

White Grass Heritage Project “Sharing the Legacy”

INTERVIEWEE: John Mortensen (J)

INTERVIEWER: Roger Butterbaugh (R)

LOCATION: Wilson, Wyoming DATE: August 2, 2019

Transcribed by Julie Greene in 2020

Note: This transcript has undergone minor edits, e.g. ‘false starts’ and extraneous text were removed to make it more “reader friendly”. Jon’s complete interview transcript is below:

R: (0:00) My name is Roger Butterbaugh, I am the coordinator of the White Grass Ranch Heritage Project. The date is August 2, 2019. I am in Wilson, Wyoming with Jon Mortensen, who I will introduce in a minute. He and I are in the process of continuing the recording of oral histories related to the White Grass Ranch. John has a long history there and we look forward to talking with him about that. So, first of all, John, thank you for (1) doing the interview and (2) inviting me to be on your porch at your home in Wilson, WY. I should say we are actually on the porch of your studio; where, hopefully, we will move inside later and talk further about his work as an artist.

J: Welcome to you, Roger.

R: It’s a pleasure.

J: I appreciate your coming out. Looking forward to talking to you.

R: Good. In our interviews, typically what we do is I start with a little background information. Previously, we’ve talked a little about some of those things and I would ask you to start us through your journey to White Grass starting with your early days growing up in Salt Lake City. Tell us about your background there, some of the happenings that you think are significant to being in the Tetons, White Grass and related happenings.

J: Well, as you said, I was born in Salt Lake City and raised there. And, my family was very interested in horses, particularly my father. At a very young age, I was introduced to horses. I had my first (pony) horse when I was 4 and she was 2. Dad said we could both learn together. So, I started out that way.

He was very experienced with horses. He’d been a jumper, competitively in the 30’s. He played polo in the 40’s, and then went to World War II as a pilot and after the war, he got married and started having us kids. I was the oldest of 3 boys, and we started showing horses, again, from a very young age - showing quarter horses, cow cutting, lot of different things. By the time I was about 15, I was beginning to get, I think, a little bored with all that and Dad recognized that.

When I was 17, he suggested/asked (he knew a fellow, Bob McConaughy that had a guest ranch in Jackson Hole) if I’d be interested in talking to him about working for the summer as a wrangler. And, of course, I was very excited. I had had a long interest in Jackson Hole as a boy.....seeing things there when we had visited. I saw the movie, SHANE, in junior high and, of course, you are kinda hooked right there. But, I interviewed with the McConaughys and was offered a job.

So, in the summer of 1966, they took me up to the R Lazy S; dropped me off; said goodbye; and I spent the summer there. It was one of the most pivotal things in your life. It totally changed my life because I had known a lot about horses but not ranch life. So, over that summer, I just learned about everything you needed to know - went on pack trips, learned how to pack, took guests into the mountains, took trail rides, and lived in the bunkhouse with 5 other guys. I just enjoyed the ranch life; it was a wonderful experience.

I remember how one of the first times I had a learning experience, (you might say) was when Bob told me, "We have this horse over here, the little gray gelding, that just bucks everybody off but we don't want to get rid of it. Why don't you take that horse and see if you can straighten him out". I'd brought my own horse (to the ranch for the summer) but I couldn't ride him all the time.

So, one day I found myself with the grey horse in the corral and I had gotten ready to get on, looking at him. And, there was this older fellow doing horseshoeing (I say older, he was probably 30), but anyway, he said, "What's the matter, kid?" I said, "Well, this horse bucks a lot and they told me I've gotta try to straighten him out". He said, "Well, why don't you just get on him?" I said, "Well, I am trying to figure out the best way." He said, "Just cheek it and get on." I said, "What's that?" And he said, "Well, you just grab a hold of the cheek strap on the bridle, pull the head to you, and hold it tight until you are on and then let him go." I said, "Well, that makes sense." "So", he said, "Hell". He put down his tools, walked over, grabbed the cheeks straps, and steps on the horse. They buck around a little bit, comes back and gets off and he says, "Can't be that hard, is it?" I thought "Oh BOY!"

R: (5:17) You were 17?

J: Yea. So, I grabbed a cheek strap, got on and we bucked around the corral. And that horse, I swear, never stopped bucking the first time you got her. She never threw me off but she never really stopped bucking very much. It was an introduction to a lot of the cowboy ways and working with horses that, regardless of how much experience I had had in one aspect, didn't have it taming horses in such a manner. So, it began my education in working with ranch horses in Wyoming and 3 of those summers I met wranglers from the White Grass like Fred and Carol Herbal and others we'd meet on the trail.

At the R Lazy S, they would not allow you to drink on the ranch property, but of course, White Grass had a very different policy; so, we often found ourselves getting in the car in the evening and driving to White Grass and having a good time with the wranglers and the people we got to know there.

After 3 years, working at the R Lazy S, I met my future wife, Pam, who had come from her family's ranch, the GP Bar Ranch in the Wind River, (Wyoming) which was established in the 20s and had a very colorful history. She came with her cousin, Kim, who became my immediate best friend. After that summer, we (Pam and I) became very close, and ultimately got married in 1969. And at the point, the R Lazy S did not have anywhere for married couples to live. We'd gotten to know Frank (at White Grass) and loved the people there. So, we drove up there, talked to Frank and he gave us a job starting in 1970. We worked there with Fran Fox, who was the head wrangler and was Frank's nephew. We got exposed to the White Grass for the first time and it was a vastly different experience than the R Lazy S.

R: Can you compare the two, how they were different, the ranches?

J: Well, I think it was the whole psychology of it. The R Lazy S had kind of fit the kind of guests they had; it was quite structured. The rides would leave at 10, 10:30; there could be the loping ride, the walking ride, the kids ride, etc. And, at White Grass, it was much more, what I would call an independent view, where whatever the guests wanted to do (is what happened). We had enough wranglers and such to accommodate many more different options and the trail riding up there was far more vast and opened up. The R Lazy S, at that time, would often come up to the White Grass and ride. And, the trails up at the White Grass were far more expansive which I enjoyed. And, the wrangling was very different. The R Lazy S only had about 100 acres or so and we had to keep the horses, pretty much, in that area. So, the wrangling wasn't too extensive. At White Grass, (the horses) would go from Phelps Lake all the way to Slide Meadows (at night to graze). It would take 6 wranglers divided into 3 different sections to bring in 80 head of horses every morning; we'd leave at daylight and hopefully be back by 7 o'clock (am).

R: The horses would be released (after a days ride) up into the mountains to graze?

J: Yes.

R: And, you are describing bringing them back down?

J: Right, and they would go in different directions but they, each would kind of form groups, and so we would bell one horse, put the horse bell around one neck of each group. That would help us locate them because they had areas they kinda would like to go to and frequent. But they didn't always go there and the areas were pretty large, so it was particularly hard to find a lot of them. They could become quite secretive about where they would be. So, on any given morning, we might miss 10 or 12 horses and either substitute it for the guests or, if there were enough missing, we'd go back out and look for some more. I think there was more of an overall, "Old Wyoming" feeling to the White Grass than the R Lazy S.

R: (9:47) The R Lazy S being maybe a bit more gentrified.

J: I think so plus its history was not nearly as long. Bob's parents had bought the property and had it on lease with the Park Service similar to White Grass had, but, I think, that was in the 50s. So, there was a very big difference to the White Grass heritage (starting in the early 1900's). The R Lazy S was wonderful and, they, to this day, do a tremendous service to the guests but they just don't compare (1) to that depth (at White Grass) of serving and growing up in the area like Frank did and (2) having more of that rugged true Teton feel with all the network of trails you could ride and activities we could offer (at White Grass). We would take guests swimming at Phelps Lake on their horses; once a month, we had a moonlight ride up above the ranch, taking all the guests up there along with the pack horses and have dinner and cocktails. Later we would watch the moon rise and then the challenge was to get all the horses and guests back down to the ranch by midnight. There were certainly some adventures there. But, I think it was more of an adventurous, historically rooted perspective with that ranch (White Grass).

R: Well, if you were at the R Lazy S Ranch in the 70s and it started in the 50s, you are talking 20 years; White Grass goes back to 1919, that's basically when the first guests, dudes came. I am

curious in the 70s, were you still seeing (at White Grass) a lot of long-term repeaters, dudes coming back who had been at the ranch many, many years before, going back 20 or more years?

J: Yes, yes. You certainly did. And, I think the R Lazy S, to their great credit, has successfully built on that idea today because they continue to operate today. They offer their guests a 5-year buckle for being there 5 years, a 10 and a 20. Now, they are trying to figure out what to give guests who have been there 30 years, so they are certainly experiencing a lot of that same thing we say (White Grass) built. But White Grass, as you point out, already had and it was pretty fun to meet a lot of those guests who had been there for so many decades.

R: (12:18) So, what atmosphere did that create then with those people who kept coming back and kept coming back to White Grass. How did that affect the tone, the tenor, the activities, in terms of how White Grass operated again by contrast to the R Lazy S?

J: Well, I think in many ways, they operated the same except for the freedom to be able to go so many more places. A lot of the guests (at White Grass), of course, were familiar with the trails and really wanted to go do what they had done in the past and help shape the direction of their stay, probably more than guests at the R Lazy S.

R: At White Grass, where repeat guests had been around for a while, they were allowed to just get a horse and off they would go -- a wrangler was not required to be with a guest who was out riding every day?

J: Well, I understand from past years (from Cindy Galey Peck) they used to do more of that but they did not do that (at White Grass) when I was there. We would always assign a wrangler but we had enough wranglers that if one person wanted to go over here and 4 or 5 over there, we could accommodate that and cover each person's interest. I think what you are referring to happened much earlier. Perhaps, insurance got more involved with the ranches, R Lazy S, White Grass and probably all the ranches. I do know, from stories from Pam's family's ranch, that they often let guests go out by themselves.

One of the colorful stories that kind can go with that – there was a particular guest that wanted to go out on his own and he didn't quite know the country. But they said "Oh, you are gonna be fine, you are gonna be fine; just go off in this direction and we will expect you back about 4 o'clock." He said, "What if I kinda get lost" and they said, "Don't worry; just turn your horse loose and he knows the way home." So, he said, "Okay. So, about 3:30, the horse comes back to the corral without the guest and about 5 o'clock, the guest stumbles in and we said, "We are so glad to see you, are you okay, what happened?" Well, like you said, "I got lost out there. So I figured I'd do just like you said. I turned that horse loose but I couldn't keep up with him on his way back!" And so, that can be the flaw to that idea.

R: Yea, yea. Next time I bet you gave better directions or more explicit directions to stay on the horse.

H: Exactly.

R: Can you give us some ideas of numbers, numbers in terms, when you were there in the 70s, how many guests and the ratio of staff, specifically wranglers...you were saying you had enough wranglers to....

J: Yea, we had 2 or 3 more than the R Lazy S had and I think we had similar guests, although there were times where we would have another 10, 15 or maybe 20 more guests at the ranch.

R: Totally, how many at the ranch?

J: I would say peaking out at 40 or 50 at White Grass and probably 35 to 40 at R Lazy S.

R: So, if you are peaking at White Grass, you said, at 40 or 50, how many wranglers are servicing that number of

J: We had 2 kiddie wranglers, of which, Pam, my wife, was one.

R: (15:58) Kiddie wranglers would be taking care of the children? Okay.

J: Yea, they would eat with them, watch them during the days, ride with them, so it was a pretty long day for them. In the contrast, at the R Lazy S, she was the only kiddie wrangler to deal with all the kids and they would usually add helping do dishes at night to her job description. Where at White Grass, we had 2 of kiddie wranglers and I am trying to think, probably 4 or 5, or 6 adult wranglers too. We had a bigger crew.

R: Yea, help us....the life of the wrangler... were all of those wranglers, those 5 or 6, getting up at before dawn to get into the mountains, wrangle the horses back down. I'm trying to get an idea when a wrangler's day started and when it ended. They were long days, right?

J: They were very long days. And, like I said, we'd get up, leave at 5 in the morning and hopefully you'd end your day by 5 o'clock at night. And we'd work 6 ½ days a week and that was the same at R Lazy S and so you got ½ day off. We'd usually worked it out so at least 1 or, if possible, 2 wranglers could sleep in until 7 on one day and then rotate through doing the wrangling.

For me, doing the wrangling was kinda the highlight of the day because you would see a lot of wildlife in the morning. You got the excitement of looking for those horses. Two (wranglers) would go out but you would split up to cover the territory so you are just riding through the hills and up towards Stewards Draw alone. Then, when you find those horses and get them moving (back toward the ranch), they would usually break into a cantor and gallop back to the ranch with you following behind. Always, nothing was ever the same. It was a lot of fun.

R: An adventure...every day a different kind of thing.

J: Exactly.

R: One wrangler I interviewed described that early morning by saying they would start before daylight and get so high but they knew they couldn't find the horses until the sun came up. So, the joy was waiting and watching the sun come up. Was that a part of your experience?

J: I guess we must have started later because I remember we would leave the barn just as the sun was coming up and so it was not full sunlight but you were in that early morning; but by the time you'd get to those meadows and all that, it was pretty well light. But, it makes me also think,

particularly, in the meadow section, which was kinda up north of the Phelps Lake Overlook, some of those horses would drift very high up those meadows. Those hills don't look that steep until you start going up them and, as you start riding up them, you can find that your elbow can about hit the sides of the hill as you are traversing across, going to the horses. There were several white mares that would go up there and unless you got equal or slightly above where they were; they were not budging. But the minute you hit that (Boom!), they'd take off and start running down the hill. Then, you could get them out but if you didn't go up to their ground, they weren't coming down.

R: Did that suggest that the rider and the horse, the wranglers had to be pretty good horsemen?

J: Absolutely.

R: To manage that; I mean it is one thing for a horse without a rider to get up that high; I assume, to take a rider up there, that is a skill.

J: Yes, it is, but I don't think we had any issues that I can think of over the years I was there. Subsequent years, I know there were wranglers who broke a leg, broke an arm, and different accidents; maybe they weren't quite as familiar with the terrain. I remember one incident in the Spring, there would be a cornice of snow over the creek up there. I never crossed any of those, I'd always go around. Well, some of them would go over them and the stream coming, the water would be there and it would break through and you would break a leg; things happen.

R: Well, yea, dangerous to the horse too.

J: Absolutely.

R: So, during the days you were at White Grass, where did these wranglers come from? Was there a repeat group that kept coming back year after year, were they plentiful, did you have to scowl the landscape for good wranglers?

J: Well, I think there was a little bit of everything. There were people like Freddy and Carol (Herbal) and Beth (Wooden) that came back for years. I think Beth had been a guest and perhaps Carol too, and then became wranglers working there. That happens today at R Lazy S and other ranches. And, they were great help and they had learned all the trails, the people and they were wonderful. And, there were others that weren't so great and others that had really good skills.

The second year I was there, I had a couple of rodeo cowboys who were really good riders but liked to party and little bit more. But, they were wonderful, charismatic brought another great experience for the guests. But, there were others that just drifted in. Frank was one not to plan ahead as much as other ranchers and sometimes you ended up with who happened to be in Jackson Hole on Memorial Day to fill a couple of holes you might need at the end. So, we might get some old, some new, some experienced and some not so much.

R: Some responsible and some not quite so responsible.

J: Right. I think we pulled together really well and, as I say, and a lot of them brought a lot of charisma as well as experience. I can't think of any serious accidents we had any of those years. I think we did well serving the people.

R: As you were talking about the responsibility of being in charge of taking guests, who may not know much about being in the woods? I was curious about what wildlife you saw in the woods wrangling early in the morning. Can you give us an idea of what the wildlife that you saw?

J: Sure, you'd see quite a bit of elk, quite a few bears and particularly moose. I remember one morning coming up to the Phelps Lake Overlook, and for anyone who has been there, it is a beautiful incline. You can walk to the top and it is framed with pine trees and an openness with the lake beyond. One morning, as I came there, there were two bull moose silhouetted sparring right in that perfect opening. I was like, Oh my God, how could this be any more perfect and with that, another bull moose came out and broke the two of them up and then all three scattered.

There were other mornings in Whistler Draw looking for horses, where it would be really foggy. You could hear that bell distinctly and you would follow it and then break out into a meadow lined with some pines. There you would see 20 head of horses mixed in with, maybe, 30 elk. And, they would all be grazing there in the fog. So, you gently move in and separate the horses out from the elk and then start the horses on the way back to the ranch trying to leave the elk on their own.

I remember another time, you talk about wildlife, we had a bear that they had seen. We hadn't opened up yet, so in those days, the bears were literally everywhere. If you didn't see a bear(s) one day you would say, "Gee," I wonder where they are today. We felt that there was this one sow that had 3 cubs, maybe it was a grizzly, and we were all kinda looking out for her just to see her.

One morning, I was on the ridge over Phelps Lake at Whistler Draw off to the left. I came into a clearing and at the opposite end of the clearing was this bear with the 3 cubs. I could immediately see why they thought she was a grizzly because she was huge. But, she was a black bear, kinda that tawny color, very big and I think, at a quick glimpse, you could mistake her but, indeed, she was a black bear. And, I was on my own personal horse.

He had been a cow cutting horse, could turn quick, move quick. Tinky Cat was his name. His mother was Clever Kitten and his father was Tinky Hawk, he was a quarter horse. But anyway, I decided, being young and foolish to see, given the fact I thought I had room, who would yield the trail. And so, as she advanced, I advanced - a foolish thing to do (I am not recommending it). As I made that move, she made one little gruff noise and all 3 cubs went up the tree immediately. And then, she focused on me and started swaying her head and she charged but it was a bluff charge and she stopped and you could feel the earth shake.

She let out a big roar. My horse spun around and wanted to leave but I straightened him up and I started making noise, slapping my chaps and hollering at her and she swayed her head again and made another charge and at that point, we were getting within 30 or 40 feet of each other. I was beginning to think, "Okay, it's about time to turn around." Then, all of a sudden, she just swung her head and made another little noise. Then, all 3 cubs came down and she went off on the trail. I guess the moral of that story, for me anyway, was again, not something I would recommend, it was probably a stupid thing to do but it proved to me that given any opportunity, the wildlife, including bears, are going to yield and not be confrontational given the opportunity, even a bear with cubs. But, we should respect the animals nonetheless ...that is sorta my takeaway from that.

R: (27:13) You didn't ever do that again?

J: I never did it again. I never had that exact circumstance again.

R: So, you are at what age when..

J: 20, when I did that.

R: Wow, well, an opportunity to learn a lot of respect about nature. I mean that was part of that whole nature experience very, very different from living in Salt Lake City.

J: Totally.

R: As I am hearing you talk, that was a good match for John; that wildness, that openness, all sort of things that really spoke to your spirit.

J: Exactly, very much so. And working with horses and when you work with that many horses at White Grass, we had about 120, but as I say that, we probably had about 60 or 70 that were usable. Every year, Frank would have about 5 or 6 colts that you couldn't use, 5 or 6 mares and colts and have the yearlings - the 2 and 3 years olds. So, you've got a couple of dozen of that number that are into the breeding. Frank was a strong believer that if you had a horse bred and raised there and went through the whole routine of the summers, you could go out with them as they got older into the mountains. Such would then make far better horses, more sure-footed and more attuned to being in the mountains. And, I think it was true. It also gave some of his wranglers the opportunity to break 5 or 6 every year.

I would always take 2 and work with them and I had a different way than most of the guys there. We would agree on the day that we would get on them and they get on them and they would buck around and some guys would fall off. But I would always start a week or two before, ground ride them, saddle them, kinda what they now call horse whispering (which is more sophisticated than what I did). I would get bonded with the horses and they would always tease me that I had lucked out and got the easy horses because I would get on and just ride around the ring. They just didn't have that buck in them after working them out before. But it was another great experience to become closer with the horse and nature and use what I had learned when I was younger about working and training horses.

R: (29:56) But it seems embedded in what you are saying is that whole concept in developing a relationship takes certain personality characteristics, (1) to be interested in that and (2) sell it to the horse. Is that a fair statement?

J: Yes, I think it is. Plus, one of the things I learned at the R Lazy S, which I was able, of course, to bring to White Grass as head wrangler, (one of your biggest job) was to match the horse with the rider. That is probably the number one thing. To do that, you have to try to know the guest and which sometimes you do and sometimes you only know what they tell you; but with the horse, you have to know what kind a person he will fit with be it a child, an adult, an experienced rider or novice, what the little quirks are, what the personality is. It sounds funny to say but out of those 100 or so horses, you knew every single horse's name and you knew the personality and you knew how to match them. And my brother, Dan, is excellent at that, and Brad, Freddy's (Herbel) son who works at the R Lazy S now, is very good at that. I think (to be successful,) it

takes that closeness and insight with the horse to make it the best match and great experience for the guest.

R: (31:21) But also the wrangler. It must bring great joy to make a good match.

J: Yea, you are not always perfect and need to tell the guest, you and that horse are not a good match.

R: Well, horse psychologists, is that a fair term, or people psychologists or both?

J: I think it takes both because you want to match them and bring them together. Every single horse, people say how can you possibly know their names? I say well, they are just like people; each one is different - they don't just look different, they act different and they have different good qualities, bad qualities and as you learn that, they become just like a person.

R: Well, switching from horses to people, is there a way to characterize the White Grass guests though they came in all shapes and sizes, traditionally Eastern folk?

J: I'd say much more traditional Eastern with the White Grass; R Lazy S was more Midwest - the Ohio area, and some California and other parts of the West. But far more came from the Philadelphia, eastern area because that is the heritage of White Grass. But we got some from Texas and other places.

R: Any particular walks of life or were they all professional people, doctors, lawyers, or a smattering of folks?

J: I'd say a good smattering; a good representation, lot of businessmen. I'd say many had their own companies. I'd say both ranches were characterized by that.

R: In previous oral histories of other White Grasses, they've said that there frequently was not a whole lot of interest paid to what guests did back home; it was more, here we are together and let's explore this area as opposed to living on my laurels back East and what my life was like back there.

J: I would absolutely agree with that. But, by and large, if you are meeting people on common ground, whether he is a CEO of a big corporation, big company, doctor or lawyer, you are meeting on common ground whether I was 17 or 20. You really did have that common ground if you took them on a pack trip. You are there to share a family experience with them and very much so with very few exceptions. I do remember one notable exception

It was a fellow from New York and he was very braggadocious. He was actually the Street Commissioner of New York City. I was taking him on a pack trip and we had an existing camp set up in Granite Canyon. It had been raining a lot and one of the wranglers from R Lazy S was anxious to get to our camp first to show us up, you might say. So, he was closer to that location. He started going up Granite Canyon and it started to rain and had continually rained for several days. His family was expressing concerns. "Do you really want to go on?" I would said, "We could wait a day or two and go back to the ranch but no, because there was 'no physical obstacle that would get in our way to get to this camp.'" He even got pretty aggressive with his family, as we are moving.

Then, all of a sudden, this other wrangler is coming back down out of the canyon, soaking wet. He was trying to show them (me and the guests) that it was going to be a bad day and he said you are not making it up that canyon. There is a landslide that has come down, it is about 30 feet across and 5 feet deep and I am heading out. I said, "Well, that is good enough for me," because I knew he wanted to beat me to that site and if he turned around, I knew there was no point in me going ahead with rocks, limbs, everything mixed in there. So, I explained to this guest that we would have to turn back. He said, "No, let's go up to that, I think we could cross it, I think we could cross it or go around it." I said, "I know it is not going to work."

We were right by the creek in Granite Canyon. I said, "Why don't we stand over here and talk". I go him to the edge of the creek, edge of the stream. I said, "Boy, that stream is really starting to flow." He said, "Oh, that's nothing" and then he was explaining to me that nothing in nature could stop a person from pushing ahead. At that point, the family is just kinda shaking their heads. So, we talked about 5 minutes. I said, "Are your feet getting wet?" as the water had risen up about this high on his boots and he looked at that and he said, "Let's get the hell out of here." And indeed, about a week later we had to go back up and get that camp. I looked at that slide; it wasn't until the next year that they were able to clear that trail. That was one guest who, "I am the Streets Commissioner and there is nothing that is going to bar me from getting me where I want to go." Mother nature here is just a little bit different. But he was very much the exception.

R: (37:31) I am just struck with your sophistication to bring him to a point of him making a good choice to turn around. I mean that is a masterful piece of dealing with people. Those are my words but I mean the two of you could have fought it out.

J: I couldn't think of a better way to end it.

R: My compliments.

J: I think it works with animals too, given the opportunity to make right decisions and work really well.

R: So, where did you learn that skill or did it just evolve over time?

J: I guess...just innate.

R: I mean, at 20 years old, that is wonderful. Well, maybe that is being with animals and because you talk about working to tune into that whole process and how can I get this horse to do what needs to be done even though the horse may not want to do it initially.

J: Exactly.

R: Wonderful, wonderful. Let's back up a minute before going to finances, because you started as a wrangler and then you mentioned Fran Fox was head wrangler when you first came in 1970 and then eventually you were head wrangler. How many years before you were head wrangler?

J: Well, that fall, Fran was not going to come back so they offered me the position to take over for the next year, which was 1971. That year, Pam and I had just graduated from college, and I guess

it was our last gasp to claim Wyoming and the ranches before we went into the real world. So, we came back and worked that summer and fall.

R: Was it different being head wrangler for you, that experience; was it a good transition?

J: Well, I had been head wrangler at the R Lazy S before so I had a pretty good feel for it. I think the only real difference was, we ended up coming a week later than most of the help because we went through graduation ceremonies down at the University of Utah and the crew had sorta kinda already congealed. And, as it turned out, I was the youngest part of the barn crew and there were the rodeo guys who were 35. I was 22 and a lot of them, I think, thought who is this guy that came in late, younger than all of us who is now going to be in charge. And, so we had to iron out a few things on where basically I really tried to present myself as respecting each of their backgrounds but someone has to be in charge, and that is me. So, let's all work together. We had ups and downs all summer but we all stayed together.

R: (41.00) So, where was Frank as you established yourself as leader and head wrangler of this crew? Was he behind you or did he kinda go on doing something else?

J: Frank was very much a non-hands-on kind of a ranch owner. I think his focus was much more with the guests. I think it was just a ritual for him to eat breakfast, lunch and dinner with the guests to see what they wanted to do and entertain them at night. He figured we, at the barn, were taking care of our responsibilities unless there was a problem. He really was not very involved at all. He wasn't really aware of those kinds of things, which he really didn't need to be.

R: So, I am guessing you solved a lot of problems he never even heard about?

J: Oh, absolutely. But that is what your job was. But Frank, I don't mean to say that he neglected the barn. I think he figured we knew what we were doing and he would just rely on us to do so. He would focus on taking care of the guests, that was his main role.

R: Did he ever reach a point where he had to intervene with the barn and the activities there?

J: Not really, every once in a while, he would wander by us and see something that he would gripe about but it was pretty quick.

R: So, describe more Frank as leader -- you mentioned he was more into daily guests accommodations, hospitality, those sorts of things. Did he like that role and good at it?

J: Oh, I think absolutely. I think he flourished in it and was good at it. I think he loved the guests. He was a constant entertainer and I think I would say the same about the McConaughy's but not quite the depth and intensity that Frank had. I know Pam was raised with that same instinctual hospitality that her grandfather and her parents had - of making the guests feel welcome, which spread throughout what we did here. We entertained the guests and made them immediately feel welcome and I think it all comes from that foundation of guest ranches and people, like Frank as well as her own family.

R: A person once told me that one of the key components of a successful dude ranch operation is the leader/owner was perceived in such a way that guests wanted to come back and be with that owner the next year.

J: Very much so. And, Frank would have the stories of the yesteryears and accommodate whatever they might want to do now. He was a very colorful character and the ranch, in many ways, I always said, could run itself. That setting, you would have the horses and if you had some people who kinda knew what they were doing, you could be there and he could be the host that he was.

R: (44:18) You were at the ranch 1970 and 1971, after graduation. You were the head wrangler and then after that you got more of a regular life in Salt Lake City. But, you came back from Salt Lake City to establish yourself and Pam here in the Wilson/Jackson Hole area and you continued your relationship with Frank and Nona, his wife. What was that like because at one point, you said just welcoming, he was just a welcoming guy.

J: Well, he was and we moved to Salt Lake for about 12 to 15 years and I pursued a career that worked out very well but I think in about the year 1974, we purchased, what is now, our guest cabin here (in Wilson), when Pam's grandfather sold their ranch to the Forrest Service. They in turn sold all the buildings and we purchased one and move it up to some property we purchased in Jackson. So, starting in 1972, 1973 we would come up every summer, spend some time up here and we did that until the mid 80s, when we purchased the home, here in Wilson. Each year we would call Frank and I would hope that we would be invited to go out to say hello. I wanted him to know that we in town.

Every single time "How long you here for, why don't you come on out. Let's have lunch. I bet there are a couple of extra horses in the coral. Why don't you and Pam come up and go for a ride and by the way, 'It is the Fourth of July next week and we are, if you are here, we are going to have our annual Fourth of July party.'" Without exception, he was always so welcoming, so glad to see us back and it meant a lot to me and shaped the way I look at people that come to visit us now. I don't mean to say that we were that special that he extended that. I think he was just that way with people who would call him. It was his gracious nature. We always enjoyed so it we maintained a friendship from the time we left the ranch until the time Frank died, seeing him multiple times each year and having good visits, good times.

R: Well, you mentioned Fourth of July party barbeques. Describe those, please...what those were like and who would come.

J: I'll try to. They were a wonderful experience. The first year when I was there, Frank married Nona on the Fourth of July in 1970. I didn't realize they'd been doing that kind of celebration (July 4th) for many years before we got there, but they always continued the tradition. They would of course, include all the guests, all the crew and cook either a pig or a half a beef and have a huge bonfire down by the lake. They would invite a lot of their friends from Jackson and beyond. People from the little Jenny Ranch, the Wagstaffs would come up from Bondurant. Paul an Anheuser Busch heir was there. All of Melody Ranch were here and a lot of other great old friends of Frank would come to the party. The Dornans - Dick Dornan and later years, Trisha, also came. Sometimes Freddy and Carol (Herbel) would be there and it was just almost like a mini rendezvous of guests who were there at the ranch, crew at the ranch and people from around the valley and beyond. It was just a wonderful experience into the night with the bonfire

going. It was just a wonderful time. I know I heard that in subsequent years, things got carried away quite a few times, which doesn't surprise me completely.

R: (48:47) Carried away, in getting a little rowdy?

J: Yea.

R: So, we are talking over 100 people, at least. 125?

J: Easily, at least, and often the Park superintendent.

R: Okay, how interesting, interesting. Dynamite was a part of Frank's passion?

J: I didn't personally experience that as much as others did but I know that it is true. He would use it with the stream. There were rumors that is what happened with the barn roof - it was a technique that he supposedly used. (I can't speak firsthand) but if too much snow got on the barn roof in the winter, he would tie a rope from the top rafters and kinda suspend it in the middle. The right amount of dynamite would give it enough of a shake to get rid of the snow without shoveling. One year it was maybe too much and blew the roof off the barn. I don't know.

R: Yea, that story does goes around.

J: Others say it just old and caved-in but I don't know. I think that was one of the tough things with the ranch. Frank had a lifetime lease and I am sure he expected to live a lot longer (then he did), but the older he got, the less incentive there was to make a lot of further investment in the ranch figuring the Park was just going to take it and let it all go.

R: Could you see that as you walked the ranch, things were slipping?

J: Well, I didn't see it so much because I loved the rustic-ness of it. There were other ranches - Lost Creek put in a swimming pool, tennis courts, carpeted the cabins, but that is not the experience you'd get at White Grass. You would get the feel of just the way that cabin as it was in the 20s and 30s. Most people not only appreciated that but craved the authenticity. But over time, if you don't do a few things, that catches up with you. I don't think he was focused on that, given the situation.

R: (51:03) Do you have any sense about the finances of the ranch; the dude ranch season is a very short season given 12 months in a year. As you said to me earlier, it is a tough business model.

J: Yea, it is tough, for any in this business. Even when the land is covered with that lifetime lease, it is very difficult to make a year's living in 3 or 4 months. I was never privy to the books or the income and expenses but I know he had 6 or 7 acres that he withheld from the original sale. From time to time would sell the Park another acre or two, which would suggest he needed cash from here and there to sustain what they were doing and be able to continue to do what he wanted to do all of his life. So, it suggests that at times, he needed money but I don't know much for than that.

R: Embedded in what you are saying is that while being a wrangler, head wrangler and guest around (the Ranch) that was not an issue that was apparent to anybody? It just ran?

- J: Absolutely not, it just ran. I never knew of anybody that wasn't fully paid on time or any guests that had any issues in that way at all. We always had wonderful food, horses, and I think everything ran very nicely.
- R: From time to time, people talk about how gracious Frank was with the cocktails for the afternoon cocktail party - which put out the message that if he put out an outlay of cash to create an atmosphere at the ranch that was festive. Is festive that right word?
- J: I don't know if festive quite fits, but of western hospitality. We had many cocktail parties and many times we started out at Frank's house which made people feel like almost part of the family.
- R: A lot of gambling?
- J: I was never part of that, guess I was too tired at the end of the day but I heard many, many stories, particularly bridge games as well as other card games and such. Frank was very adapt at that and one of the guests, who had been coming for years, Suki Matthews, was certainly another comrade at arms with Frank. They certainly took on people at the card table. She was a wonderful hostess, helping Frank throughout the years that I was there.
- R: You attended the barbeque on July 4, 1985; Frank died 2 days later. You had supper with him on the 5th before he died on the 6th, what was that like? Any premonition that his health was such that he would be dead in a day or two?
- H: Absolutely not. We talked to Frank and he invited us to come up for dinner that evening.
- R: The fifth?
- J: The fifth, Pam and I went up (to the ranch). Nona said he had had a long day and they didn't want to go up to the lodge and have dinner with the guests but wanted to have dinner at their house. We would have dinner brought down. Frank was getting cleaned up so we had a drink with Nona. And, we were getting ready for dinner and about that time, Frank appeared out of the bedroom and he was wearing cowboy boots that 'bout went up to his knees, had a cigarette in one hand, a martini in the other. It was Quincy Town prank and he had a big smile on his face.

So we sat down, had a good visit, had dinner. After dinner, he was anxious to show us all he had been working on during the summer which was realigning some irrigation ditches out on the meadows. That was one of his biggest jobs to keep that productive for the horses in the fall and get water to it in the summers when the weather was hot. All the water came from Stewart Creek, so he had a professional engineer bring that water down for the ranch and irrigation for the fields. Also, he showed us some things that they had done with the barn. So, he was very proud of the way the ranch was running and he took a great deal of time to show us all that and we ended the evening and went home.

The next morning, they called us from the ranch and told us he had died. Nona was extremely upset as was the crew. I think it was a gal who was in charge of the office who asked us if we could come out and stay with Nona for a while and we agreed. We stayed with her several days until her family could come down from Canada.

We learned from talking to guests, the office and the barn (personnel) that Frank had indeed had a tough couple of days. He already had a pacemaker and he probably would have lived better if he had known he was going to live that long. He was that kind of a guy. He had one pack trip go out on the fifth although Frank was not involved in the packing or getting the ride organized. But it was always his absolute duty to go to Moose to buy all the provisions, steaks and food. He would go down there and come back in the station wagon and give us what he had bought though he didn't always obtain all the needed provisions for the pack trip.

Apparently that night two of the crew, who were Shoshone Indians and brothers, got into a fight that escalated into gunfire. No one was shot; but gunfire. The Park came in in the middle of the night. Frank fired one (brother) and probably gave him some money, drove him to Moose, set him on his way and kept the other one. That made it a much longer than normal. The next morning he had 2 more pack trips that were going to go out and he had already been to Moose, got the provisions, got one going and was back at his house making up a list for the next one. He wore half glasses, reading glasses, had his note pad and a pencil. He asked the girl to get him another cup of tea while he finished his list. In the time it took the girl to get the tea and come back, he had just passed away in his chair with the pack trip list in his hand. But, (he died) a very gentle and peaceful way but way too early for his age. It was a peaceful and appropriate way for him to pass.

R: (59:03) Do you know his age?

J: I think he was 62 or 63 or somewhere in there. He was born in either 1918 or 1919 and it was 1985. He was about the same age as my father. Frank was a B-24 pilot in the war, as was my father.

R: That must have come as quite a shock to you but also to the ranch and everybody.

J: The Park made a concession they could operate through the end of the season, which was the middle of September. But, it was hard to believe that all that history, all that vibrance of life at the ranch was over.

Then, we subsequently helped Nona organize the auction of the saddles, the contents of the cabins, the horses. We went through cabin by cabin and suggested things she might want to keep for herself and other things she might bring and what to do with it. Which was not fun to do. But it had to happen. And, as you know, we did buy a few things from the auction, a saddle which we did return to the ranch, cow moose head, and few other things (that have become part of (as part of the White Grass Heritage Project Collection). It was amazing to see there were some things we would have loved to get - there were some beautiful fireplace screens, particularly in the Hammond Cabin, but I guess could be called the Porch Cabin. Apparently they were designs that Thomas Bosworth did, great western designs which started the whole movement out of Cody. There were people from New York that appreciated what those things were. I particularly loved those screens and could spend a couple of hundred dollars on that but in 1985, I thought I could maybe go \$300 on one screen. Today, they are probably worth \$12,000. He had some very priceless and beautiful things there. A lot of people didn't appreciate it at that time.

Note: Photos of items donated to the ranch by John and Pam can be seen at www.whitegrass.org under Collections/Coming Home.

R: Did the community struggle with his death? He was established in the community, liked in the community?

J: I think he was certainly well respected. I don't know if I could respond well to that because I think his connections there well beyond my purview. But to one insight (I've had), people often ask how much Jackson changed when you were at the 1966 R Lazy S to 1970 White Grass. I said, we went to town maybe every 10 days; but mostly we just stayed at the ranch. I think that was Frank's lifestyle too. A lot of the expanding population in Jackson, particularly at that time in the 80s, we probably were not even aware of. We were focused on White Grass appreciating their smaller group of old time friends and guests. We were interested in everything that went on, but I don't think it was perceived as big thing in the broader sense because what was special, was our own world, very intimate (at the ranch). Beyond that I don't know what else I could add to it. I am sure people, today, that were closer (than I), had a much bigger feeling.

R: (1:02:57) Well, did you ever have the sense that Nona enjoyed living on the ranch?

J: Yes, I did. I think what drove her more than the ranch life or anything else was that she really loved Frank. It was what Frank would do and I think she was very sharp in office management and knowing how to help him manage the ranch. She was a very good hostess but not the host Frank was. Frank was the icon of the ranch. I think she did the best to support him but he was the primary focus. I think she enjoyed her role and enjoyed being with him. She was always extremely supportive.

R: After Frank died, she moved off the ranch, did she go back to Canada?

J: Ultimately she did. She stayed at the ranch until that Fall and apparently their home burned to the ground. There were all kinds of theories as to what happened but the fact was, it was gone. I think the only real tie to the ranch she still had was a lifetime provision to be able to stay in the house, not to run the ranch but to reside there. She decided to give that up which was probably a good decision once the house had burned. She decided to move to town and bought some property and lived there and traveled some for a couple of years. Then, she moved to Brownsville, Texas and got involved in a few things down there. But she wasn't too happy with that. We kept in communication for a couple of years. Then ultimately, she moved to Canada and found someone from her past high school. I don't know if they ever married but they became partners and shared their lives. And, then she passed away.

R: (1:05:16) In part two of this interview, I want you to talk about the influence the ranch had on your artwork. But before that, are there other things you would like to share about the ranch that you think are important to the story that we haven't touched upon, things you would like to expand upon? It is an important part of this story and it is important to be heard.

J: I have to say with your questions, you pretty well covered it. I think there are things that could tie in where Pam and I went from there that would be appropriate to relate back to it but I can't think of anything else at the moment.

R: (1:06:10) Well, you fairly summarized, if I am hearing accurately, it (the ranch) was a great plus for your life, for Pam's life and set the stage for many things to come. And having this

conversation and others before we started recording, it is clear that you have a great appreciation for those great experiences at White Grass.

J: Absolutely, very much, very much. I think it certainly shaped our lives as we moved ahead from wanting to continue with horses, wanting to continue our connection with Jackson Hole and to start collecting more of the things that Frank adorned his house with. (That included) Navaho rugs, to artwork of Jackson and the west, and just the whole lifestyle the western cowboy theme and truly learning it. I like to think of Jackson Hole, wildlife, and ranch life from the back of a horse. And, you can still see that today. And it is one of the things I treasure, still having a horse at R Lazy S, still being able to ride, go out on the trail. (Doing so) I think you can see the ranch life and wildlife from a totally different more intimate perspective, from the back of a horse than you can any other way.

R: Ranch life, wildlife from the back of a horse...wonderful! Let's take a break and we will come back.

J: Thank you, Roger.

R: What a beautiful statement! I love that...I am writing that down...there is a title of a book!
(1:08:15)

Part Two

R: (0:19) This is Part 2 of the interview with John Mortensen of Wilson, Wyoming. We have moved off the porch of his studio in Wilson and moved indoors where we are surrounded by wonderful, wonderful Western art and artifacts throughout this entire studio. John, please tell us about the photograph behind you of the horses, a dramatic shot.

J: Sure, I have always enjoyed taking a lot of pictures/photographs and this particular shot was taken of horses at the R Lazy S as they were leaving the corral for the evening. I took it, oh, probably 20 years ago and decided to convert it to a larger format, convert it to black and white. I think it has come through quite well. You take a million pictures, I mean a lot of pictures that you think really captures the moment that you experience.

R: That's a lovely shot. It speaks, as they say, a thousand words, one picture a thousand words.... although there is more than that picture here. It is a good introduction (to interview part two) because I would like to go back to what you were talking about earlier and pull together some things related to White Grass, art and your lifework here. If you can go back to where your art started in Salt Lake City as a young person and talk about your interest in art and how that blossomed from then on.

J: Well, I think artists go through many paths to create the career that they do. In my case, I was pretty much born with it and I think anything you are born with and you want to make better is, as one of my aunts told me, is 10% talent and 90% perspiration to develop it, to work it and bring it to its full fruition. But, I think from an early age, I always liked art, did art. My mother encouraged it, my father always encouraged it throughout elementary, junior high and high school. I did a lot of different art.

My father, which I think contributed a lot to my confidence with art, had a Western store and it kinda leads into more where we get into the Indian thing (collecting Indian artifacts). Because, as we sold saddles, he got the idea to go down to the reservation and collect Navaho rugs to sell. But, in the store as a young person in high school or maybe even younger, he would say, "I want to run an ad in this magazine. Would you do the artwork?" That was pretty thrilling for me. I don't know that it was always great but he gave me that opportunity. I remember one year he said, "What would you think for the front of the store if we created some kind of window design that would help people feel more like Christmas and feel welcome." I said, "Well, I don't know." So, I sat down, looked at it, brought him back a drawing. He had a fiberglass horse with a saddle in the back of the store. I said, "Why don't we bring that up front, put one of these nice winter blankets on it. What if we create a barn with barn doors and the horse has its head out. We can create some snow." And, Dad said, "Great, I know a carpenter and we can give him your drawing and he brought it to fruition." I think that kind of encouragement went a long way.

Unforgettably, he died very young at 53, and I was yet to do my first sculpture but I was already focusing on wanting to do that. He was very actively helping me try to find a foundry, find out what we could do to get that going. Then, he unexpectedly had a heart attack.

Later that next year, I finished my first piece (of sculpture) and I have always regretted that he was never able to see it. As a homage to him, I took the horse head off and put it on his marker, which remains there today. But he was a big part of always giving you the confidence to do that and I think that extended to suggesting to go to Wyoming, as we talked about earlier. And he was, for both my brother, Dan, as well as my younger brother, was great being behind the scenes, not telling you what to do but saying what about this thing. "Do you want to try this," but helping gently push us into directions that meant what we were looking to do. I think it was invaluable and as you said, I went on to work at R Lazy S.

(When I worked at the R Lazy S Ranch) I remember they appreciated that I did a lot of cartoon kind of things - I did with lot of kids from Kentucky/Tennessee area. As they left, we all (the staff) decided what we thought distinguished their stay, whether it was falling into the pond or being a good rider. So, I was asked to draw something for each guest, each of those kids, they were all 16 to 18 years old, on a paper plate. We described what we all agreed was individual to them and then I would do a little drawing of whatever that depicted them. So that was a lot of fun.

When I went to college, I decided I wanted to go into graphic design and pursued that for 2 years at the University of Utah, but it just wasn't what I thought it would have been. They had felt the computer ages were coming, which it was but it wasn't there yet and they weren't prepared to give you the techniques to work with that. Their bet was more to show you how they wanted things to look, the style, and I didn't like that at all. I was probably just too independent. I wanted to learn the techniques and how to be able to express myself. After 2 years, they reviewed your past 2 years, and told me that I had done really well with the graphic design but they were disappointed that I hadn't taken sculpture, oil painting, life drawing, watercolors and (should have) if I was really serious about the art.

I said, "Well, I think I look at different than you do. I took all of my general ed. in that 2 years. And, I figured now I could just finish studying art and I could just do all that." And, I was one of those moments when the light bulb went on and I got up from the table and I said, "Well, I am glad we had this moment because here is what I didn't like about your program and you can take me off the list. I am leaving in a month."

I recalled all the general ed I took (and remembered) an economics class for whatever reason. I thought it was pretty interesting. So I walked out the door and went to the economics department and changed majors that day. And my wife, Pam and I were married by that point and I figured we needed to get part time jobs. So, Pam got one and I went to the University and found there was an opportunity on campus to become the graphic design and production manager (who would) create all the reports covers for the Bureau of Economics and Business Research. I got the job and stayed there until I graduated. I had like a graduate degree in graphic design - working with type setters, designing the covers, working with the printers and bringing them to fruition. Working on all the newsletters/publications and working with most of the professors in the Economics Department made it all very interesting. I received that degree (graphic design) and ultimately graduated with a degree in economics.

Upon graduating, we decided to go back to the White Grass one more year, which was 1971 and had a wonderful experience there. And, I found when I came back (to Salt Lake City), there were not a lot of jobs for an economist without going on to masters, doctorate, etc. and I did not want to do that. So, I took a job with an advertising agency in Salt Lake.

It was quite a small agency and I started with graphic design doing newspaper ads, publications, etc. But within a year, I was filming television commercials, recording radio, and I would help with writing, and virtually every part of advertising. One of our clients was a small Saving and Loan and one day they approached me to leave the agency and set up an in-house agency for them doing all the functions of a full advertising agency. I figured that was a pretty good opportunity. So, I left and within a year, the largest Savings and Loan in the market approached me and said we have been watching what you have been doing and like it quite a bit. So, why don't you come over and do it for us?

In that case, I wouldn't have to do all the day to day creations. I would have at my disposal a full-service advertising agency and an account executive. You could explain what you wanted to be done. Follow it through, critique it, etc. and be part of the best firm in Salt Lake, which I had always respected a lot. So, it was a great chore to do that.

I was with that Saving and Loan for about 10 years. I moved from advertising to relations to operating all the branches and educating the people about the new products. (I) got to design all the new products and kinda encompass the whole thing and ended up working directly with the chairman. It was a wonderful time and they appreciated it, particularly him, i.e., the fact that I had a degree in economics allowed (me) to understand a balance sheet, income, expenses and look at the corporate plan. (And, it) also (allowed me to) find a more creative way to approach marketing and reaching markets and goals we had.

But, then in the mid 80s, they brought regulation to that business. It was disastrous and very few, or none, existed the way they were. It wasn't fun anymore. We were closing branches, retreating to cash, making the decisions we needed to make but it just wasn't fun. And, because Pam and I had started doing the bronzes on the side, developing a market there in Salt Lake, we made the decision in 1985 to leave that world and start doing bronzes full time both in Salt Lake and develop more in Jackson and so I did leave.

R: (12:28) So, let me pull a couple of things together. When you were working in industry, one of the things that came out of that was an opportunity to be creative. I assume, you help me with this, that

helped you solidify your creative flow in a disciplined sort of way because advertising is certainly focus/goal oriented. Was that a challenge as opposed to kids coming up....kinda the sky is the possibility? Did that help you with your creative focus/skills?

J: I think what helped me a lot was the acceptance and reinforcement we got by selling the bronzes that we did. In that last year I had started to receive commissions for some life size work which kinda helped me think that we could do well with that. People liked what I did, and I liked where it was coming from. But I think, too, I couldn't have done any of it without my wife, Pam. She was extremely supportive. We did not have children, so we didn't have that responsibility to think about. And, we were both confident that we could do well with it.

We had done well enough in industry that we had some money, kinda be the seed money, to get things started, to move ahead with it (the art). But, we quickly learned that, although Salt Lake was okay and we were doing pretty well there, we liked horses, liked wildlife, and Jackson was a much better fit. We already had the small cabin up here, so in 1985-86 we started getting very serious about finding somewhere bigger, here, to be kind our base to market the sculpture.

In 1987, we found this property here in Wilson that includes Fish Creek and this historic home built in 1913. It was in terrible shape but had 'great bones' and we were really excited to do it. We started out with it as a summer home. In early 1990-91, we sold our place in Salt Lake and moved up here. We moved a cabin (to our property), which is now the guest house, which we bought from Pam's family's ranch that we talked about earlier.

In 2000, (we) built the studio and that year was an exciting year because I received several life-sized commissions. One was from a University of Utah donor to create a family of life-sized moose setting - a cow and calf in a live stream with the bull moose sitting above stream, detached from the two, which is what you see in nature more than the three together. I also received a commission to do a larger than life bison for the city of Evanston, Wyoming. So, we decided to take that good fortune and put it back in the business and build a studio (and wondered) why didn't we do that 10 years before. From there, we were able to expand much more and create work here and go to the foundry and (bring work) back which created a bigger market.

(The art) I think was all tied to White Grass or that ranch background because we also kept horses throughout all this and rode. Pam had grown up with (an appreciation of that life-style) with her grandfather and parents in the winters on the upper Green (River), appreciated artwork, native American artifacts and Western artifacts. You saw some of the art at the R Lazy S and, of course, (saw) bountiful things of that nature at White Grass. Frank Galey (appreciated it also and) became a customer too. He bought some of my bronze work, which is somewhere at the bottom of the ashes of their home. That was up at White Grass so I guess I could say that it is still there.

Desiring to have that kind of lifestyle that I guess celebrated all of that past and bringing it together, we started going to the Southwest and collecting particularly southwest native American Navaho rugs, kachinas, pottery, jewelry, and basketry. (And, we collected) everything in the western country up here (Wilson, WY) from wildlife to different (animal) heads. I am not a hunter but I appreciate the feeling that they bring to your home, i.e., a sense a homage to the way White Grass was, GP Bar Ranch was, also almost like a cultural landscape, that they describe in the southwest. (We created) a cultural landscape of the Tetons, Rocky Mountains, wildlife, cowboys and all that ranch life. I think that just became our life and we celebrated it.

Frank was very supportive as we would come up to visit. I can remember, on several occasions, he would say why don't you bring some bronzes out and we will set them up on the porch during cocktail hour. You can have dinner and we can see if we can sell some stuff for you. (That was similar to what) was a tradition at Pam's family's ranch. They weren't artists so much, but vendors would bring Navaho rugs, jewelry, work by people who made silver buckles, bolas, etc and they would invite them to the ranch. So (what happened at White Grass), it kinda followed in those footsteps.

I can still remember after dinner, sitting on the porch outside the bar with Frank. With Frank's style with a cigarette in hand and a drink here, he'd say, "When John worked back here, he would, by golly, get up early in the morning, would drive to the top of those peaks, chase those horses down and bring them in here. Then, he'd (John) started creating these things and he would have the people believe.... I think half the things he said I never did but he would embellish things so much and make it sound so wonderful. (As a result), we would start selling bronzes through that venue and did till the ranch was gone. We continue that today with the R Lazy S and I go out there and ride, develop a great groups of friends, clients, guests that come over weekly to the studio. Pam and I would entertain very much like Frank with cocktails, good hors d'oeuvres, make them feel welcome, share what I am doing and (that we were) able to make a life out it. I think all those things come back to those roots, from not only Pam's side but the side we share together, particularly, at the White Grass and Frank.

R: (20:24) A good marriage is synthesis of two people and you have done a wonderful job of articulating that synthesis.

J: We truly were partners in every sense of the word and we were very symbiotic with each other. Her style is, I learned, the entertaining and hospitality, first from Pam and then through the White Grass too. And I, hopefully, am continuing in that same standard today.

R: Your bronze work, did it basically start with the wildlife themes?

J: No, I'd say it started with horses. That is probably my paramount interest. There was a bucking horse, called 'Stirrup Slide,' with no rider and with stirrups sliding, the horse bucking. That was about 45 years ago. It came out in 1974, and the interesting thing to me about it, is I that I enjoyed (enjoy) doing people from time to time. I have done Sacajawea. I've done, you can look across the studio, a lot of people. Probably my preferred way of showing the horse is to create the horse with the trappings of man; the saddle, the pack saddle, rope corral, corral with rope posts, which they would do on a trail drive, and the saddle thrown to the side and in a sense, the burden of man shown but the man absent.

I've often wondered, I didn't make a conscience decision to do that, but I think it was my way of focusing on the horse and his attitude and the hand of man with it from the corral to the saddle but also allow you to focus on the horse working with man without him in the picture. Although, he is in quite a few, I think the more central theme was that, and I think back to that first piece, it was all there, i.e., attention to the style of the saddle, the horse rebelling and the attention to all the detail from the saddled horse's emotional stance, but no man; he is absent.

R: (22:54) And what spirit was the horse expressing?

J: Pure rebellion.

R: Pure rebellion, freedom but rebellion? Does that theme come through in a lot of other pieces that you create?

J: Absolutely.

R: Another example of that?

J: Well, this rope corral, that one I pointed to over here. Another is one that isn't here now, 'Bomber.' I took a ranch horse and made a case of that. Another good example is 'A Chancy Ride,' which is a rodeo saddle bronc. To make it authentic, I worked with a local rodeo rider, Chancy Weldon, of the Melody ranch, south of town here. He'd competed in the finals in the rodeo and he let me borrow his saddle and halter. And, I created the horse that just bucked the rider off. He (the horse) is very defiant about his situation in the area. He stepped on the long rope that the rider holds onto, which has arrested him in motion. (The horse's) head is pulled up definitely, looking back. The rider's gone, the saddle is there. I called it 'A Chancy Ride,' which has the double entendre. All the equipment was Chancy Weldon's. It is one of my favorite pieces.

R: (24:37) What a journey, What a journey!

J: Well, I think for me even with wildlife, I like to tell a story with every piece that I do. This piece over here is 'Walpi Burro,' which is from the Hopi Reservation subject with the saddle all thrown together. (It has) an old McClellon military saddle tree, Indian rawhide put over it, stirrups just hanging, somethings with just a knot and a little Walton blanket on it. It is kinda like the tired animal of burden for the Indian. But again, the Indian, the man, is not in it, but he (the horse) is in the Pueblo setting of sandstone and it is quietly sitting there waiting for his next assignment.

Another one, which was really fun (came from) a good friend, Harry Oliver, who had guest ranches here in Jackson, including the 4 Lazy F Ranch. We spent a lot of time in Santa Fe and Pam and I enjoyed him and Barbara there.

One day, he was telling me a story about a fellow who had a company in Santa Fe where he would have burros at the top of Canyon Road. He would load it with firewood in the morning and would send them down Canyon Road. He (the fellow) would go down either to a bar or restaurant and he would wait for the burros to come down. The burros knew every stop that wanted firewood and had a little leather pouch attached to the pack on the animal and people would put in their coins for the wood they took. At the end of the day, with the firewood depleted from each stop, they would drive them back up to the top of the road and then do it all over again the next day. I told Harry there was a bronze in this. So, I created a piece showing the burro with the wood, the money pouch, no halter, no headstall, just ready to come down. It is really fun to find those stories.

Another one is 'Sacajawea'. I depicted her on a horse with her son. She, of course was on the Lewis and Clark expedition and I chose to show her on the horse at the moment in their journey (Lewis and Clark's) that was pivotal to the whole thing either failing or succeeding as they were without horses, without provisions on the east side of the Rockies with Sacajawea and her husband, I believe, Charbonneau.

They (Lewis and Clark, Charbonneau and Sacajawea) had (come on to some Shoshone Indians and they brought them in). They (Shoshone Indians) were deciding if they should kill these guys; they

surely needed help. It turns out that out of all things, the leader of them, their (Shoshone) chief, was Sacajawea's brother. They (the Shoshone Indians) saw that she (Sacajawea) had been rescued from the pagans. (The pagans) had kidnapped her/enslaved her as a young child. (In appreciation), the Shoshone Indians said whatever you need and they gave them horses, supplied them and then they went on to complete the exhibition. So, I think it was, at least from my studies, almost the most pivotal moment in the whole journey - the horses and Sacajawea. That was fun being able to depict that scene. I try to look for things in history or moments I've seen that can tell a story and engage people and make it an interesting thing.

R: (28:40) When you sell a piece or create a piece, do you also create a narrative, like the story you just told?

J: I did for a while but then I got lazy, and I don't do that so much. I should get back to it. I tell people that but I don't document like I should.

R: Another part of your work that I am curious about goes back to the ranch and some of the stories you were talking about earlier. For example, you talked about forming a relationship with the horse that you were getting ready to break. I am wondering if, as you are being commissioned to do a piece, if there is a lot of interplay between you and the person who is purchasing your piece. Is that part of the collaborative, creative process for you?

J: No, not really, but I think you have touched on one thing that I can comment on. I think the most important thing as a sculptor, that I try to achieve, is to breathe life into something that is cold metal. I don't look at it as cold metal but I look at it as something that is created at 2000 degrees of bronze that rushes into the mold that I've created and that it brings life to that subject. And, that is the most rewarding part. I don't find it too challenging, but it is challenging to breathe life into a piece.

When you start a piece, I like to see results rather quickly, within the first day or two as I will do a rough, when you have a gesture of the piece. The most important thing is, not the body gesture but the look in the eye, and the feeling that this thing is alive. That it is an individual piece and I think you will find that in every piece. I think that is the heart of why people like what I do because they can relate to it as a person almost to another spiritual being. They (can) put themselves in the situation the horse may be in or they find comfort in the way the horse looks as they recall a memory they've had at the ranch or whatever. I think that is the heart of what I try to do, whether it is a bison, elk, horse or person that is given life that comes from a medium. I see that as very spontaneous but the net result (of my work). Of course, it will last for ages is another exciting thing about it. Sure someone could melt it down (but it could) be here hundreds and hundreds of years.

R: (31:45) Do you consider yourself a good observer of animal life to be able to breathe life into your artwork?

J: You have to, you have to be able to look at what the position of the ears means on a horse or cocking one foot and, I think, it extends to riding in the woods too. If you are riding with guests, I will say, "There is an elk over here" and they will say, "Where." Well, I'll say, "I just saw it flick its ear or twitch its tail" and they will say, "Oh, yea, there they are."

Over all those years, you become attuned to looking for all those details. I think it extends to another part of what they (my customers) appreciate is the detail in the saddle and rigging and all of

those kinds of things which are totally authentic. Some pieces that you will see where artists come up with a way they think a saddle or whatever, might go. But (for me) that kinda goes back to my father and in his western store. He had a fellow there that made saddles and did repairs. One of my jobs was not to make saddles like he would but, “OK kid, if we are gonna work on this, you have to tear it all apart.” So, I would completely dissect the saddle down to the tree so he could work on it. And, as you do that, you learn exactly how a saddle is made and how it goes together. So, when you go to create, everything is the way it should be. I think that kind of authenticity is very important to people when they are supporting me when they choose to purchase it (a piece of my work).

R: (33:28) I am not an author but one of things I understand authors are told to do is to tell the story one knows about or write about what you know.

J: I think that is very, very true and I think in my case, beyond that is to work from life as much as you can.

R: What does that mean?

J: It means that your model can be in front of you. You can't always do that with an elk or bison but by being among them, using good photography and other things to support it (one's observations), you can help breathe that life into it (a sculpture) by working as close (as possible to the 'subject'). For example, when I did that bison for Evanston, (I drew from my observations) when I would spend time by going up into Yellowstone. I would sketch and look at them and listen to them just grunt and move and go by you. (I would try to) feel the rhythm of the way they are. Then (I'd work to) put that in the piece I'd create. And, I think it is that kind of intimacy of doing what you know that is extremely important. I think any writer, artist will probably tell you that same thing.

R: Been a fun career?

J: Oh, absolutely. I mean it is magical to think you are able to do what you loved all your life and to make a living at it. And, the big bonus beyond that is all of the friends and clients (I've had/have) because almost all have become very close friends and they add stories to it. A fun example is one of my good clients and a very dear friend, Robert Ballard. His name may not ring a bell but he discovered the Titanic. He discovered PT 109. He would call himself the 'Lewis and Clark Explorer' of the ocean with submarines.

He has a piece that I did of John Colter and he has 'Sacajawea' because he relates to them as the explorers. He would say Lewis and Clark knew more and had more intelligence maps where they were going in 1803 than we do today of the ocean. He's described what he believes is a discovery of the source of life on earth at the bottom of the ocean where there are huge hot springs coming out. There's worms 7 feet long and all this chemosynthesis rather than photosynthesis as it is total darkness down there. (Discovering) the heat the hot springs gives off is a much more significant accomplishment (than the Titanic and PT 109 discoveries). So, in his headquarters in his home, with all his cameras, he has my sculpture of John Colter from the Lewis and Clark exhibition.

I have had calls from him in the middle of winter, "What are you doing today, John?" I would say not much, snow is falling. And, he would say "I am in the Black Sea and we are doing this and we are going to explore this 10,000 year old village down here. And, he would say, "Why don't you click on your computer and go to this website." I would say, "Okay, and it is a good thing, Rob, that I just got a new, faster internet so let's see how this works." And he said, "What do you see?" and I

said, “Well, it looks like kinda a command thing on a ship and a bunch of guys.” He said, “What do you see now?” and I said, “A bunch of guys and I see you waving at me.”

He was communicating because they are doing a live broadcast on the web and he is talking to me on the phone. There is about a 1 second delay so no one else could hear our conversation but everyone could see. He said, “Do you want a tour of the ship, here, let’s go forward, let’s go aft, now we are going to watch this submersible.” And, again, having clients that appreciate what you do and sharing part of their life and what they do is, I mean, (it is) indescribable how all of that enriches your life and my work and insight.

He is my example but I have had countless clients over the years that do all kinds of different things and share their lives, (i.e.,) what they do; how they have had a troubled time in their life. And they will just wake up and look at the sculpture and find strength and direction for what they are trying to do. I think the bottom line for any artist, writer, painter, sculptor is you’re communicating the things you felt in life to somebody else. You hope they will appreciate what you’re sharing and communicate with you. I think that is one of the most wonderfully rewarding things about what I do. And (for) the large body of people, you are really part of their lives and you don’t even know how you are influencing them. It is very, very rewarding.

R: (38:28) I’ll add one observation, to your comments. It starts with your being receptive to taking in all that information, all those experiences in and again, synthesizing them to breathe the life into something else.

J: I think you are right. You have probably heard it too, the phrase that “You will never learn anything if you are the one talking.” I am a strong believer in that. I have been on a number of nonprofit boards over the years and in one particular board was the Jackson Hole One Fly, where you have a lot of very successful captains of industry that are on the board. Yet, I was the President and Chairman for a long, long time and I was often criticized for having too long of board meetings because I let people talk. Some of them would say, “I don’t want to hear what George said over there because he will go on way too long.” I’d say, “He has something to say that is gonna be worthwhile if we just let him get to it.” If you cut that off, then you cut off that person’s interest to be involved, to contribute the thought they had to make an overall endeavor better. I have seen it kinda drift different ways, ‘Let’s move on.’ (But if) you take more time and you do wait sometimes wait for a long story to get there, I think it is always worth it. I guess I have applied that to almost every part of my life. I think you can’t learn if you are not listening and open to receive it. I hope that I will learn as long as I live. It is a part of our goal as humans or should be.

R: (40:28) Thank you for making the world a better place.

J: You are kind to say it.

R: But I mean it with sincerity because part of your works seems to be an obvious interplay with nature but your story that you just told is an interplay with people and allowing them to express themselves. And, even though it may be slow and laborious, you’re facilitating their creativity, if you will, much like you facilitate your own creativity with that process. That’s what I mean by interplay. Are there other things you want to say about your art?

J: Well, I have to say it’s been a fabulous journey, to see it go the way it has and to have someone like Pam, who supported it and allowed me to do it. I wouldn’t be sitting here today without her and

sadly, I lost her to cancer in 2016 after about a 10-year battle. We got more time than most but I have tried to carry it on and as you know, I have a new partner in a dear lady, Diane, whom I worked with in the SLC (Salt Lake City) days and hadn't seen in 35 years. She lost her husband to cancer, as well, and we were able to reconnect and now have forged a wonderful life together where she is very supportive and gives me new ideas. It is wonderful to have someone to continue to share that with.

One interesting thing I would say before another thought I've got, is you all think about what you want to be when you grow up. I have a friend that comes here and helps. She (Betty Ann) is a retired school teacher that was at the ranch the year before I met Pam. She has always been a good friend.

She loves to relive the ranch by helping with the cocktail parties we do. One thing she told me, no, two things that were significant. I remember from the early days. She said, "John, do you ever remember when we sitting around the table with the wranglers (from the R Lazy S) and all us ranchers and we were saying what are going to be when you grow up?" I said, "I don't remember that conversation," We would run around the table, Kim was going to be a lawyer. She (Betty Ann) said that I said, "I was going to be a bronze sculptor." And, I said, "I have no memory of that." She said, "You sat it right then and there in 1966!" I thought I am glad you remembered.

The other interesting thing she said when I had her speak the eulogy at Pam's celebration of life that we had here. (Betty Ann) had known me the year before (Pam and I met at the R Lazy S) and she was interested in someone else and I was too. And, Pam arrived and then I arrived and they were standing together and Pam turned to her and said, "Betty Ann, just remember this...he's mine." And, that was 2 years before we were married.

So, Betty Ann is a keeper of some good memories. But I think one of the good footnotes, in a sense, to all of this, I was explaining to you earlier, is that Pam was also involved with a lot of nonprofits and she encouraged me to do all the work that I did and explained what a responsibility it is for everybody to be engaged in your community, i.e., give what you can, be on the boards, give your input. She was wonderful at that and one of the ones that she was involved with was The Utah Museum of Natural History, which is part of University of Utah. She did that for about 10 years and, after her death, I kinda peripherally remained interested and would go to some of their events, if I happen to be in Salt Lake.

I got talking with their director about Pam's past, which was always wonderful (for the Museum) to remember (her), despite they've grown to a huge organization. (It has a) beautiful, unbelievable facility with a huge dinosaur, displays of minerals and everything that I talked about (earlier related to) Native American artifacts.

They've got certain categories (in their collection) but not others and I told him a little bit about what Pam and I collected over all the years, starting with my father's roots and with her grandfather's things. So, we went crazy for about 50 years collecting what now turns out to be about a thousand different items of Navaho rugs, pottery, kachinas, basketry, fetishes. They asked if they could come up and look at it. I said, "I would love to you come up."

Well, they think we are a perfect fit with the artifacts they have and I have agreed to donate all we have collected to the Museum. They are going to create the John and Pam Mortensen Collection in the Museum. Our things fit nicely with the things they don't have. To that end, they have also

agreed to catalog the entire collection and we've gone through about 800 items and figure we only have about 200 more to go. They will be coming up in about 2 weeks to complete the job and, in the course of doing all this, their curator and their anthropologist talked about how this is a wonderful example of the cultural landscape of the southwest. And I said, "What does that mean? It sounds scientific and I don't know what that is." She said it kinda is. It means the indigenous people of a specific geographic area represented all the totality of their life in their artwork and daily life, which is the case for the American Southwest which includes Navajo rugs that depict their daily life. (Additionally,) the kachinas show their cultural activities; baskets each tells a story and on and on and on. It shows their culture, their geography, the other indigenous people.

All of a sudden the light bulb went on with me that Pam and I never realized why we collected what we did, why we chose this, why some people collect just rugs, just kachinas, or just the finest new contemporary things. But, we kinda went for the other things, the things that expressed the cultural landscape of the Southwest. And to that end, you read the book that I shared with you, that Museums can help edit and hopefully finish collecting the cultural landscape of the American Southwest. (The Southwest) really embraced me and Pam learning all that we have about those cultures and why we did what we did. I think in a broader sense it kinda shows where our lives went too. We've tried to preserve the culture landscape where we live, the wildlife, the ranch life, the mountains, the history, and what all around here. And, I think it kinda shaped our lives.

R: (48:35) Yes, yes. A wonderful life. Thank you, Jon.

J: Thank you Roger, it was fun. I appreciate your interest.

R: Genuine, genuine.