

INTERVIEW OF BONNIE KENYON
INTERVIEWER IS KAREN BREWSTER
SEPTEMBER 3, 2016
IN MC CARTHY, ALASKA

KAREN BREWSTER: Brewster and today is September 3, 2016 and I am here in McCarthy, Alaska with Bonnie Kenyon at her home. I am talking about she and her husband Rick and the life they made for themselves here in McCarthy. So thank you, Bonnie, for being willing to participate. I know it was sort of sudden me dropping in on you. But just to get us started so people know a little bit about you tell me a little bit about yourself. Where you were born, your background before coming to Alaska.

BONNIE KENYON: I was born in Pennsylvania and came to Daytona Beach area, Daytona Beach, Florida with my parents and I believe I was in the eighth grade and so we moved there. And I went to high school there, graduated from high school, and this is where I met my husband -- my former husband Rick Kenyon. We were married Daytona Beach and he had just finished going to -- attending at MB Riddle Aeronautic Institute down there as an airplane mechanic. And so after he graduated from them we -- there we went to Sarasota, Florida, opposite side of the state, settled there and built a couple of businesses, small businesses. And he worked for a small commuter airlines, did repair work for many years and we had a son who was born 1967 and his name is Rick, Jr.

KAREN BREWSTER: And did you have any college education or anything besides high school yourself?

BONNIE KENYON: No, I did not.

KAREN BREWSTER: Okay.

BONNIE KENYON: I did not.

KAREN BREWSTER: Okay and so what year did you and Rick move to Alaska?

BONNIE KENYON: We left Florida in 1976. It was early summer, 1976 and came to -- drove to Alaska with our son and we had a little travel trailer behind an older Suburban and all our belongings. We had sold our home, couple little businesses, and just liquidated everything and headed north.

KAREN BREWSTER: And why did you decide to do that and come up to Alaska?

BONNIE KENYON: Well, we -- Rick and I were -- I am still Christian of course and that was what we believed was a call of God to come to Alaska. And so we just obeyed what we believed was the right thing for us to do and so we did. We were not supported by any missionary organization. We were -- stayed independent, but that was our reason for leaving Florida and coming to Alaska.

KAREN BREWSTER: And was your intent to set up your own church some place here in Alaska?

BONNIE KENYON: When we left Florida, we didn't really know what the Lord had in -- we just didn't know. We really didn't. We just did this I guess what you would call by faith. We didn't know where we were going in Alaska. We just knew that this was God's call for us and we headed this way. So we didn't know -- really know what God had planned for us.

KAREN BREWSTER: And then is it my understanding you spent some time in Valdez, Rick worked as an airplane mechanic there?

BONNIE KENYON: We did. We met a man who hired him. Rick is an airplane mechanic for a small community airline in Valdez and we stayed there for -- we left Florida '76, the winter of '76 we spent in Valdez. We were there approximately a year.

KAREN BREWSTER: And that was for Kennedy?

BONNIE KENYON: Kennedy Air Service, yeah.

KAREN BREWSTER: Okay.

BONNIE KENYON: Yeah.

KAREN BREWSTER: And then so how did you end up out here at McCarthy then?

BONNIE KENYON: Well, we had been there about a year in Valdez and we stayed that whole year in our little travel trailer and that was kind of interesting.

KAREN BREWSTER: A little cold?

BONNIE KENYON: I was raised in Pennsylvania so I knew, you know, what snow was. Rick was born and raised in Michigan, so snow was not unfamiliar with us, but that amount of snow was absolutely amazing. We go what have we gotten ourselves into?

KAREN BREWSTER: Valdez gets a lot of snow, especially back then it probably got a lot of snow.

BONNIE KENYON: It was just, yeah, an amazing thing, but a very beautiful place. We were so honored to be able to live there for a year. But while we were there my husband came in one day and he says, Bonnie, would you -- would you pray about a possible move he said. I just really feel like our time here this year in Valdez was very productive. We got introduced to a small city compared to a big city, you know like Sarasota, Florida and Daytona Beach. So he just asked if I would pray about it in my personal time, my devotions in the morning, which I did and it was in that time that I was -- felt very sure that where the Lord was sending us was to a place called McCarthy. We didn't know much about it. Rick didn't know where is this place? He began to learn a little bit about this place and we actually flew into -- the company he worked for one of the pilots said I would be glad to fly you out there one day and so we did. We landed at the McCarthy airstrip and was met by a man that lived in McCarthy at the time and he took us downtown. And we looked around what was there at the time and thought, wow, this is really remote. And, you know, we just kind of -- we knew when we got on the where the Lord really wanted us we would know. We would have that sense, that peace, the Lord in us to witness that. And, you know, when we walked around the town of McCarthy, we just -- we just didn't have that and so we left, went back to Valdez and a little disappointed as to why didn't we have -- we were sure the Lord just ministered that -- the name of that little town to us. And so we just decided well let's just head that way. That is all we know to do. We will take the McCarthy Road and we sold our trailer and put a few things in storage in Valdez and packed up our Suburban and headed out the McCarthy Road. And that would have been the early summer of '77.

KAREN BREWSTER: So when you came in that day on the plane, what time of year was that?

BONNIE KENYON: Oh, boy, you know, it probably would have been more like spring, springtime and --

KAREN BREWSTER: To me it seems like great courage and a spirit of adventure to just get on the road and drive out here.

BONNIE KENYON: Well, it, you know --

KAREN BREWSTER: Did it feel that way?

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BONNIE KENYON: You know, yeah, well I look back now and I think I am amazed we did. We didn't know really what we were doing. We were just trusting God, that's all. That's all. It is kind of an interesting way of life, but that is the way it is for us. And so well, it was. I mean we didn't know much about the McCarthy Road. I mean, oh, my word, probably if we had, we would have been just absolutely scared spit less because it was not as nice as it is today. So anyway, but we headed out. We made it and got as far as Long Lake, which hopefully, Karen, is Mile 45 McCarthy Road.

KAREN BREWSTER: I drove past it, so.

BONNIE KENYON: Did you? Beautiful.

KAREN BREWSTER: It is beautiful.

BONNIE KENYON: Beautiful setting at the lake there. And, of course, we had been driving for miles didn't see anybody and hardly anything, you know. And finally we broke out across the Lakana and a man by the name of Hank Hopper owned quite a few acres and he was the first -- his dwelling was the first place we saw when we crossed the Lakana and a beautiful setting. Green grass and just gorgeous. So we pulled in there and we asked Hank do you have a place -- is there a place we could rent for the winter? We would like to stay here. And he goes why he said? Why would anybody want to -- he never stayed for the winter. He returned to the Lower 48 somewhere and only came up for the summer. So to make a long story short he finally agreed, okay, you can stay in this little cabin over here and so we kind of moved in. Went back to Anchorage for supplies, came back and he said you want to spend the winter, huh? And we said, yeah, and he says, well, neither one of my places are winter proofed at all. He says you would be very uncomfortable. And so he says would you be willing to build a log cabin for me on my property and I will supply the logs from off my property and do what I can to help you, but mostly you will be doing the work yourselves and with the idea that you could spend the winter and into the spring perhaps a year. So that was our first attempt to building any kind of a structure ourselves. But we did. I think it was like a 12 x maybe 14 cabin.

KAREN BREWSTER: Did either of you have any experience with building?

BONNIE KENYON: Oh, no, goodness gracious. We were like Florida kids, you know, really, city kids, but Rick was very good at getting a book and reading things and be able to put it into, you know, practice with that. And very good at that so, of course, he picked, you know, the brains of the few local people there on log building, read books. We got library books and we just devoured, you know, the information and then just did it. And it was -- I remember very hard work, but we were younger than and we were excited because we felt good about that place, Karen. We didn't -- we felt it was a stopping point in our life, but we were where we were supposed to be for that year.

KAREN BREWSTER: And how old were you at that point?

BONNIE KENYON: Well, I was let's see that was what '77? I was -- Rick and I were both born in '47, so --

KAREN BREWSTER: You were 30.

BONNIE KENYON: Thirty. Yeah. Yeah.

KAREN BREWSTER: And so then you stayed out there -- you were raising your son when this happened?

BONNIE KENYON: Yes, we did homeschool. The state of Alaska had a very good correspondence program and Ricky's contact teacher was in Glennallen and so, of course, we didn't have phones. We had to do everything by mail and mail -- our mail in those

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days at Long Lake came in at Chitina. And so then there was a neighbor that was oh between Chitina and Long Lake and he offered to get mail for us too as he did for other people and then he brought it as far as maybe his place and we would go up and get it or if he was coming down the road would bring it. So everything had to be, you know, by mail, his books. And, of course, we would go out a couple time for supplies.

KAREN BREWSTER: So was the road maintained at all at that time?

BONNIE KENYON: You know, I don't remember much of any maintenance. I really don't and, you know, if the road closed, you just, you know, there probably was, Karen, if it was actually closed and nobody could get through.

KAREN BREWSTER: I was thinking how could --

BONNIE KENYON: Somebody would have --

KAREN BREWSTER: It snows, somebody had to plow.

BONNIE KENYON: Well, yeah, well in those days you just didn't I mean they didn't -- DOT didn't plow like they do now and have -- it just was pretty much closed, except for snowmachining. So and what we would do sometimes is leave our vehicle out, chained up, closer towards Chitina and I think Mile 11 maybe we had some friends there and that is where we left it. We could snowmachine to the car, get out and then back, but everything had to come in, snowmachine, sled, you know, back then so.

KAREN BREWSTER: Right. So how long did you live at Long Lake then?

BONNIE KENYON: I think almost a year and then during that winter we met a couple named Jo and Harley King. They owned property that bordered Mr. Hopper's property and we would oh, during that winter they were so kind to us and we went over to their cabin a lot and played games and card games and just, you know, it was a winter thing. And there was a few other people at Long Lake at that time, but Jo King had owned -- was given property up where, in fact, where we are sitting now and I don't remember how many hundreds of acres that belonged to her, but at the time it was given to her it was just in payment for some work she had done for somebody and not considered worth a lot. But back then around '77 she decided she would like to subdivide and so she said, you know, if you guys would like to go up there and live on that property, I'd be glad to lease it to you and Rick did some airplane work for her on an airplane of hers and we did some exchange swapping out things and leased all of her property for several years and then as she got it subdivided and Rick helped on, you know, on doing that and then what she did was she offered to supply the logs, like Hank had done from Long Lake, and we got them, we did. They cut them that winter. We kind of came up here and we looked at this area and, of course, this was all that the yards right now it is not like an open field and it was open then, except for tall grass, laid down. There was an old homestead cabin up in the woods. It is still standing and there was a part of an old barn in here. So when we walked in from the road, we, you know, we just knew this was the place we were coming. And so anyways we just ended up getting the logs. Rick and Mr. King did the harvesting of the logs that winter. And then we came up, got the logs, were trucked up here, borrowed a truck from a neighbor at Long Lake, brought them up and July 4, 1978 we started to build the cabin that I am in now, so.

KAREN BREWSTER: And your winter at Long Lake didn't scare you off from living out this way?

BONNIE KENYON: You know it didn't. I think it's because there were some close neighbors, maybe six, but people that were savvy to living out there. We had an old snowmachine.

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We didn't go far with it, but we were able to get around anyways. And got skis, kind of learned how to do that. You know, I don't remember being -- I remember being somewhat intimidated when temperatures would drop minus 50 and hang there for a while. Thankfully, we had plenty of firewood so we had a nice cozy little warm cabin. So, you know, we were fine. I don't remember being extremely afraid. I remember that winter was a tremendous show of the northern lights, just awesome, and we had never seen northern lights. And it was just like they -- we went outside and they just -- the lights danced all around us and we could even hear the swishing, swirling noises and I have never heard them like that again. And it was an awesome introduction.

KAREN BREWSTER: Yeah, definitely magically.

BONNIE KENYON: It was beautiful, yeah.

KAREN BREWSTER: And so once you had the cabin built here it was my understanding that, you know, Rick apparently integrated into the community with hunting lifestyle.

BONNIE KENYON: Yes.

KAREN BREWSTER: And those kind of things?

BONNIE KENYON: Yep. We just -- he hunted. He was -- I don't remember much in Florida, maybe a little bit. There was a little bit of hunting available in Florida and he enjoyed that. It was mostly when he hunted it was to -- for food is what we did and that is what he did and I remember quite a few years praying for a moose as we needed winter meat. And we were -- Rick was very successful. He didn't -- wasn't the type that went out looking so much. It is just that in those days there wasn't too many people around and thankfully a moose would come in our yard out here during moose season and we would, of course, that would last us for -- we had to can them. It is a lot of meat to can a moose.

KAREN BREWSTER: Didn't have freezers?

BONNIE KENYON: We had -- no, we had no refrigeration like that, but anyways we did it and enjoyed that, living like that and made a garden. I think it was the second year we were here. Frank came over and tilled up some garden space and we began and we built on that garden and just grew a lot of potatoes, carrots, things that we could store and eventually got a root cellar and were able to store those kind of foods through the winter.

KAREN BREWSTER: It is interesting that Rick didn't necessarily come from a hunting background, but he somehow learned how to do it up here. Did he have --

BONNIE KENYON: Well, in Michigan, growing up, his grandmother loved to deer hunt and he would go with her sometimes. And so I can't say he wasn't a hunter because then growing up he did have -- he did have introduction to that with his grandparents. And so it is just that this was so totally different I mean bear and moose and, you know, just and the, I don't know, the danger sometimes from the bears that would roam through and I don't know how many number of bears he had to shoot.

KAREN BREWSTER: I have read in your newspaper the memorial to him. There is a story about him taking the bears that were trouble bears and the Park Service called him.

BONNIE KENYON: Yes, well, I know, but at the time I think the interpreters at the time on this side, the west side of the Kennicott, were young ladies and I can see why they would be - - not be really keen on having to deal with this and Fish & Game was called originally. Please do something. In fact, I think it was Rick that made the call to them. Please come out here because it is terrorizing the neighborhood, these three bears, and we are concerned somebody is going to get hurt. So they did come and they tried. They camped out trying to find them and, of course, the bears were elusive and never showed up. So it

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was Fish & Game that actually came and said, asked Rick would you be willing to, we can't stay any longer. Would you be willing to do it? And Rick says well, yes, I would and so they were grizzly bears, but the Park Service was very understanding. They understood and they just said if you -- if you manage to take the bears out that we will take care of it after that. You just shoot them.

KAREN BREWSTER: Cause this was after the Park was already established?

BONNIE KENYON: Yes.

KAREN BREWSTER: Was it a sow with cubs?

BONNIE KENYON: Yes. So it was and they were, you know, learning a lot of bad habits from their mother.

KAREN BREWSTER: And were you guys able to take some of the meat?

BONNIE KENYON: We didn't. I think somebody did, a local person may have sampled some of it and Rick did have a -- we had never tasted grizzly bear meat. I wouldn't eat it. A black bear was one thing, but not grizzly. I had this -- and I still today haven't eaten any grizzly bear, but Rick said Bonnie, it didn't taste any different than black bear meat and I came to really like black bear meat so.

KAREN BREWSTER: And did you do any berry picking?

BONNIE KENYON: I did. Those first few years. I mean those early years we did because we had good raspberry harvest. It was a very good year and I don't know how many quarts of raspberry jam I put up. I don't know why I ever did quarts. I have no idea. It would have been better to do, you know, pints. Anyway, but, yeah, so we did. We took advantage of what we could and we learned from those that lived here.

KAREN BREWSTER: And then when did you start your church and church services here?

BONNIE KENYON: I don't exactly remember when we started meeting in our cabin. It was after we got established. We got the cabin done. What we did is we opened up our cabin on Sunday mornings and we invited neighbors to come and we had people that would come from McCarthy, Kennicott come down and over and from the local area. And we just would do something and from Long Lake on Sundays here in the cabin. I don't remember what year that was.

KAREN BREWSTER: Do you remember how many people on average would come?

BONNIE KENYON: I don't remember cause it would vary depending on how cold it was whether people could travel.

KAREN BREWSTER: And now did either you or Rick have theological seminary type training?

BONNIE KENYON: No, not really, although Rick and I had both been raised in Christian homes. My parents were in the ministry and so it was just nothing, you know, I mean reading the Bible was a daily occurrence. We just -- but whatsoever.

KAREN BREWSTER: You were just felt called to start?

BONNIE KENYON: Yes.

KAREN BREWSTER: Having other people come?

BONNIE KENYON: Yeah, yeah. Just Rick would -- we would sing. Rick had a guitar and he would kind of lead the -- we had a little chorus books and or just sing. Somebody would say, you know, could we sing Amazing Grace or How Great Thou Art or something and, you know, people come from just different walks of life, different denominations and it was good. I liked the variety and the backgrounds of people.

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KAREN BREWSTER: Did you feel like the people of the community were feeling the need for some sort of religious services that that was something lacking for them?

BONNIE KENYON: Some did, Karen, some did. Others were out here because they wanted to get away from that kind of thing and structure and I can understand that too. And so, but there were -- the group that would join with us on Sundays were people that were missing that, that Christian fellowship and encouragement.

KAREN BREWSTER: Uh-huh. And as you say there were some people here who were not interested in that sort of a thing.

BONNIE KENYON: Uh-huh.

KAREN BREWSTER: Did you feel animosity from people or conflict that they didn't want you here, you know, in a mission context?

BONNIE KENYON: Well, you know, there were times I think when people would feel somewhat I don't know that we were going to come and maybe I don't know beat them over the head with a Bible or something and that wasn't our call to do that. But I could see why they were --and to some there was you could tell. And you could tell in their just their attitude to us that we, you know, well, you know, you might be welcome here, but don't push that on me, you know, type thing. And so we just figured it is better to live it in front of them the best we knew how and make it available for those that, you know, were interested.

KAREN BREWSTER: Uh-huh. And then now you have the church --

BONNIE KENYON: Uh-huh.

KAREN BREWSTER: That is built over there between the two footbridges.

BONNIE KENYON: Yeah, yeah.

KAREN BREWSTER: So when did you build that?

BONNIE KENYON: I believe we started that in 1994 and the land was donated for that purpose and so the folks that were attending, you know, like in our cabin here we, Rick and I prayed whether we should be this is something we would do. We believe the Lord did have us -- said that this was part of our assignment to come here and so we did. We took up the challenge and so we had just certain people that were here in the community that were attending and they just, you know, went with it and it was built by just, you know, probably a handful of people.

KAREN BREWSTER: Yeah, I would say --

BONNIE KENYON: It was really interesting.

KAREN BREWSTER: Building a church is not an easy task in many places, you know, to large congregation.

BONNIE KENYON: I know.

KAREN BREWSTER: And they do fundraising and donations and things and so your small group how did you manage?

BONNIE KENYON: You know, Karen, I even think back now how in the world did we ever pay for that. None of us were in any position to be able to do it and Rick and I were of -- we just -- being raised in a Christian we saw a lot of times we saw misuse of people asking for money. We didn't want to do that. We thought if this was God's idea, he would provide for it and he did. I mean people just gave volunteer gifts to see to it whether it was time, effort, just, you know, monies. I think we took up a couple offerings just if you have something you like to donate to get it going and then it just kept coming in, mostly from our own group. We just never asked.

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KAREN BREWSTER: You didn't have to go do fundraising tours?

BONNIE KENYON: No, we weren't going to do that.

KAREN BREWSTER: And then how did you get all the supplies over there?

BONNIE KENYON: Well, tramping. I am telling you it was not easy. It just was not easy and a lot of hard work on people's parts to do it so.

KAREN BREWSTER: It sounds like a very devoted congregation?

BONNIE KENYON: Well, it was.

KAREN BREWSTER: They wanted a church.

BONNIE KENYON: It was beautiful. It was just really a wonderful thing so, yeah.

KAREN BREWSTER: So that means you did services in your cabin from -- for 20 years or something almost?

BONNIE KENYON: Let's see, we moved into the church I think in it was either December of '95 or '96. It might have been '96. We may have been started to -- we might have started a little bit of the foundation '94 and then '95 building still meeting here and then '96 I think was our first service.

KAREN BREWSTER: And if you started services here in --

BONNIE KENYON: In the 80's, probably.

KAREN BREWSTER: Oh, okay.

BONNIE KENYON: Because if we moved here in '78 I think it -- we probably were a good two years just getting established here.

KAREN BREWSTER: Interesting. Tell me a little bit about the newspaper.

BONNIE KENYON: Okay.

KAREN BREWSTER: I can't remember the name of it.

BONNIE KENYON: Wrangell-St. Elias News and that started up the first issue was in July -- August -- July of 1992. And you know people have asked us why did you do that? I have no idea why we did that, but it was July 4th and, of course, we had the July 4th celebration in McCarthy and Rick just came up with this idea of coming up with something that was patriotic and I think we did an interview -- actually got an interview with the superintendent of the Park Service at that time. And we put it on a tape and we transcribed it all out what we asked her and what she responded and all that and put that in there. And it was -- it was only like I think maybe four or five pages stapled together and I don't know how many copies we did here.

KAREN BREWSTER: Mimeograph machine or something like that?

BONNIE KENYON: I am trying to remember what we had. We must have had some sort of a little copy printer or something. I don't remember. And anyways we took them to the July 4th celebration and handed a few out and someone says, gee, I would like to have a subscription. We'd keep hearing these people, we'd like to have a subscription. When is the next issue due, you know, and stuff like that? And we thought, wow, I wonder if we ought to be doing something like this. Maybe there is a place for it, you know. And so it just -- it just seemed to head right that way and we just kept at it. July-August was the first little one and then it just every two months after that and we did it all here in the cabin. Otherwise we had no education on that either, but we just, you know, once again Rick would read books on how do you publish something? What would be a -- what could we afford as a printer and computer to do anything on, you know, with and so we just little by little, piece by piece, picked up equipment to do it and so.

KAREN BREWSTER: And you and Rick wrote most of the articles or?

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BONNIE KENYON: We did, yeah, and Rick did any layout or computer work he did. He learned how to do that and did it fine. And I took to writing just because. It was him and me so what are we going to do.

KAREN BREWSTER: Well, it does seem like for a community like this having a little newspaper --

BONNIE KENYON: Uh-huh.

KAREN BREWSTER: With current events or a place for people to express their thoughts.

BONNIE KENYON: Yeah.

KAREN BREWSTER: It makes sense that it could work.

BONNIE KENYON: It did and it did well. I mean we ruffled feathers because we had, you know, we -- Rick would do editorials and at that time the Park Service the issues were pretty just very difficult. People were trying to make transition of here we lived out here without any government oversight and people were self-sufficient and then we had the Park Service moves in and it was -- it was not easy and people needed to vent their feelings. Editorials became pretty -- well very pointed and so some people either liked us, didn't like us and we just felt, well, we think there is a voice here. It needs to be said and we are just going to do it whether we are popular or not.

KAREN BREWSTER: Well, and like you say Rick maybe wrote an editorial, but if somebody in town had a different --

BONNIE KENYON: Oh, yes.

KAREN BREWSTER: Perspective that was included as well?

BONNIE KENYON: That's right, yes. Yes and we tried our best to do that.

KAREN BREWSTER: So I am curious about the introduction of the Park. That is another one of my sort of themes of what happened during that time period and how it affected your lifestyle.

BONNIE KENYON: Well, like I said, it wasn't very pleasant at first and we felt I would say not just Rick and me, but there was a good percentage of the community that felt we were being intruded on and that we didn't like the way our new neighbors were coming in and acting. We thought it was heavy-handed.

KAREN BREWSTER: Were they being restrictive of your activities?

BONNIE KENYON: You know it is -- I don't remember that necessarily being an issue. It is just that their presence when we would have like little town meetings. In the earlier days the -- we were treated like maybe our superintendent needed a bodyguard. We were like considered, you know, more like savages or something out here. I think that word was used one time and that was unfortunate and it just created animosity and then we would maybe get another superintendent and they would show up at a town meeting well-armed and like they had, you know, rangers that were well-armed and come to a town meeting. Well, that is very intimidating to people like a small community and we didn't like it and we began to speak up and it just, you know, it was very uncomfortable and we just, you know, sadly it just didn't go over well with many in the community and we wrote about it.

KAREN BREWSTER: Right, but do you think the Park Service could have come in in a different way and it would have -- the community would have reacted differently?

BONNIE KENYON: You know I think so, Karen. Maybe I am just being I don't know. I do think -- I think it could have been handled better because since then it has been handled better and it just was I mean there was like a change. Well and then we began to read up.

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People began to read up what happened to little small communities when the National Park Service did move in and it was not pretty and people were not -- were not welcome there for various reasons. And so sometimes little community would totally disappear and we thought well we're probably threatened here, you know. And we may get booted out too, you know.

KAREN BREWSTER: And you didn't want to leave?

BONNIE KENYON: No, we were all here for a purpose and we loved it here. This was now our home and people were carving out little homes and cabins and learning to live off the land. We wanted the freedom to continue to do that and so it was -- it just was not -- it was not a pleasant introduction at all for us.

KAREN BREWSTER: And now you said that has changed. Can you talk about how it has changed since the beginning?

BONNIE KENYON: Well, you know what began to happen and I don't remember actually the dates on this. Our publications, of course, wrote about it, but we got a regional director, named Marsha Blazek (phonetic). I guess it is okay to say her name.

KAREN BREWSTER: Yes.

BONNIE KENYON: Okay, anyways, and at first we didn't feel she was anywhere supportive of our -- what we felt was our plight out here and we needed somebody in authority to listen to us and it just came down to where we actually were able -- she came out, we aired our views and we told her where, you know, one of the things was the town meetings. Listen Park Service is welcome here, but not dressed out the way they come. You want us to speak our piece in our hearts we cannot do it when they come trooping in here like that and stand in front of us.

KAREN BREWSTER: With weapons?

BONNIE KENYON: With weapons. We don't need that. We are not savages. We are not here to hurt you and now some places across the state I think they did have issues with that and so I can understand them being -- the Park Service being a little concerned. And maybe here we had a few things, you know, I don't remember so much of that. We weren't for that kind of treatment. That wasn't the way to do it we didn't feel, but we began to have conversation with Marsha Blaisak and for something I don't know what happened, Karen, but she listened and she just did a turnabout and she began to make some calls. And I remember one meeting when she came out here she -- I think we were up at the -- up at Kennicott and she says what would you like to see in a superintendent? How do you want that person to look like? Talk to me about it because she was at a point where she was going to change over some -- a superintendent. And, you know, we were happy about that, but we thought well, what else? What are we going to get next thing? Is there going to be any difference? And she began to -- I, you know, I don't remember the name of the man she brought in, but he was so good and so kind and he began to show up at our meetings, not dressed decked out. He looked like one of us. He listened. He really listened and we began to share. Listen we know this is a Park, we can't change that. We are willing to work with you. I mean we live here. We care about this place we call home. We want to be representatives of this place, but we want to live here. We want to stay here. And he listened and he -- I tell you the whole atmosphere changed. It really did and he died. He wasn't in office very long here and we were so saddened by it. And but then Marsha came back with somebody else, Meg Jensen was the next one that I remember. Anyways, it really worked with the community and began to verbalize how welcome we

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were. That we were an asset to this Park and that she wanted the input. She wanted us to be a help and we -- the whole thing just changed, Karen.

KAREN BREWSTER: Well, I know that there are challenges -- that there were challenges and probably still are challenges. Local people living in a place where they want to live off the land.

BONNIE KENYON: Yes.

KAREN BREWSTER: And go out and harvest resources and you're surrounded by a Park who doesn't want people to harvest resources.

BONNIE KENYON: Right.

KAREN BREWSTER: And access I know is a big controversy.

BONNIE KENYON: Yes.

KAREN BREWSTER: So do you have any thoughts on the access issues?

BONNIE KENYON: Well, not -- it has improved so much, you know, went from the tram from which needed to be changed out in my opinion after living here for many years it is becoming dangerous. More visitors were coming and people were being hurt. Their hands just trying to do the cables. It became really serious and we were for another option, a bridge and I don't know the access. I know we had our issues with the access too and trying to restrict the footbridge and some of the community fought back with that. Said if we are going to have the footbridge, remove the restrictors. We can at least use four-wheelers and went through a whole lot of turmoil over that whole issue, but I can't say the Park Service was overly helpful, you know, on that kind of thing, but they were concerned too with their own issues and protecting their resources.

KAREN BREWSTER: And I was thinking about access out into the --

BONNIE KENYON: Oh.

KAREN BREWSTER: Countryside for --

BONNIE KENYON: Right.

KAREN BREWSTER: Harvesting for meat or collecting firewood or using old trails.

BONNIE KENYON: Yeah and that began because we began to feel like well we just couldn't go anywhere we wanted to anymore, you know. That we were being maybe watched. We were being -- that was being kind of, you know, closed in on us being able to do things like that and it was a real concern for people. And then I don't know as the Park began to develop their ways of their planning and things like that, things began to, you know, we just had to hash through some of this. And so I don't know I never really felt threatened, but then other people that did do more resources like berry picking and going out more into the backcountry and things like that felt that their lifestyle was being, you know, a little bit more crunched so.

KAREN BREWSTER: I thought Rick had some strong opinions that were in some of the editorials about people being able to get out to their property or things like that.

BONNIE KENYON: Oh, that is true, that is true. When there was an issue with your crossing Park land to get to your home or your something like that and when there was an issue and the Park is well, you might have to get a permit. You have to do this or do that. We did. We just came out saying, hey, people have a right to get home. And instead of just saying you can't do it, no, no, it is not acceptable. There has got to be a way and you make a way because we are going home and we are standing for our neighbors that want to go home. So Park land or not you are going to have to deal with it and that we did. We

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got very verbal because -- and we tried to stick up for each other with that. And I think things are much better now.

KAREN BREWSTER: So that got resolved somehow?

BONNIE KENYON: It did. There was a permit system that did come up that people were willing to live with and fought for the right for them to use the access maybe that was good for them to use and where they could improve on that access. Because if somebody needed more than a walking trail, my goodness you got to have it, get your supplies and stuff.

KAREN BREWSTER: Yeah, I know that a lot of that was -- revolved around the time with the Pilgrim Family.

BONNIE KENYON: Yes.

KAREN BREWSTER: Up McCarthy Creek. Did it start before that or?

BONNIE KENYON: You know, I don't remember so much of it before that. I am not saying I just may not have a clear recollection of it because it didn't really affect us and I don't remember that much about it in the paper. The Pilgrim thing was a real, real big issue and we were for them having access when we were told well, you guys live here, you could go on that trail, but not them and we'd say wait a minute, wait a minute. This doesn't make sense. So we fought for their right to go home and to do it in a way where they could get their supplies and not just some little, you know, dinky trail.

KAREN BREWSTER: So it was a freedom issue?

BONNIE KENYON: Yeah, in a way I guess you would say that. Access was something we felt, man, if we don't speak up about it, we could all lose somewhere in this way and so.

KAREN BREWSTER: Well, it makes me think about the idea of people who were long-term residents. I mean you came in the 70's.

BONNIE KENYON: Yeah.

KAREN BREWSTER: So there were people before you.

BONNIE KENYON: Yeah.

KAREN BREWSTER: Who came and settled here and then there is people who have come more recently whether it is the Pilgrim's or anybody else.

BONNIE KENYON: Right, yeah.

KAREN BREWSTER: And how does that work in a community? How do you -- we are all newcomers at some point?

BONNIE KENYON: I know it. I know it. Well, you mean how is it working today or what do you mean?

KAREN BREWSTER: Well or when you came, did you feel accepted in the community or you had to work at becoming part of a community?

BONNIE KENYON: Yeah, I think we had to work for it. Now we were told by a neighbor, I won't mention a name, but that if you can't build your own cabin, you don't deserve to be here. In other words, we are not going to come out and help you build your cabin. If you are going to live here, you are going to have to do it yourself. Now after we showed, you know, we were a little stunned at that. It was mostly the attitude not that we were asking for help, but we just thought that was kind of an odd. At the time we didn't think it was very nice.

KAREN BREWSTER: Well, that is sort of what I mean. If you heard the standards for becoming accepted.

BONNIE KENYON: Yeah.

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KAREN BREWSTER: Like what makes you accepted into the community versus, you know, some like the Pilgrim Family were accepted by some and not by others.

BONNIE KENYON: Yes. Yeah and --

KAREN BREWSTER: So how do people become part of this community?

BONNIE KENYON: Well, I think, you know, at that time it is like you had to ease into it. You had to prove yourself. That you could live here, you intended to live here. I mean some people would come and they could spend a little bit of time, but they just couldn't make it. It wasn't easy to do. And, but we had a reason that motivated us to whether we were uncomfortable or whatever. We were here to stay for as long as believed we were supposed to be. So we just -- I mean we slowly we tried not to get in people's faces, but on mail days we would show up and we did our best to be a part of the community where we could. I mean there were some things we didn't go to -- attend. And it wasn't because we didn't like people. We just didn't go to the, you know, some of the parties, you know. We had a young son and we didn't care that he be exposed to some of the maybe a little bit of lifestyle that was happening at that time here.

KAREN BREWSTER: Too much of a party lifestyle?

BONNIE KENYON: Yeah, yeah.

KAREN BREWSTER: And say some people would come to your services and some people wouldn't and --

BONNIE KENYON: Exactly. Exactly. Yeah.

KAREN BREWSTER: And so what about nowadays is their some people -- is there still that need to be -- to sort of prove yourself that you can live out here?

BONNIE KENYON: You know I am not sure that that is. There is probably still some of that, but I'd say there is more of an openness to accept people and there is more summer people who come and building little recreational houses and it is fun to meet them. I think that that people aren't so close-minded anymore. I think we are open to meeting a neighbor and giving them a hand, you know, encouraging them and things like that. So I don't see as much of that. I don't have that feel, you know.

KAREN BREWSTER: Were there particular people here who you mentioned some, but other ones who helped teach you and Rick about how to live here and do the things?

BONNIE KENYON: Yeah, you know, like when we lived at -- that year at Long Lake, there was a family that lived there, especially through the winter. He was a trapper and they lived a lot off the land. He was a commercial fisherman out of Cordova. They caught fish. They processed fish. They showed us how to ice fish during that time and we just, you know, especially Rick would just pick their brain. Well, you know, we were ice fishing one day on Long Lake and we got this -- Rick pulled in this fish. It was the most ugliest fish we had ever seen, but it was called a lingcod and our friend said don't throw that back. That is the best eaten fish in this lake and so we learned how do you ice fish? We asked well, how do you do that? You know, how do you dress to stay -- what kind of, you know, parkas do you get and we just learned. We'd ask people.

KAREN BREWSTER: And what is the name of that family?

BONNIE KENYON: The Ralph Lohse Family. Yeah. And they still have property at Long Lake.

KAREN BREWSTER: I have heard the name, so, yeah.

BONNIE KENYON: Yeah.

KAREN BREWSTER: So as your -- and you built your church, so did the congregation grow or has it --

BONNIE KENYON: It did for a while and has kind of waned off now and now it is just a summer church fellowship. It is people that are here for the summer months, have property, cabins, most of them maybe work in town for the lodges or, you know, something like that.

KAREN BREWSTER: I was wondering now that you said you leave in the winter and Rick is no longer with us, if it continued without the two of you through the winter?

BONNIE KENYON: No, it did not and has not so we -- it -- we come -- I come in mid-May and that was doing that for the last I don't know how many -- couple of years before Rick passed away it had turned into a more of a summer only. So which fits my pattern of living now real well and so it is like mid-May to mid-September.

KAREN BREWSTER: Well and before Rick's passing in 2014 you both lived here year round?

BONNIE KENYON: Uh-huh.

KAREN BREWSTER: Since 1977?

BONNIE KENYON: Yeah, yeah.

KAREN BREWSTER: And what kept you here?

BONNIE KENYON: Well --

KAREN BREWSTER: As you say, it is not an easy place to live.

BONNIE KENYON: It's not, but it was where we had been called to come. It just was, you know, and then too it was nice Rick's folks would come up almost every year and hang out for a lot of the summer with us. My mom began to come up in the summer, sometimes staying all summer with us. It became easier, you know, for them to come. We didn't necessarily have a lot of money in those earlier days to travel. It was expensive to fly. We drove a few times down for a few weeks at a time or maybe a month and then we would come back. And but I think it was 2013 we actually decided to start going for the winter and we might have done part of the winter in 2012; 2013 was actually because our group was now just summer only. And so we were able we felt we could do that and anyways we just -- we liked winters. We kind of welcomed them. It was, you know, they're so quiet and pleasant and then, you know, the whole -- it just was different in the winter. Some of the people that stayed year round and then the summer folks left and businesses stopped and it was really quiet. And Rick enjoyed going up to Long Lake ice fishing and you know things like that that you just didn't do in the summer. We had more time to.

KAREN BREWSTER: So in the winter did the community come together more or did you separate more because you're farther away and it is harder to interact.

BONNIE KENYON: There was more I mean I think people mail days were a big thing for one thing and there would be gatherings, parties or sometimes Christmas things, Thanksgiving things that would happen and I don't know you tended to visit more, a lot more. Go to a neighbors for tea. They would come over. It was, you know, a lot of that in the wintertime.

KAREN BREWSTER: And what was it like raising a family, you know, your son and you said you homeschooled, but was it difficult raising a child out here?

BONNIE KENYON: Well, Ricky was -- I mean he enjoyed the outdoors too and he wasn't much in for missing sports. I mean some of the kids out here I know one family in particular, the Edwards Family, their son and daughter would go into Valdez and board

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out and go to school. And Ricky just never showed an interest in doing that. We were glad so Rick and I just plowed through the homeschool and stuff. We just -- way over our head sometimes, but --

KAREN BREWSTER: What I was thinking Rick changing diapers and having all that laundry. You didn't probably have electricity or running water.

BONNIE KENYON: No, we didn't. We didn't. Now Ricky, of course, was well past the diaper thing by the time he come up here.

KAREN BREWSTER: He was a little older?

BONNIE KENYON: Yes, right, but washing clothes for instance five gallon buckets. We'd have to haul water, especially in the winter from a winter -- what was we call a winter creek that ran all winter, but we had to take our little orange plastic sleds and with buckets and, you know, containers to bring -- haul water back. And I washed, you know, clothes by hand in five gallon buckets. Put them out on the line. They froze dry, you know, and then you bring in a piece at a time. Hang them up on the landing and they would dry and, you know, it was, yeah, it wasn't easy, but you just did it.

KAREN BREWSTER: Yeah and now the Bed and Breakfast business here.

BONNIE KENYON: Uh-huh.

KAREN BREWSTER: Remind me the name is?

BONNIE KENYON: Is Aspen Meadows B&B. That we had changed it from the Wrangell-St. Elias News B&B. We kind of did that to go along with the paper. I don't know and then eventually we changed it to Aspen Meadows B&B.

KAREN BREWSTER: And when did you start that?

BONNIE KENYON: I think we started that in '92. The newspaper for some reason we just got going '92, but the little paper started up. We started our Visitor's Guide. We did a little small Visitor's Guide that carried all the ads from a lot of our local businesses and we started doing that. That was an annual project up until let's see 2014 was our last one that we did together. And so we started that up and then we had that little log cabin that we had actually built from logs off of this property to give Rick's parents a place to stay when they come up for the summer. And so we decided, well, boy, the tourists are starting to come in, we ought to just make that a little bed and breakfast cabin, add to our little business. And so it worked and we'd get -- actually get, you know, people that would stay and wow, this is pretty good. And eventually added another cabin and then the third cabin and bought a little travel trailer from a neighbor who was going to take it out and sell it in Valdez. And another neighbor said well, Bonnie, why don't you buy that for your mom, you know. Then she could -- she wouldn't have to go to the outhouse and she could have a little place. So we did and I said well, I didn't want a trailer. I really, you know, a cabin is one thing, but not a trailer. Well, they said how about if we side it with wood and then it would look like a cabin. I said, well, then okay, maybe I would do that. So that was our fourth cabin, so and so that started in 1992, slowly.

KAREN BREWSTER: It made it sound like it fits into the pattern here that to make a go of it here you kind of have to do a bunch of different things.

BONNIE KENYON: We did and I notice that other people began to do it too. You just find a niche. There was something missing here that should be can we do it.

KAREN BREWSTER: Right. I mean you -- Rick didn't have a regular job out here he got paid for did he?

BONNIE KENYON: Well, now in 1983, Karen, we -- the fall of 1983 we were approached I think it was by our mail pilot Lynn Ellis at the time, you know, in March -- early March, 1983 the -- we had the tragedy of the killings in town. And two of the people that were killed were the Hedland's and they were the ones that took in, did the weather -- did some weather service stuff, took in mail. We had their little house became our kind of our meeting place on mail days. But they did weather observations for NOAA. So it -- that happened in May -- March and that job came to an end. There was no one to do weather, but they -- NOAA was looking for somebody that lived here year round that was settled in that they could invest for equipment and stuff to take up the weather observations. So we were asked would you be interested, you guys are here all the time. There would be a -- it would be a paid position and we thought, wow, year round, a paid position. So anyways we said, yeah, we would do that. So they moved the equipment over here and in October 1983, we took the weather job and we did that up until fall of 2014 when I stopped.

KAREN BREWSTER: And that was enough to sustain your family?

BONNIE KENYON: It helped a lot, Karen, and then that along with Rick going out on occasion to Valdez to work on airplanes. For a short while he did mechanic work for our local pilots and he would find work like that. He did some fish spotting, got his pilot's license and did some fish spotting.

KAREN BREWSTER: Oh, in Prince William Sound.

BONNIE KENYON: Prince William Sound, did some of that and so then we added the little B&B and added to that, the newspaper. We took on selling commercial propane here. Crowley out of Glennallen brought tanks out and so we did -- we became the propane dealer. So that was just something. Not one would have totally supported us, but altogether they added up to, you know, where we could make a living out here.

KAREN BREWSTER: All right. Well, this has been great to talk to you. Is there anything else you'd like to say about living out here and what is so special about McCarthy?

BONNIE KENYON: I don't know. I mean I compare it to Florida sometimes now where I go in the winter and there is just such a feeling of freedom here. I don't know there is -- I just really enjoy Alaska. McCarthy is such a beautiful place. I like the difference -- the difference in the people, the lifestyle. Some people are living almost like we used to live and now we have been able to over the years upgrade to where I even have running water, the cabin, and washing machine, you know wow. A generator and lights and, you know, and things, so, but it has been wonderful going from little or nothing to building on a life. And I like seeing that. I see that in people out here.

KAREN BREWSTER: Big changes?

BONNIE KENYON: It is.

KAREN BREWSTER: Since you came?

BONNIE KENYON: It is.

KAREN BREWSTER: Yeah, and any regrets about picking up and leaving Florida and coming here that --

BONNIE KENYON: Not at all. Not one bit.

KAREN BREWSTER: It has been a fulfilling --

BONNIE KENYON: It has.

KAREN BREWSTER: Period?

BONNIE KENYON: It sure has.

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KAREN BREWSTER: And you feel like it was the right, God gave you the right message?

BONNIE KENYON: Yes. Yes. We did not miss it at all.

KAREN BREWSTER: Right. Well, thank you very much. I really appreciate your time. This has been great.

BONNIE KENYON: Thank you, Karen.

KAREN BREWSTER: All right.