
RICHARD MILLAR: Good morning, John.

GROSVENOR: Do you want to give me a little biographical background: where you were born, where you were educated, and how you came to work for the Forest Service?

MILLAR: Okay. I was born in 1923 in San Diego, California. My mother’s family was there, and my dad and mother met during World War I. He was in boot camp in the Navy there, and after the war they got married and moved to Ogden, Utah. Apparently my dad was going to be coming to California to school, so my mother went home to her family to have me, and that’s how I happened to be born in San Diego instead of Ogden, Utah. We lived in Grass Valley for four years, and then we moved to San Francisco, and my dad was a schoolteacher there, and we ended up, after three or four years, moving to Palo Alto, where I went through all the grade schools and high school and ended up going to San Mateo Junior College for a year and a half before I went into the service, and then I got out in February of, let’s see, 1946 and went back to junior college, and that’s where I met my wife, Norma.
After that semester, I went to Utah State and entered forestry school there and graduated in 1949. My first year of work for the Forest Service was in the summer of 1941. I worked on the Plumas in blister rust so I spent ’41 and ’42 working summers. Then I went into the service, and I came back and in 1948 I worked another summer on the Plumas, and then when I graduated, they picked me up as a fire crew foreman on a crew at Lee Summit, on the Plumas. I guess at that time it was the Quincy District. And so I worked—let’s see, that summer, ’49, ’50, ’51—I worked all around the Plumas. I worked on all the districts and got my JF [junior forester] appointment I think in 1951, and then I transferred to the Klamath. I was district fire control officer (FCO) on the Klamath, and then I was assistant ranger on the Modoc, at Adin on the Big Valley District.

From there, to district ranger on the Sequoia, and forest fire staff officer on the Los Padres, and supervisor on the Mendocino, and then in 1968 I went back to the Washington office to assistant director of fire. I think I had prevention and fuels management responsibilities and did a lot with the budget. And then I came back to Region Five in San Francisco as assistant regional forester in charge of fire, and I was eight years there before I retired. So that’s a capsule of my career.

GROSVENOR: You’re not like some of the people who’ve been all over the world. You’ve been limited to California and the Washington office.

MILLAR: That’s right. I only worked in Region Five and the Washington office. Interestingly enough, when you say about all over the world, after I retired, I was asked to put in for a job in Korea with FAO, so I went to Korea for a year and taught forest fire control to the Koreans. They were mainly interested in developing a helicopter program, so using the actual Forest Service manual on helicopter and helicopter use, I rewrote a manual for the Koreans to use. That
was an interesting year there. So I did broaden my experience a little bit by going to Korea and working there, and got to go around the world twice while I was in there, so I did get a little traveling, because the headquarters for FAO was in Rome, and so I had to go to Rome. And then, when I was through in Korea, I had to go back to Rome. It was an interesting job.

GROSVENOR: You really liked your work.

MILLAR: Yes.

GROSVENOR: You stayed in the Forest Service your whole career.

MILLAR: Yes, counting my military service, I ended up with over thirty-five years of service. Thirty-one of that was with the Forest Service.

GROSVENOR: What would you say was the high point of your thirty-five-year career?

MILLAR: Well, I think being a ranger—I was ranger on the Sequoia, and it was after the McGee fire, which was a pretty disastrous fire, and we ended up with about a 17,000-acre fire that we had to replant and so on. The three years I was there, we had a major planting program, where we planted lots and lots of trees, and that was challenging and interesting. In addition, we had a major job salvaging the burned timber, which took about three years.

I guess the other high point was being a forest supervisor on the Mendocino.

The Washington office was interesting, too, getting involved with budget and meeting with congressional delegations, so there’s a number of things I did that I would say were sort of highlights.

GROSVENOR: Your career was pretty much normal progress? You took all the right steps as you moved through?

MILLAR: Yes. I wasn’t able to get a very high mark on the JF exam, so it took me a little while. I graduated in ’49, but it took me until ’51 to get my JF appointment, but in the meantime
I got on a sub-professional roster and got a permanent appointment in—I guess that was in 1949, and so as soon as I passed the JF, they were able just to convert me. I didn’t have to come off a roster then because I already had an appointment, which helped.

GROSVENOR: One of the best things in the Forest Service is people. Do you remember some people who were your mentors during your career?

MILLAR: Well, I’d have to think about that. One of the interesting activities of my career: In 1951 I was on the Klamath, and they had major fires that summer. I was on the Yreka District, and we had a fire called the Three Devils fire, which I guess was on the Happy Camp District. It was a nasty fire. It was about 10,000 acres when it ended up. But because there were other fires going on, on the rest of the forest and we didn’t have a lot of valuable timber on that particular fire, so the supervisor put higher priorities on the areas where there was more high-value timber stands, so that’s where they put most of the resources and crews and things, was on the other fires, and so we ended up I think with two sectors on a 10,000-acre fire, where we had, on one side of it, Glenn Robinson had a sector and I had the other half with a sector. That’s where I met Doug Leisz. He was one of my crew bosses on that fire.

We’d work during the day, and about the middle of the afternoon we’d have a slop-over, and so the night crew that came on, they’d try to pick up what we lost. And so the next day we’d start out again. I became well acquainted with Doug Leisz at that time. Our careers sort of paralleled. We became assistant rangers and district rangers and forest supervisors about the same time. When he was forest supervisor on the El Dorado, I was supervisor on the Mendocino.

I went back to the Washington office before he did, and we conversed about his coming back there, and I told him it really would be good experience for him, seeing that I was already
back there. We had parallel careers for a while, and then Doug ended up by going to Region Six as an assistant—I think he was in lands as the director of lands, and then he ended up back in the Washington office, and then he came out to Region Five as the regional forester. And then I came back as the director of fire under Doug.

So I would say that not only was he a close friend, but he was sort of a mentor. Doug and I are still close friends.

GROSVENOR: Did you serve with Bill Peterson?

MILLAR: Yes, Bill “Peet” was the supervisor on the Plumas when I first met him—the summer of 1948, and then when I graduated in 1949, I went back and I worked on the forest with Bill. Of course, then I left in ’51 to go to the Klamath, and he was still supervisor. When I got to be supervisor, he was still supervisor of the Plumas, so it was kind of interesting. He always thought of me as a junior forester, I think, even though I was forest supervisor and somewhat of an equal, even though he had a long career.

GROSVENOR: He was an interesting guy. I’m getting lots of stories about him now that he just died. I’ve got three obituaries and two stories by people coming in to me for the newsletter, so I’m learning more about him. I worked a short time while he was supervisor, but he retired before I got very far up in the organization.

MILLAR: One of the things I can remember about Bill, there was a milepost fire on the Beckworth District. He was a baseball player. Apparently it was a Sunday and they were playing baseball, and he and Jay Peterson, who was on that district, had been playing baseball, and they were in their baseball uniforms, and fighting fire. I can remember that. [Chuckles.] I ended up—I had a crew on the Milford District at that time, sent to the fire with my crew, and so
I ended up mopping up that fire. It was an interesting fire. It wasn’t very big, about 300 acres or something like that, but it was a busy time.

GROSVENOR: Much of your career was spent in fire.

MILLAR: Yes, most of it. My first assignment in fire was on the Klamath, where I was the district fire control officer, but my earlier career, I spent a lot of time fighting fire. Even though I wasn’t in a fire position, because of what I was doing, I ended up as a crew boss on fires, and I went to Southern California and all over the region, actually, working on fires. I developed some knowledge and expertise, I guess. That’s how I got to be a fire control officer. Then I was assistant ranger on the Modoc, but I had the fire portfolio, so it was primarily fire. And then I went to the ranger job on the Sequoia, and then I went to the forest fire staff officer on the Los Padres. I was there for five years and then went up to the Mendocino and then back to the Washington office, and I was assistant director of fire there, and then came back to Region 5 for eight years as the director of fire in San Francisco. So I would say a high percentage of my career was in actual fire positions, yes.

GROSVENOR: In looking at your thirty-five years being in fire, do you see a progression, a learning curve that the Forest Service had, or did we always stay about the same, or did we go up and then drop back down?

MILLAR: Well, there’s been changes, all right, but it always amuses me when people talk about needing to use fire and do slash disposal and cleanup and burning. When I was on the Klamath, we did a lot of burning, and we had prescribed burns, and this was in 1952 and ’53. I think it’s changed, and I think that’s probably the biggest problem that the Forest Service has right now, and in this new funding that they’re getting out of this program that the president has, it will put a lot of money into fuel treatment and trying to reduce hazards. But the problem is almost
insurmountable, the amount of acres that have to be treated. You have to train people to become
experts in this area, and that takes years and years. You don’t learn how to do prescribed
burning and how to treat the fuels overnight. It’s something that takes a lot of experience and
doing. You have to do it in order to learn how to do it. So they have a big problem and big
uphill battle to accomplish the things that they need to do in that area.
GROSVENOR: There have been some technical improvements along the way that have helped.
Were you involved in any of those? You talked about the helicopter work in Korea, but how
about Region Five?
MILLAR: Early in my career, like when I was on the Los Padres, that’s when they first started
using TBM [the Grumman Avenger or the Douglas Devastator?], which was the old Navy
torpedo bomber. And at one time we had six of them, training pilots at Santa Barbara airport.
We were flying six TBMs right from the Los Padres and going to different fires and things. Part
of that training was to develop air attack capability. Some of the pilots that were flying those
TBMs had been Navy pilots who flew them during the war. I can think of John Kirsky and Joe
Jensen, who ended up as the air officer in Region Two. They had flown them during the war. It
was interesting that they became some of the trainers and ended up going to various locations to
become the lead-plane pilots and using the contract air tankers that were developed. I think that
was in 1960 or along in there that was the beginning of the big air tanker contracts that we
developed. I think I had quite a bit to do with that.

And then later on, when I was the director of fire in Region 5, we had a research project
that developed the system that the Forest Service is using now, which they call the incident
command system, where they changed all the terminology. Instead of a fire boss, it’s an incident
commander. We did that in cooperation with CDF [California Department of Forestry and Fire
Prevention] and Los Angeles County and San Diego County and Ventura County. The county agencies and the state agencies and the Forest Service all combined to develop that program. That all was developed during the period that I was the director in fire in San Francisco, and so I feel I had quite a lot to do with that because I was part of the steering committee, we met a lot and discussed and steered it to what it ended up with.

GROSVENOR: Were there problems that created the need for that program?

MILLAR: Well, yes, there were because when you get these big fires, you don’t stay in one responsibility area, especially in Southern California. You get into state and county responsibilities, so you end up with agencies from the county and the state and other federal agencies, like BLM [Bureau of Land Management] and [National] Park Service. [It] was felt that you had to develop a system, that everybody was on the same page, using the same criteria, the same nomenclature and everything else, and that’s what was developed in the incident command system.

As far as I know, it has worked out real well. Of course, I’ve been retired now for almost twenty-four years, so...But I have a son that is involved with it. He’s the forest staff officer on the Shasta-Trinity and has been for a couple of years, so I know that he has been involved in using that system, and he thinks it’s pretty good, too, so...I guess that is one of the areas that I feel pretty good about, that I had something to do with developing.

GROSVENOR: There’s always the opposite of the high points. Do you remember any low points in your career, things that you wished didn’t happen to you—

MILLAR: Yes, I think the “consent decree” which took place for a period of time during, oh, gosh, I guess that was in the late seventies, but the consent decree. It lasted a long time. I think it started in ’76 or along in there, and it lasted probably into—well, I think it’s still being felt.
GROSVENOR: The results are being felt.

MILLAR: Yes.

GROSVENOR: I think we finally got out of it.

MILLAR: Yes, we got out of the consent decree, but I think the results of some of it have definitely slowed down some of the progress. I think there were some good things, however, because it allowed some strong, capable females to get involved in managing programs. That wasn’t happening much before that. That, you’d have to say was a plus.

GROSVENOR: But that was nothing you had any control over.

MILLAR: No.

GROSVENOR: That was [unintelligible] controlled you.

MILLAR: Yes, I didn’t have any responsibility on it, but it did affect some of the people for a while there, they were just putting people in jobs who weren’t qualified for them. That was difficult on them sometimes and difficult on the people that were trying to manage programs. I think it eventually worked out, but there were some close disasters during that period of time.

I guess one of the other things I didn’t mention. When I first came back to the region in 1972 and ’73. We went through a region-wide study of what was happening because we were losing too many people on fires. It was called the Safety First program?

GROSVENOR: That’s what it became. I don’t know what they first called it.

MILLAR: That was a big attempt at finding out why we were having problems. A number of things that came out of that study developed, and there was a period of time where I think—I’m just remembering, but we were killing three and four people a year on fires up until 1975 or along in there, and then we went for seven or eight years, or even longer, without ever having a fatality after the Safety First program was put into effect. I guess that’s another plus that I
remember during my active years. It was a very interesting program because it took a lot of people, and they interviewed everybody in fire programs and others to get an input into what was wrong and what could be done about correcting it. Unfortunately, I think because of funding and other programs, there’s been some—

GROSVENOR: Slippage.

MILLAR: —slippage in that, because of a number of things. I think primarily it’s been how much money has been available to finance the crews and different people.

GROSVENOR: One of the things you don’t find much in reviewing records is how the agency treats its employees, how it houses its employees. Can you remember anything from your career that would indicate a trend?

MILLAR: When I first was courting my wife, I told her the first thing we’d live in once I got out of school and went to work for the Forest Service would be a tent platform. It turned out [chuckles] that that’s what it was. We were on the Milford District, and we had two tent platforms up against each other, and that’s where we lived. But I think we were there a week and we had a brand-new baby that was only about six months old. My wife had never been out in the mountains. She was born and raised in San Mateo, so this was quite an experience for her. Then after a week there, then I got sent to a fire in Southern California, so I was gone. When I got back, she says, “I’m moving.” So I moved her down to an apartment in Oroville because I knew I wasn’t going to be staying on the Milford District.

MRS. MILLAR: Oroville.

MILLAR: Oroville, right. So that was another interesting part of the career. As it developed, we ended up living in private rentals, and then we ended up at Challenge and that was our first Forest Service building, which was a couple of cabins that had been pushed together and built
into—I think they were sort of like barracks buildings, but it was fine. It was a lot better than anything else we’d ever lived in. And then we progressed to that to a little better—

MRS. MILLAR: A trailer.

MILLAR: A trailer in Quincy, and then when we moved to the Klamath we had a nice two-bedroom house. Then we moved from that to a house in Adin that was a small two-bedroom. But I think one of the things that’s happened with the Forest Service is many of their district offices have moved to town, where the work stations still have residences but many of the rangers and their staff now live in private rentals in communities that are larger and away from the actual forest. I don’t know whether that’s good or bad.

   I think part of the strength of our coming up through the organization is living on a ranger station, you get to know the assistant ranger and the fire staff and the other people, and the families pull together and have the same common experiences. I think that’s not happening quite as much now because the people are living in town, and they’re not in a compound where they’re associating as much with each other, although they’re still doing that. I guess that’s one of the developments that’s not as good. When they moved away from the forest, because I guess it’s the expedience of having—and the need for housing, they’ve done that. And I guess it’s access to the public, putting the ranger in closer to population centers.

GROSVENOR: Also Congress has raised the rent to the going rate in town.

MILLAR: Right, right.

GROSVENOR: Everybody said, “If I have to pay that much rent, I’ll have a house but not on the compound.”

MILLAR: Right. Yes, that’s happened, all right.
GROSVENOR: The complaints I’ve heard during my career from rangers was that sometimes they spent more time when they were on a compound with lots of families there being the godfather of the compound rather than managing the district. Did you ever see anything like that?

MILLAR: I guess I was lucky. When I was ranger on the Sequoia, I know that—let’s see, we had, one, two, three, four, five—we had five residences plus a couple of trailers that some of the timber staff lived in. I know my wife became pretty much involved because all the ladies would come to our house for coffee in the morning. They talked out problems and became friends. As far as I know, we never had any kind of conflicts that maybe other places did. I think that’s good. But maybe we were lucky, I don’t know.

GROSVENOR: Looking back at that thirty-five years, is there anything special that you would like to talk about? You saw a lot happen during that time. Political issues that affected you and the agency, or budget issues that flew up and down as things changed?

MILLAR: I know that whenever they have big problems like they did last year, at the end of the fall of 2003, they get congressional hearings, and there’s all kinds of congressional delegations that want to get involved. That happens almost every year after a big bust like they’ve had. I guess that’s part of the reason that—what is it?—a $700 million-or-more program that they’re going to be treating fuels with? I think part of that came out of the major fire problems we’ve had last year. That’s happened almost every year after a big fire.

GROSVENOR: But usually there’s no increase in the agency’s budget.

MILLAR: So you end up—I guess one of the things that I remember as being the most difficult for me to deal with is—I’m not sure what year it was; it was either in 1978 or 1979. We had a budget, and you know how the Forest Service budget system goes. You’re working on this
year’s budget, you’re planning next year’s, and you’re planning three years in advance. Well, you put a lot of effort into those budgets, and planning, especially the regional office and the fires staff. I’m talking about fire.

That year, in the middle of the season, I think it was probably August—apparently they had big cuts in the Washington office, and so we had to absorb something like a $10 million cut, which meant that we had to lay off hot-shot crews, tanker crews. It was disastrous to have to come up with a way of doing this right during the worst part of the fire season. I can remember almost crying [chuckles] because it really affected me, and having to call up a supervisor and tell him that he’s going to have to cut so many thousand dollars out of his budget for the fire program. That was bad, bad. How they could do that and expect results, I don’t know. But fortunately, we got through that without any major fires, so it was just plain luck, as far as I was concerned.

Let’s see if we can maybe think of other issues. You were selected because of your fire experience, but there’s more to a Forest Service career than fire, is what I’m trying to get at. I haven’t read any of the other interviews yet. They’re just getting transcribed. You’ll get a copy of this. We can check names and dates and things like that, but we can’t really change what you’ve said.

MILLAR: Right. I guess one of the other things that maybe we ought to get in to discuss is the timber program and trying to meet a timber management cut target on a forest.

GROSVENOR: Were you involved in that?

MILLAR: Yes. When I came on board in the late fifties, early sixties, timber was god.

GROSVENOR: Right.
MILLAR: It was still steering a lot of the programs. Because of the timber program and the need to develop a transportation system ahead of, as part of the timber cut and access to remove the timber, it became—

GROSVENOR: More of a ranger and supervisor role.

MILLAR: I can remember specifically some problems on the Mendocino.

GROSVENOR: Maybe we can take off and start talking about your management roles versus your technical fire roles.

MILLAR: Okay, yes.

MILLAR: Right. I can remember I was a little upset when I went from the Klamath to the Modoc and went from a district fire control officer to an assistant ranger position, which ended up being with the same responsibilities. I mean, I had fire in both jobs. I felt that I was going to be lacking in a broader experience not being able to go to something besides fire. So I talked to the forest supervisor on the Modoc about that, who was Neal Rahm, and he said, “Don’t worry about it,” he says, “I’ll have you on a ranger district in a year.” He says, “And besides that, we’ll try to get you some other experience while you’re there.”

MRS. MILLAR: You just mentioned Neal Rahm.

MILLAR: Right

MRS. MILLAR: But he was really primary in giving you a boost—

MILLAR: That’s right.

MRS. MILLAR: —in your career.

MILLAR: He definitely was.

GROSVENOR: Maybe when we get through, maybe you’d like to give your view of being a Forest Service wife for those thirty-five years? You don’t have to, but some wives have chosen
to give their distaff perspective, not on the agency but on the effect of the agency on raising a
family and having a husband that is—

MILLAR: Gone a lot.

GROSVENOR: —on call a lot.

MRS. MILLAR: Here and there.

GROSVENOR: [Chuckles.]

MILLAR: Do you want some coffee?

GROSVENOR: Maybe some juice.

MILLAR: Juice? Let me get some.

GROSVENOR: When Bob Harris got involved in the logistics, we got the region to buy five
more of these. We were trying to use four with nine interviewers, and only four—

MILLAR: Recording machines?

GROSVENOR: Now we can double the size of the interviewers. We would have been waiting
in a long line to get these things. I’m going to try to get five interviews in while I’ve got this
thing here, not to fight for it again. It goes twenty-three hours.

MILLAR: Twenty-three hours? That little tape?

GROSVENOR: It’s one of those little chips. Okay. We’re about halfway through the time.

Part of your career was spent in management, outside the direct fire. Can you think of
things that happened during those times that would be interesting?

MILLAR: I was just thinking about that. On the Klamath, even though I had the responsibilities
for fire, the district had a pretty good range program, and we had quite a few cattle allotments on
the district. Some of the permittees were a little testy. We had an old-time assistant ranger who
apparently had had words and came up crosswise with one of the permittees, so the ranger, who
was John Hall, told me that he wanted me to do the dealings with this particular permittee. My first contact with him was during one of the summers we were having lots of lightning fires. This permittee’s son was someone we had picked up to use on fires. We’d had him on a fire, and his dad called up and said that he wanted his son off the fires right now, and I said, “Well, he’s out on a fire, and it’ll be some time tonight before we can get him off.” And he says, “Well, I want him off right now.” So we had a discussion, and he says, “I think I’m gonna come up there and bust you in the nose.” I says, “Okay, come ahead.” He never showed up, but later on apparently, when we got his son off the fire and he went home and his father told him what he’d said, he says, “You know, you want to be careful who you say you’re gonna bust in the nose,” he says. “That guy is pretty big, and he’s a lot bigger than you are.”

So anyway, oh, Walt Litchen was his name, and I became pretty good friends. He used to have a line cabin up on the district, so whenever I was up that way, I’d always stop and visit with him. In fact, even went out and rode with him when he was moving cattle around on the district. So I did get involved with some of the management programs other than fire in the grazing activities and taking permits and working with the permittees and helping them move cows around. I found that was a good way of becoming better acquainted with your permittees, is to go out and spend time with them on their unit when they were moving stock around.

I think I told you that when I moved from the Klamath to the Modoc, I was into an assistant ranger job, and I thought I ought to be getting more experience than just fire, so they did give me the assignment of dealing with the range activities, and so I did work with some of the permittees and got involved in some of the recreation activity on that district, as well as the fire.

When I was ranger on the Sequoia, our cutting of green timber was almost stopped because we had the 17,000-acre fire that—we had a lot of timber to get out and we had lots of
people cutting timber, both small and large sales. So managing to get out the green cut as well as salvaging the burned timber was a major program, besides managing and getting the planning program going. During I think the three years that I was on that district, we planted well over a million trees a year. I got very much into the timber program as well.

I found out, dealing with some of the timber contractors, that you had to get closely involved with laying out-roads and helping them to manage their cut. So in dealing with laying out the timber sale and the road access, I spent a lot of time with their forester and their woods crew to try to work out the problems we had. I can remember that when you lay out a staked road on a timber sale and then they go in and try to clear the right-of-way, they lose the stakes. That was always a problem to reestablishing the center line or the road the way it was planned and engineered. That took a lot of active work with the engineering people and the construction people on those timber sales to make sure that that road ended up in the right place, the way it was planned.

I can remember one particular incident that the timber people, the contractors were really upset with us because the road design, the center line ended up going right through this huge boulder, which was about as big as a house. They said there’s no way they were going to go right through that; they wanted to go around it. And so I had to go out and look at that and agree with them that that was not a very logical design for them to go right through that, and so we ended up making a plan to go around it, which turned out fine. One of my better friends today and his family was the forester on that sale. He’s since moved to Oregon. Our families, our kids grew up together. You learn to accommodate and deal with people when you’re trying to do a management program, so I guess that’s another incident in dealing with an issue.
And I can remember [chuckles] the forest supervisor calling me up and giving me hell over the radio because I was behind in our cut. He said, “Call me on the phone!” So I called him on the phone, and he apologized for getting so upset with me over the radio. I explained one of the reasons we were behind in our cut is because of the fire timber that we were trying to get out. The fire salvage was taking priority. The green sales and cut were not keeping up.

Another incident was when I was supervisor on the Mendocino. We had a timber sale on the Covelo District. I had to make a decision to not put up a sale. I got a note from [Charles] “Charlie” Connaughton, who was the regional forester at the time. It was one of those—I don’t know if you’ve heard of a C.A.C [pronounced cak] note, because he signed his initials, C.A.C? It was very specific. He says, “I want you to turn over the management of the forest to someone else, and you take over the timber program and get that cut out.” So I called Charlie up and said we needed a meeting. I went down to San Francisco, and he says, “Okay,” and he went down there and Homer Hixon and the engineer—I don’t remember whether that was—

GROSVENOR: Was it George Blodget at the time?

MILLAR: No, Blodget was the engineer on our forest, but I’m thinking of the regional engineer. It was either—

GROSVENOR: Webb Kennedy?

MILLAR: No.

GROSVENOR: Max Peterson

MILLAR: It could have been Max, but I’m not sure. Anyway, we met. The reason why I cancelled the sale is that our land staff officer, who was also in charge of watershed, wanted me to go out and look at the design on the road that had been planned to get into this timber sale. Well, it was designed to go across terrible, slippy-type country that we have ended up with a
disaster as far as the construction of the road and what happened afterwards. If we didn’t built that road, we couldn’t get the timber sale out. I was able, with Blodgett’s help, to convince Charlie and Homer Hixon that we had to wait and come at that sale from another point. I said, “There is another way of getting there, and that’s to come down across the river and come down with a road from above, instead of having to come in from below.” And I said, “It would do a lot less damage to the area, and we could accomplish it,” but we couldn’t do it right away because it was going to take a year or so to develop that other road system. They finally agreed that that was a good reason for not meeting the cut for that year, so I got Charlie to accept that. In fact, I think he even came out and looked at it, himself.

Those are some of the other management problems you get into. I don’t know how familiar you were with the Mendocino, but some of the roads that had been built previous to my getting on the forest had ended up to be very difficult to maintain because of the design and where the roads were located. Because of the soil types the roads were difficult to maintain; any kind of rain, you got washes and washouts, and the culverts would wash out. I didn’t want to end up with another problem, we had already enough of them, and this would have been a major problem if we had gone ahead and built that road. So we ended up not building it, which was a good deal.

Those are some of the management problems that I can recall.

Oh, I think we had another one on that forest, where the wilderness people wanted us to establish a wilderness area on Snow Mountain, which had been not very big. I didn’t think it met the criteria for a wilderness area, so I wasn’t very interested in pursuing that. Subsequently, however, that did become a wilderness area, after I had left the forest. The proponents were able to convince the regional office and other people that this was reasonable, even though it was
small, to be a wilderness. And there was no reason other than—I mean, there wasn’t any timber. There was no reason why we were going to go up there and build roads or anything. There really was no reason not to have it designated as a wilderness area.

Well, John, ask me some more questions.

GROSVENOR: You talked about people who were your mentors. How about people that you mentored that you still see around? You were talking about your son being a Forest Service employee now. Did you have any effect on his choosing that?

MILLAR: Oh, I think I did. At one time, after he had—he also went to Utah State. That’s where I ended up and graduated from. Apparently he was finding the program pretty difficult, and so he called me up, and we got to discussing. He said, “I’m not sure that I really am all that interested in becoming a forester and staying in this program to get a degree in forest management.” I said, “Well, that’s fine, but before you make that final decision, why don’t you, after the spring quarter is over, drop out of school? I think I can get you a job with the Forest Service so that you can get some actual on-the-ground experience.”

I did, and in April he went up to the Mount Baker-Snoqualmie Forest in Region Six. The supervisor was a classmate of mine from Utah State, and I talked to him, and he said, “No problem.” They put him on a sale prep crew in April. He worked on that for I think a couple of months. When they found out that he’d had a couple of summers with CDF on a fire crew, they wanted to put him on a hot-shot crew. He says, “What about that?” And I said, “Well, it’s fine. I think that’s a good move for you.” So he spent that summer traveling all over the West, fighting fire on the “Concrete hot-shot crew.” He worked on fires in Region One and Four, and I think he even came down to Five. After that summer’s experience, he went back to school and decided that he would finish, and got his degree.
Incidentally, he got caught up—that’s part of the reason I was so upset with the consent decree, is that he was really affected by that. During the period of time that he got out of school, it was in effect. I think his career was slowed down because of the consent decree, but he eventually overcame that, and he’s doing fine now.

GROSVENOR: A lot of people left the region about that time.

MILLAR: Yes.

GROSVENOR: Found their careers again, but not here in California.

MILLAR: No. I think a lot of people were affected by that. It was unfortunate. But I think in the long run it hasn’t really been that disruptive in the organization. It was certainly disruptive for a while.

Let’s see, anything else?

GROSVENOR: What about your hobbies and other interests outside?

MILLAR: You mean besides golf? [Laughter.] Well, I used to have a hobby of woodworking. When I first retired—in fact, before I retired, I was in the process of remodeling the kitchen in this house. I did rebuild all the cabinets. So I would say I do have a hobby of woodworking, or used to. I haven’t done anything. I built that table you can see out there in the dining room. That was a big project. I did that after I retired. My wife found a program in San Francisco where this cabinetmaker was giving lessons on Friday and Saturdays, and I think I had two sessions of that, and that’s when I built that table. They had wonderful equipment and good direction on how to do some of these things that I didn’t know anything about. I would guess that that’s the only real hobby I have other than I like to play golf, even though I don’t do it very well. I think part of that problem is I’m getting older, and I’m not quite as physically adept as I used to be.
GROSVENOR: Do you still visit the forest areas and enjoy them?

MILLAR: You know, I really haven’t done much of that. One of the Forest Service retirees who I worked with on the Sequoia and who was part of the incident command program—he worked for me as a member of that team in the research program. His name was Jerry Berry. Jerry and his wife, Frances, have moved to Nevada City, and so several times a year we go up to visit them in Nevada City, and I always enjoy being up there because the first four years of my life, I lived in Grass Valley, so it’s almost like going home. My dad was a principal in high school for a couple of years. I always enjoy going up there and that timber type, the Ponderosa pine. At that level—it’s right around 2,500- to 3,000-foot elevation, and it’s a beautiful area. I enjoy doing that. But that’s about the only...

We used to go skiing, but I haven’t. That was the other hobby I enjoyed. We used to go with our family every year for a week at Mammoth and up at Tahoe. But I haven’t done that for years, so I guess I’m too old to go skiing. I know Doug Leisz keeps talking to me about coming up and going skiing, and I need to do that, but I haven’t.

GROSVENOR: Let’s see, anything else you can think of?

MILLAR: I’m trying to think of people that I might have influenced.

GROSVENOR: It’s hard to sometimes know that, even, because many of the ones you influenced most are the ones you don’t see anymore.

MILLAR: Yes. I think, and I’m trying to think of his name right now; it’s just skipped my mine. Wait a minute. Let me look a minute. [Moves away from microphone.] Because I forced him off the forest. He didn’t want to leave Willows. He was a ranger at Willows. His name is Dave Mohla. Well, Dave spent his whole career on the Mendocino, and he was ranger on the Willows District. I just felt that it was time for him to get some other experience. There was an
opening on the Tahoe for—what district is that? It’s the one right there in Truckee District. I think he was there during the Olympics as the Truckee ranger, because the Olympics was in ’60, wasn’t it?

GROSVENOR: Right.

MILLAR: Nah, he wasn’t...Well, he could have been. I’m not sure, because it was after ’64, ’65, along in there sometime that I moved him over there. Anyway, he didn’t want to move because his family was established in Willows, and that’s the only place he’d ever been. Even though he was from back East, and I think he went to school at Duke [University] and got his degree there, but when he came out, he got his JF on the Willows District, and that’s where he’d worked his whole career. Anyway, he moved to the Tahoe, and then he ended up—it seems to me he was the deputy forest supervisor on the San Bernardino after that. No, let’s see, that’s not right. He went up to Region Six, and he was ranger on the Sisters District.

MILLAR: [Talks to himself.] Deschutes [Oregon]. Okay, that’s where it was, Deschutes. Yes, at some time, he moved to the Sisters Ranger District, and he became the supervisor of the Mount Hood after that. I think that’s where he was when he retired. And I think he had said a time or two that he was really glad that I pushed him off the Mendocino.

GROSVENOR: He didn’t hold it against you the rest of your life.

MILLAR: No, no. We used to visit back and forth. In fact, after he was retired, we visited with him there.

GROSVENOR: Do you want to talk about him?

MILLAR: Well, sure, we can. You asked me about anybody that maybe I had some influence on. The one person that I can think of is Dave Mohla, who, when I was supervisor on the Mendocino, he was the district ranger on the Willows District. He was doing a good job, but
he’d been on that district through his whole career. I believe he started out there as a JF and was
timber management and assistant ranger and then ranger. I just felt it was time that he got some
other experience besides the Mendocino, and so I got him transferred to the Truckee District on
the Tahoe. He wasn’t too pleased about moving from Willows because his family was
established there, but he accepted that. It worked out, I think, for him because he ended up with
a career and ended up going to Region Six and was a ranger on the Sisters District, and then he
ended up as the supervisor on the Mount Hood Forest and still lives where he lived when he was
supervisor, I believe. Has a nice place that we visited.

I guess there’s a couple of others. I can remember when I was ranger on the Sequoia, I
had a foreman who was a KV foreman on one of our KV crews. His name was Bill Prinz. He
had spent his whole career working on that district, and while I was ranger there, he worked up
and became the fire control officer on the district and was there for a number of years. His
family was from the Valley, down in Reedley. Anyway, when I got to be supervisor on the
Mendocino, I needed a dispatcher because our dispatcher was retiring, so I called up Bill and
asked him if he’d be interested in being considered for the dispatcher position. He checked with
his wife and they decided, yeah, they’d like to move; it was time for them to move. So he did
move up there. He ended up being the assistant fire control officer on the forest, so I think it was
a good move for him and his family. He bought a nice—yes, I think he bought two homes while
he was there and ended up with a small, almost farm, where he had walnuts and almonds and
raised chickens.

Those are two specific things that I can remember and think that I influenced their career.
There’s probably others, but offhand it just doesn’t come to mind. I had some interesting
interchanges with the rangers on the Los Padres. That was one of the more interesting
assignments, the five years that I spent as fire control officer on the Los Padres. We had a situation there where the supervisor would be gone for—it almost seemed like months. So we didn’t get a lot of close supervision from the supervisor, and so each staff person ran his staff without much supervision. I had fire, and the resources and recreation were sort of autonomous, but they ran their own program. We got a lot closer association with the rangers there because, in our specific function, we were really almost like line officers for the rangers. That was interesting.

We had an interesting group. We had some old-time rangers, like Ed Smithberg and—oh, gosh, I can’t think of the ranger that was in Monterey. Oh, his name was Alex Campbell He was there for a long time.

GROSVENOR: At one time, the Los Padres had three rangers who had been in place for more than thirty years.

MILLAR: Yes. Let’s see if I can find...[Turns pages.] No, these were all [unintelligible].

GROSVENOR: What year is that, ’75?

MILLAR: Yes. [Turns pages.] Nope. Monterey. Nope, all after. No, I can’t think of his name, but he was there for a long time. The ranger of Monterey, Santa Maria and Cuyama had long tenure. The rangers at—oh, and [the ranger on the] Santa Barbara district was there a long time, Warren Barnes. Warren I think was the ranger there from probably 1951 or ’52 until, oh, I would say almost 1970, so it was over twenty years. And that was pretty common for the rangers on that forest. But Ojai District and Mount Pinos were the only districts where it seemed to change; the rest of them were well entrenched and there for years, which I guess has some pluses and some minuses.
GROSVENOR: They certainly know their area, but they’re certainly fixed in how they understand it.

MILLAR: Right.

Oh, it’s hard to think of...

GROSVENOR: In wrapping up, looking back at your career, how do you feel about your thirty-one years with the Forest Service?

MILLAR: Well, I feel I had a very enjoyable career. I was pleased with what I was able to do and how we raised our family. And just a little sidebar on that is that after being back in Virginia, when I worked back there, we moved our family when we went back there—two of our kids, Norman and Susan, had to move to a new high school in the middle of their high school career, and this they felt was a little bit difficult. So then when we moved back to California, we had—our second son, Mitchell, had to move between his junior and senior year. He had a girlfriend that he didn’t want to leave, and he was doing well in football, and his coach wanted him to stay. But I said, “No, we need you at least one more year in our family, so you’re going with us.” He was able to earn some money and went back on his Easter break and spent a week back there with his girlfriend, and he came back from that and he says, “Man, what a bunch of rednecks.” He says, “I’m sure glad we moved.” [Chuckles.] So I think that worked out well, too. Yes, he had a year here in Alameda, and then ended up going to the University of Washington after that.

Yes, it’s been a good career. There was lots of fun. I can only recall a couple of times when I was upset. One of those was on the Sequoia, where I got crosswise with the forest engineer and almost came to blows and words with the supervisor, and he calmed me down. I had written a very strong letter of complaint about some of the things that had happened, and my
reasons for being upset. He said, “Well,” he says, “I don’t want that letter.” He says, “Just you think about it, and we’ll talk some more later.” And so I tore it up. But that plus the time when the Washington office took away the money in the middle of the season are the only times that I really felt so bad that I really was upset with the Forest Service. But I never was of a feeling that I should quit. It was, over all, very good, a good career.

GROSVENOR: And you left with good feelings.

MILLAR: Yes.

GROSVENOR: You weren’t pushed out like some.

MILLAR: No, because I qualified for the firefighter retirement, I was back in Washington on a detail, and the associate chief called me in and said, “Your firefighter retirement was improved [approved?]” He says, “You’ve got three months to decide when you want to retire.” I said, “Okay.” That, I think, was in February. Finally we figured out the best time to retire, and I retired, I think, March 23rd, 1980 [exactly twenty-four years ago to the day], which is a little bit before I would have—if I hadn’t qualified for the firefighter retirement. But at that time, I think I was almost fifty-seven, and the firefighter retirement, if you qualified for it, you were supposed to retire at fifty-five, and so I had already exceeded the limit on it. As it turned out, it was a good deal because we added to our retirement because of the qualification of the firefighter retirement. So no, over all, I would say it was very good.

GROSVENOR: Well, thank you for your time.

MILLAR: Okay. It’s been interesting to reminisce.

GROSVENOR: Before you’d forgotten it all, huh?

MILLAR: Yes.

GROSVENOR: Thank you very much.
This is John Grosvenor.

[End of interview.]