to Washington on a nine-week detail. This was for the development of the Resource Planning Act.

GAUSE: RPA.

CERMAK: Issues—not issues but—oh, what was it?

GAUSE: Goals for resources planning?

CERMAK: Goals and issues and policies. This was really the key part of the whole thing. [Lawrence] “Larry” Whitfield [also nicknamed “Whit”] and [Michael] “Mike” Kageorge from State and Private Forestry Staff and I—I was representing the national forest level, and Jay Cravens, Regional Forester of Region 9. He was the team leader. He wasn’t there very much, though. And John Butt from the Washington office would be there from time to time.

GAUSE: John Butt, yes.

CERMAK: So I said, “Well, God,” I said, “I just got to Asheville. It’s a GS-15 forest that needs a lot of work.” My boss said, “Tom Nelson wants you there.” I said—

GAUSE: I can feel that.

CERMAK: I said, “Okay,” I said, “but you’re going to have to let me come home on the weekend. I’ve got to have a home life, and I’ve got to do something with this forest on the weekend.” So they reluctantly agreed to that. So I flew back and forth to D.C. on a Sunday and back home on a Friday for nine weeks.

GAUSE: Supervisor’s office?

CERMAK: Asheville. And flying was no fun in the wintertime.

GAUSE: No. It’s a time out.

CERMAK: But we did it. It took us a week or so just to kind of get ourselves together as a team and to thinking together. We would come up with goals and then [would] take them to the steering committee. We had access to all of the staff in the Washington office, and they would give us our time first, so it worked okay for a few weeks. We took drafts to the steering committee, and they’d change them. We’d take them back and try to massage them some more, then take them back, and they’d change them some more. They were micromanaging the whole thing. We had good language. I’d done a lot of writing, and Larry was a pretty good writer; so

was John Butt. It was frustrating work, and we were in a sub-basement, all the way at the bottom of the South Building.

GAUSE: What year was that?

CERMAK: This was '77, '78, the winter of '77-'78.

GAUSE: Yes. See, I was back there then. I remember that.

CERMAK: We got about halfway through, and the staff were starting to kind of put us off.

Team members weren't supposed to be at steering committee meetings, but Jay and I went to one of them. He was supposed to be there from time to time. Max Peterson was running the show, as deputy chief. They finished all their blabbing and everything, and I said, "Max, I've got something I'd like to say." And he says, "Okay, Bob, what is it?" [Chuckles.] And I say, "We were told when we came here—we left our jobs and we have work to do back where we were, where we are—that we would have first access to all the staff in the Washington office, and we're not getting it anymore." And I said, "We've got work to do at home, just like they have work to do here, so we need to have that original agreement adhered to." And he said, "I'll take care of it." [Laughs.]

GAUSE: That's what happens. They drift away from the original direction.

CERMAK: Sure.

GAUSE: Because they got their workload pressures.

CERMAK: Sure, yes.

GAUSE: But some of them don't even care.

CERMAK: [Laughs.] Yeah, that's exactly right! That was right. [Laughs.]

GAUSE: Like four years that I learned that.

CERMAK: Yes, I know you know about it. At any rate, we finally managed to get it through, and we had to present it to the Chief and his staff. Max was very disappointed with the kind of lukewarm reception it got, and he told the Chief. The Chief came down to see us, and said, “How are you guys doin’?” Whit says, “Aw, we’re doin’ okay.” I said, “Tell him the truth, Whit. It’s miserable.” [Laughter.]

GAUSE: “It’s miserable.”

CERMAK: Whit says, “Yeah,” he says, “if there was a window, we’d probably jump out of it.” [Laughs.]

GAUSE: Beautiful story. I could just see Peterson.

CERMAK: No, this wasn’t Peterson, this was the Chief.

GAUSE: Oh, Max wasn’t Chief then.

CERMAK: No, this was—

GAUSE: That was John. Maguire.

CERMAK: John, yes.

GAUSE: Well, he probably took—

CERMAK: His eyeballs kind of bulged a little bit. So then we had to present the material to the—

GAUSE: He was a wonderful man.

CERMAK: —to the regional foresters and the research directors. We had to present it to them, and we did that. We presented it to the USDA staff. We finally got it all massaged the way they wanted it. It wasn’t exactly the way *we* wanted it. Some of the team had to leave, but I stayed the whole nine weeks. It will give you a clue as to my orientation. There was a regional

foresters and directors meeting in Washington. They have a big dinner and get together, and we were invited. I paid for my place at the dinner.

I went there, and everybody was talking to all their old buddies and making points and all the rest of this. I was too tired to put up with it. I had a drink or two and saw a few people I knew and I liked, and said hello to them. Then I left, bought a piece of bread and some cheese and milk, and I had dinner in my motel room. [Laughs.] We had some excellent supervisors meetings in the South. We'd meet in different forests. But I'm not a poker and a booze guy. I just didn't fit into that situation. I didn't have any problem with anybody else going that way, and I was friendly and amenable to everybody. I enjoyed being with them, but I just didn't want to do that. You know what it's like.

GAUSE: Yes, yes. I know I saw a lot of that when Max became Chief. You got more of that.

CERMAK: Yes.

GAUSE: He's a card player.

CERMAK: Well, anyway, we got back to North Carolina. That was a tough show, and I worked very, very hard.

GAUSE: I can feel your frustrations.

CERMAK: Yes.

GAUSE: Yes, I can.

CERMAK: But these folks—all they needed was some help, so I asked them to tell me what the problems were and what was going well. I sat down with every person in the supervisor's office and talked with them, and said, "You know, you can come to me and you can talk to me when you want to," and some of them did. I went to every district and every job corps center, and listened to people. We developed a training program for Managing for Results. By the way, I

took all the district and forest work plans back to Washington while I was on detail, and went over every one of them at night. But we had a budget and a work plan approved before the fiscal year started, and we had quarterly accomplishment reports. Jim Beavers, the deputy and I were out checking—not checking but visiting every unit to see what the quality of work was, to see how they were doing, to get some feedback, and within three years, that forest had gone from the bottom to the top.

GAUSE: Beautiful.

CERMAK: No kidding. It had. And they were so proud of themselves. They really were. We had some really good things going on, some good ideas. I can't tell you all of it now because we just don't have time. It's in my books, anyway. As a result of that—I didn't know it, but the folks on the forest put together a proposal to the Department of Agriculture for a Distinguished Service Award for me.

GAUSE: Oh, wow.

CERMAK: They were the ones that did it. I didn't know about it until May 1977, when we'd moved to the Bay Area. Regional Forester Doug Leisz called me in and gave me a copy of a letter from the Chief. Now, the Distinguished Service Award is usually given to people who are heads of agencies or some scientist who has discovered the way to the moon or something else. I think that I was the first forest supervisor ever to get one. I don't know if another one ever got it.

GAUSE: Probably not.

CERMAK: And I think the reason was because the people on the forest submitted my name and supporting data. I had published an article on Managing for Results on the national forests. It's got some distribution, and the Forest had done some other things, too. I got the award from the Secretary of Agriculture back in Washington. It hangs on my wall in there. But the people on

the North Carolina forest are the ones that did it, you know. You get the award; somebody else does the work.

GAUSE: You led them through it.

CERMAK: Well, yes, I can say that, and I'm proud of that.

GAUSE: Sure.

CERMAK: It was two and a half years, a little bit more than two and a half years, and the deputy's job in San Francisco came open. Actually, they were creating three deputies in Region Five. I was away on a trip, and Ethel got a phone call, and it was Doug Leisz, and he says, "Ethel, how'd you like to come back to California?" She said—

GAUSE: He knew—

CERMAK: "Hang up. I'll pack my bags." [Laughs.]

GAUSE: "I'll call Bob tomorrow." [Laughs.]

CERMAK: So we left. Just a tremendous turnout of people when we left. Larry Whitfield was regional forester, and he gave me a performance award for that last year. It was hard to leave, in a lot of ways, but I was suffering from the weather and from rheumatic pains, so I needed to get out of there. So we went to the Bay Area and had a helluva time finding a house. We found out that \$46,000 for a house in Asheville wasn't going to cut it in the Bay Area.

GAUSE: That's your down payment in the Bay Area.

CERMAK: [Laughs.] We finally wound up in Petaluma.

GAUSE: That's good. That was a good move.

CERMAK: Yes, it was a good move. The commute was by bus, and you could sleep if you wanted or do whatever else you needed to do.

GAUSE: Yes, I took those buses for twelve years.

CERMAK: I was met immediately with a very severe fire season.

GAUSE: That was 1977?

CERMAK: It was a very severe fire season. I was frankly disappointed in the way fire control had gone in the time that I'd left because it seemed to have become more centralized and depended more and more upon people appointed from the regional office to fire teams. The performance was adequate, although there were some cases where it was questionable. But my big job was to get with the other two deputies, Curt Smith and John Chaffin, and come up with a program on organizing and management for the region, which we did, based pretty much on what we had done in North Carolina. Doug was fully behind it. At the first supervisors meeting that spring, he spoke and I spoke, and said, "Here's what we're going to do. We're going to make work plans that are real. We are going to set goals and targets that are real. We're going to have a budget before the fiscal year begins." And somebody said, "Yeah? Well, we always have other budget changes coming along." I said, "Yeah, right. That means you can change a budget and work plan that you have agreed upon, instead of frittering away your whole work period trying to determine what you're going to do during the summer.

GAUSE: Yes, in having new starts.

CERMAK: Yes, new starts right and left. I said, "We're not going to do that." So we did. Doug graded everybody based upon the quarterly accomplishment reports that they turned in, and some of the supervisors got unsatisfactories in several areas.

GAUSE: I bet that got their attention.

CERMAK: Yes, it did get their attention. It really did. And from then on, we had a lot of believers. [Laughs.] But we had—

GAUSE: The Holy Ghost has appeared.

CERMAK: We also had a schedule of field trips by the deputies.

GAUSE: Good.

CERMAK: We made sure we visited every forest every year, sometimes two or three times a year. We also had the usual management reviews. [Stanley] “Stan” Undi in timber management and I got together, and he said, “The worst problem we have is timber sale preparation. We’re not doing the job.”

GAUSE: That’s right.

CERMAK: The guys that are administering timber sales are having to do the preparation work over again.

GAUSE: Double work.

CERMAK: So we put together a team made of forest people, district people mostly. They came up with a program, a timber sale preparation program. We put everybody in the region through it, 700-some people, that anything to do with timber sale preparation. Doug or I started each meeting off. Everybody went through that. I said, “Our goal, within two years, is to have two years of sales preparation on the shelf, ready to go.” I don’t think any region had ever done that. This region had not. But they did it. Two years later, in 1980, each forest had at least two years of timber sales ready to sell. They didn’t have to prepare them in advance; they were done. That was one of the things that I thought was really good.

GAUSE: Yes, yes.

CERMAK: Another one I have to mention is when Zane Smith became regional forester, he had a different approach to management than Doug did. Doug was well known throughout the region. He had been here for a while. Doug has a lot of charisma. I mean, he’s the guy that people like. He spent time with individuals. The supervisors were used to that. Zane took the

approach: *These guys are GS-14s and -15s. They're big boys. They need to be able to take care of their own business, and I shouldn't have to pat them on the back all the time.* And so he expected people to perform to the level of their job. The contrast with Doug was a little much for a few of the supervisors, but they got used to it.

He got sick in—let's see, what year was it? It was '81.

GAUSE: Who did?

CERMAK: Zane. He had a systemic problem, like rheumatism. He was off for several weeks. I was acting regional forester. On May 11<sup>th</sup>, 1981, a Beech Baron with three people aboard took off from Redding.

GAUSE: I know that [unintelligible].

CERMAK: Something happened to introduce a blast of heat into the cockpit, and the pilot turned the plane, instead of going straight, the way he should have. He crashed right into the smoke jumper base and destroyed it.

GAUSE: Went through the roof, did he?

CERMAK: Yup, destroyed the whole base. I flew up there, and Lynn Biddison, who was regional fire management officer, and the deputy of the Shasta-Trinity, Glenn Bradley, were there. I decided on the way up that we had to get this facility rebuilt, and the only way to do it was to take advantage of the immediacy of this tragedy. It was going to be up to Glenn to talk to the folks on the forest and to Lynn to talk to the fire people and kind of bring them out of shock and talk to the survivors. I looked over the disaster, and discussed this with them. I said, "I'm going to get back. Today, we'll send a team of inspectors. Tomorrow we'll have a team including engineering, architects, fire control and personnel management. We're going to have a

proposal for a replacement by the first of June,” which was three weeks away, a little bit less than three weeks.

I went back to the regional office, and I called the guys together, and I said, “This is what you gotta do.” They said, “We can’t do it.” I said, “You gotta do it. If you expect to have another air base up there, you gotta do it.”

GAUSE: Do it now.

CERMAK: So then I called Doug Leisz, now deputy chief, in the Washington office and explained to him what the situation was, and called the local congressman. The CDF state director called me. We talked, and he said he wanted to go into a joint building with us. Within three weeks, we had the proposal to the Washington office. It was too late for the current year’s budget, but they had it in the following year’s budget. I think construction started a year after I retired in ’82. But I don’t think it would have been there in ten years if they had gone the usual route.

GAUSE: No, you took opportunity there [cross-talk; unintelligible].

CERMAK: I discussed it with Zane, and he was all for it, so...

GAUSE: Good.

CERMAK: That’s an example of some of the activity. Anyway, all kinds of things going on. I had a set of file boxes, one for each forest, and each staff group. Everyone had their work plans, including me. We had memos which documented every field trip, every inspection. Everything was in the box. We knew what was going on in Region Five, and by the time I left, I had been to every single ranger district and every other unit in the region. I talked to, I think, literally thousands of people about what we should be doing and getting their feedback on how—and they gave me some pretty strong feedback, too. So I think it worked well, and I think what it

showed was the only way that you can get a very large organization to work pretty much together is to get out there on the ground where the work is, what later became known as “managing by walking around.”

GAUSE: That’s right.

CERMAK: But you have to be there, and they have to know that you know what’s going on—

GAUSE: That’s right.

CERMAK: —and appreciate their problems down at the field level.

So we came from there to here. We built a house. This house was built in a factory. It was erected in nine days. We contracted all the rest of the work or did it ourselves. We’ve been here twenty—I retired April 30<sup>th</sup>, 1982, so it’ll be twenty-two years. We got here in June of ’82 and moved into the house in September. We have devoted many years to rehabilitating this property (50 acres) into a family forest. I earned a master’s degree in history from CSU-Chico; did some consulting with Doug Leisz, Gene Murphy, Clint Phillips; wrote some fire plans for communities and other fire plans. Still doing a lot of writing, when I can. But that’s a very abbreviated part of that story, and all of it, as I mentioned, is in this autobiography that I wrote for my children and grandchildren.

GAUSE: Yes. Well, are there any philosophical things that you would like to bring out, about the management of natural resources and where the agency and the country are going?

CERMAK: I just have to recognize that everything has changed radically since I was last in the organization, and I can’t make generalizations that are valid because when you have a situation like they have today, a major change would be probably destructive. But I still continue to believe that the way to manage resources is to depend upon people at the field level and to have people that are skilled at the field level. They don’t have to be foresters, but they have to be

multi-resource people. They can't come into an organization and ride their own little pony of wildlife management or soil conservation or whatever it is, because these forests are dynamic. They're changing all the time, and the effects upon them are changing all the time, and the people that live around and in them are changing all the time. So it takes a high level of skill to manage a forest. It can't be done from twenty miles away.

GAUSE: Yes. And you mentioned the word many, many times, and it's "team."

CERMAK: Yes.

GAUSE: That's what makes it go.

CERMAK: Yes, it does. And a team is not a simple thing to construct. It took me a long time to realize that I really cared for people, and if you don't give that, you don't get it back.

GAUSE: That's right. That's very good.

CERMAK: At the same time, you have to recognize that if you're the boss, you have to be the boss. You have to make the hard decisions. You have to fire people, and I had to do that sometimes, and I hated to do it for some of them I loved, but for the good of the organization, there are some things you have to do. I dealt with some alcoholism problems that are very difficult, and there was nothing I could do about it personally. Fortunately, the organization has some ways to deal with it now because many times those involved were really good people.

But I don't think you can get away from managing forests in this United States. We have some of the finest forestlands in the world. And meanwhile, because of the lawsuits, the laws that we have and the way the controversy has gone, we've set aside millions upon millions of acres of producing lands while importing forest goods from countries that have no forest program at all and are absolutely destroying their forests, and that is—that's reprehensible.

GAUSE: Brazil.

CERMAK: Brazil, Siberia.

GAUSE: Malaysia.

CERMAK: Malaysia, you name it.

GAUSE: Okay. Well, we've been talking with Bob Cermak, retired Forest Service on his—how many years did you say you had, total?

CERMAK: I really had thirty years.

GAUSE: Thirty years.

CERMAK: Well, actually, I'm fifty-five as a forester.

GAUSE: That's long enough. [Laughter.]

CERMAK: Yes.

GAUSE: Thanks, Bob.

CERMAK: Yes. Thank you, Jerry.

[End of interview.]

[See addendum attached in hard copy]