

INTERVIEW OF GARY GREEN
INTERVIEWER IS KAREN BREWSTER
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IN MC CARTHY, ALASKA
PART 1

KAREN BREWSTER: And today is September 4, 2016 and I am here in McCarthy with Gary Green for Wrangell-St. Elias Project. Gary, thank you.

GARY GREEN: Yeah, you welcome.

KAREN BREWSTER: As a pilot on Labor Day weekend I am honored that you were able to find a little window of time.

GARY GREEN: Well, I will go flying when we get done.

KAREN BREWSTER: Well, on a beautiful Labor Day weekend on top of it, so. We are in this cabin here at the Wrangell Mountain Center that I can't say the name of.

GARY GREEN: Porphyry Place.

KAREN BREWSTER: Porphyry Place, great, thank you. So just to get us started. People who don't know you, you can tell me a little bit about your background, where you were born, growing up, where you come from.

GARY GREEN: I was born in Kansas and when Alaska became a state my family moved. We drove up the Alcan to Anchorage. So I went through my schooling years in Anchorage and as soon as I finished high school or within a year or two I moved to the Wrangell Mountains just for a summer of prospecting for gold. The price of gold had just been deregulated and it went from \$35 an ounce up to like 70 which was phenomenal and I decided to spend the summer looking for gold.

KAREN BREWSTER: And what did your parents do that they brought you from Kansas to Anchorage?

GARY GREEN: That is quite a long story. I ended up coming up to Alaska with my dad and my dad ended up working in the oilfield or petroleum industry. We did maintenance installation of service station equipment and installed field tanks and stuff like that.

KAREN BREWSTER: Okay. So why did you come to the Wrangell's for gold prospecting and what year was it?

GARY GREEN: In 1973 is when I came out here, early '73 and I had already gone through my schooling, grade school and high school years in Anchorage and I loved the mountains and the Wrangell Mountains always intrigued me and we learned a bit about the Wrangell's, the towns of Kennicott and McCarthy in high school. It is just part of Alaska history, but mostly I was into any outdoor activity that involved I mean hunting, fishing, trapping and a goal of mine was probably to go on a pack train hunting trip in the Wrangell Mountains of Alaska. And so when I got the opportunity to go prospecting, the Wrangell's just drew me right in.

KAREN BREWSTER: Uh-huh. And did you come prospecting by yourself or there was somebody you were with?

GARY GREEN: I had a partner. We built our own barely functional suction dredge and we brought out fuel and we snowmobiled out. There was no road to McCarthy. It was a ghost town and we freighted in a bunch of supplies in the winter by snowmobile and that was quite a trip, a 1965 Polaris snowmobile and then stashed our stuff at May Creek and left

and got flown back in by Fred Seldenrich (phonetic) in May. The gear was all there and then we started prospecting the known gold mining areas which was around May Creek, Chititu and Dan Creek. And my partner became disinterested in it within I would say a month and a half and he pulled out and I had the whole grubstake and everything and I was having a great time cause the country was just full of old mining artifacts, buildings, the old mine workings and everything was one hundred percent abandoned. There was nothing going on and so I had the whole country to myself and it was just right what I needed.

KAREN BREWSTER: Uh-huh. And can you tell me the name of that partner?

GARY GREEN: Clyde Holbrook was my partner.

KAREN BREWSTER: Okay.

GARY GREEN: And he died just about three years ago and he stayed active in gold mining, but he went back to the highway system. Moved to Moose Pass or Cooper Landing and he did prospecting around there for the rest of his life.

KAREN BREWSTER: And so how long did you stay out at May Creek then, just for that summer or?

GARY GREEN: No, I'm still here.

KAREN BREWSTER: Well, I know, but out there we are going to move to, you know.

GARY GREEN: Well, I stayed in the southern half of the Nizina Valley for that summer and prospected all the creeks around there and in doing that I met a hunting guide that was out on a bear hunt that spring and we bumped into each other two or three times. So he ended up offering me a guiding job for him in the fall for sheep season, sheep and goat. And so I stayed in May Creek for the summer, although I hiked back to McCarthy two or three times for the fourth of July which was at least ten of us were celebrating.

KAREN BREWSTER: I was going to say, 1973 how many folks were around here?

GARY GREEN: Well, there was only six people living in McCarthy when I moved here and in the summer though a few old timers still came back like Archie Poleen, Henry Schultz, Martin Radovan was around.

KAREN BREWSTER: Jim Edwards was here.

GARY GREEN: Jim Edwards was here. He lived in Chitina for a year about 1973 cause he was moving out of the town of McCarthy to his homestead only he wasn't set up over there and he lived in Chitina one year one winter. In town was Winnie and Barbara Darko. They owned the McCarthy Lodge. Les and Flo Hegland, Gordon and Freda Burdick and myself. And then the old timers that came back for just the summer they always left in the winters. They were smarter than us younger ones.

KAREN BREWSTER: So who was that hunting guide that you started working for?

GARY GREEN: The first guide was Jim Greenly and he was only out here for a season and a half, but we had a lot of fun running around the local country sheep, goat hunting and bear.

KAREN BREWSTER: So when you were at May Creek you said you hiked into McCarthy. How else did you get around out there?

GARY GREEN: I was -- I did everything totally on foot, but the old roads and trails were in pretty good shape back then. There were bridges across every river, stream that counted. The Nizina River, the bridge was still intact so I could cross the whole Nizina on the bridge. The road -- so it was only -- it was a 20 mile walk without any real obstacles

along the way and yeah, I did that several times, but I was living over there. Whenever I'd get to McCarthy I would get roped into -- it wasn't hard, into any of the activities that were around here. Gordon Burdick was building a road and doing some prospecting up McCarthy Creek and I helped with all those activities and that was a great deal of fun because we were going underground in the Green Butte Mine and sacking up ore from the old tailing piles and hauling it out.

KAREN BREWSTER: And were any of you successful in your prospecting?

GARY GREEN: I think I was very successful. I was probably making wages, but working for myself. I was getting around a quarter ounce a day if I worked at it and I wasn't killing myself. I would build a campfire along the edge of the creek, put the coffee pot on. If I dug long enough to get tired, I'd lay down and read a Louis L'Amour book and then go back to work. And every now and then you'd hit a little pocket of gold. I remember my very best occasion there was getting about three-quarters of an ounce in 20 minutes. It was just a few shovelfuls, but then the rest of the time you worked day after day, eight hours a day and get a quarter ounce. But I saved up enough to buy my first airplane.

KAREN BREWSTER: And what kind of equipment were you using, sluicing or?

GARY GREEN: Well, I freighted in a sluice box which I said was barely functional. It did work after a fashion, but I didn't consider it very successful and I was prospecting moving around. Moving this equipment around with me wasn't fun. So it was pick and shovel and sluice box. And I would build a sluice box wherever I went because everywhere that was a decent spot to prospect there would already have been a mining camp relatively nearby and there were boards laying around. I'd pack -- I came out with a pick and shovel as part of my gear. I soon stopped packing that around because anywhere I went that was worth going there was already a pick leaning up against the riverbank and a shovel or many shovels around. And so I used that equipment and built a sluice box whenever I needed one.

KAREN BREWSTER: Cool. And now that going up to that Green Butte Mine hauling all that ore did anything come out of any of that old ore?

GARY GREEN: What we sacked up in gunnysacks or mine ore bags they were set up to be about 70 pound bags of ore and we would load up an old Dodge Power Wagon with sacks of ore and haul them out. Of course, none of it mine and so I never benefitted. I was doing it for fun. I think Gordon gave me a ten dollar bill every now and then, but the bags of ore I think at that time chalcocite would have been bringing about \$1,100 a ton and we were definitely hauling a few tons of it. It was work, but we were doing it.

KAREN BREWSTER: So he managed to make some money off that?

GARY GREEN: It was enough to keep going.

KAREN BREWSTER: Right.

GARY GREEN: Yeah.

KAREN BREWSTER: Right. Okay, well so you mentioned your first airplane so tell me about getting into flying.

GARY GREEN: Well running around this country I said there is bridges on all the trails, but that didn't help you get everywhere you wanted to go and I considered the most dangerous part of the Wrangell Mountains was wading rivers because trying to keep from being swept away in a glacial torrent was challenging. And I decided to have an airplane to cross the rivers with would be a real benefit and so the second year I was here I went to

work for another hunting guide which was Howard Knutson. And we did really well together and he actually bought me my first airplane and then I paid him back in gold. And it was an old J4 1941. It cost \$3,950 and it was a great old airplane and I could hop around the country to the airstrips and get across the rivers and that probably led to my -- all my flying activities because there was no other airplanes based. Jim Edwards had a small plane that wasn't very capable, but I was based in McCarthy with mine. He moved to his homestead and having an airplane here every now and then one of the locals would need to go somewhere and I had the only airplane in McCarthy. So I enjoyed the flying and so I flew some people around and I also got to go out prospecting wherever I wanted and I broadened my horizons with the plane.

KAREN BREWSTER: And now did Howard teach you how to fly? He was a pilot as well, right?

GARY GREEN: Howard is an excellent pilot and he had several airplanes and that is why he bought me an airplane because if I learned to fly good enough then he would have me fly in his airplanes for the hunting seasons. He didn't teach me how to fly, but the year or two getting started with him I rode in the back seat of his Super Cub all over the place and that is good training. Just riding with him and learning what constitutes an airstrip or a suitable place to land and how to load an airplane. So I learned how to fly from him, but he didn't teach me how.

KAREN BREWSTER: Because you have to get a pilot's license. You have to pass an exam.

GARY GREEN: Oh, yeah. After I got my airplane well before he bought it for me I did go to Anchorage and I soloed. I flew nine hours, soloed an airplane, quit my training and then Howard bought me an airplane and I continued to learn after that.

KAREN BREWSTER: Right and certainly learning the area as you say that is the trick.

GARY GREEN: Yeah. Learning the area. I mean just the Wrangell Mountains are very flying oriented because nowadays all the old roads, the old bridges, the trails are overgrown, the bridges are gone and the only way to get around this country really is with an airplane. Nowadays people have pack rafts which changed the -- put a whole new dimension on getting around the wilderness because they could fly out somewhere and raft back or if they come to a big river they can raft across it. Before we just come to the big river and I'm not crossing that.

KAREN BREWSTER: Right. Right. What are some of the challenges of flying around here in terms of, you know, the way the air currents and the mountains? Is it a difficult place to fly?

GARY GREEN: It's the -- I consider mountain flying easier than flat land flying as far as we got GPS's now. We didn't used to. You would navigate by the terrain and in the mountains you are either going up or down a valley. We seldom go over the mountains here because they are 16,000 foot tall. But the Wrangell Mountains are pretty decent flying. Wind currents are not bad on the whole. We have our windstorms, but in general the flying is quite good. There is a few mountain passes around that are notorious for turbulence, but by the time you get to them you have felt out the air currents. It is I think the flying here is pretty good.

KAREN BREWSTER: Which were some of those passes?

GARY GREEN: Skolai Pass is the -- Chitistone and Skolai are the main pass between the north side and the south side of the Wrangell Mountains and so if there is any flow of air

between the north and the south side it goes through the pass and the pass is kind of east west. The flow of air is kind of tries to be north south and it is just -- it is a turbulent region. Any time there is any weather it can be turbulent up there.

KAREN BREWSTER: Well and I would think the challenges too weather moves in and out of here quickly and the clouds come down and then all of a sudden you can't see where you're going.

GARY GREEN: That's true, but, you know, that's really true almost everywhere. No matter where people come from they say well, if you don't like the weather, wait a few minutes it will change. The Wrangell Mountains are the same way, but what you can count on for the most part is we have big river valleys here and mostly the wind will flow up or down the river valley so you know which way it blows and, of course, river valleys are our prime landing spots. So when you land in a river valley, you are either landing up or down river for the most part and that means you are able to land into the wind. It is seldom that you have to land crosswise to the valley.

KAREN BREWSTER: And that is where it starts to get dangerous is the crosswinds?

GARY GREEN: Yeah, crosswinds and stuff and so if you are landing on ridgetops or mountain passes, you can find squirrely wind conditions and that is much more dangerous than landing down low where you can predict which way the wind is blowing.

KAREN BREWSTER: So do you do some of that landing up on the ridgetops and the glaciers and things?

GARY GREEN: Oh, yeah. I have been flying here for 40, better than 40 years and I think I have done a little bit of everything, but as far as the country I really like, I actually like being down in timbered country. I consider that friendly country whereas if you are up high it is beautiful, spectacular and on nice days it is a great place to be, but if the weather sets in, you're up in the elements. If you are down in the lowlands and timber country, I have -- my method of camping or my nostalgic feelings for prospecting is being able to build a campfire whenever you wanted and you can't do that in alpine terrain cause there is nothing to burn.

KAREN BREWSTER: Right and it is my understanding that Jack Wilson wasn't he sort of one of the pioneers on glacier flying around here?

GARY GREEN: He -- there is quite a few glacier pilots in Alaska, but Jack Wilson was -- did a lot of mountaineering flying in the Wrangell's. Bob Reeves started before he did and, of course, Don Sheldon was busy in the Wrangell's but mostly in the Alaska Range and Talkeetna's. But Jack did a lot of mountaineering stuff.

KAREN BREWSTER: Yeah, he did a lot of landing. The other ones maybe did flying and there is a difference right?

GARY GREEN: No, all those that I mentioned did a lot of glacier landings and did mountaineering -- flying mountaineering groups and stuff. They were probably the big names at the time and since then there has been many more.

KAREN BREWSTER: Did you learn anything from Jack?

GARY GREEN: I didn't. I have only flown with Jack a time or two because I was associated with Howard Knutson. They were rivals. They were actually friendly rivals in their latter years. I think in the early year's maybe not so much, but Howard did glacier flights too, but just not a lot of them. But my flying with Jack Wilson was just all in the lowlands, just local runs from airstrip to airstrip in the Chitina and Nizina Valleys.

KAREN BREWSTER: So in those early years the guides were very competitive with each other?

GARY GREEN: Guides and pilots were both somewhat territorial or maybe very territorial. They didn't like each other operating in their areas and I think everybody mellows out as they get older and they realize, you know, we all did it, we're still here and it doesn't matter if somebody else uses the country too.

KAREN BREWSTER: But that was before they had their exclusive use areas, right?

GARY GREEN: Well guides developed -- I mean actually it was before my time, but the CAA or CAB designated areas for air taxi operators and all that, but by the time I moved out here it was about when air taxis were deregulated in that manner and you could fly anywhere and before that though there was regulations involving keeping air services in certain areas and guides exclusive use areas started in I think about '76 because I was instrumental in helping draw lines for the boundaries of guide areas and after a few years though that was determined to be unconstitutional and they did away with that. In the National Parks they still have a limited entry or commercial use authorization and exclusive areas for guiding, but the rest of the state does not.

KAREN BREWSTER: Oh, okay. So, yes, so they even before that exclusive use area the guides still kind of had the places they went and were protected.

GARY GREEN: Right. I think if a guide built an airstrip and set up a camp I mean that's your area or you traditionally use an area and another guide moving in wasn't welcomed. I worked with Howard Knutson who always had a great attitude. I am impressed with he felt everybody is entitled to use the country and he was helpful and all that. I have been around other guides who tried to chase you out of their areas and I don't respect that because it is not right. It is -- none of us own this country. We have the right to use it and if you love it and use it properly you were able to. The next guy should be able to also.

KAREN BREWSTER: Yeah, I was wondering if there ever was cooperation between the guides. Did they help each other out?

GARY GREEN: Well, there is guides that were friends with other and certainly and then there is a Alaska Professional Hunters Association which promoted professionalism amongst guides and so the intent was always good, but there is always those that it is competition and they don't want competition.

KAREN BREWSTER: Right. And I would think maybe if there was some sort of emergency situation, search and rescue or something, they would have helped each other?

GARY GREEN: I am certain that everybody would help out in an emergency situation.

KAREN BREWSTER: I don't know if there were any instances like that.

GARY GREEN: I can't really think of right offhand, but any time that someone was in desperate need of help, I think anybody that was able would come help as best they could.

KAREN BREWSTER: As an air taxi have you ever had to do anything like that?

GARY GREEN: Well, I participated in quite a few searches and found missing airplanes and you are always ready to go and especially if any pilot disappears or something in your area I mean everybody is on board. There is volunteers to -- the more eyes you have in an airplane when you're searching is better. So then people are looking in every direction at once and everybody tries to help.

KAREN BREWSTER: Right. So when did you officially start your own -- it is McCarthy Air Service?

GARY GREEN: McCarthy Air started officially in 1988. I flew for another air taxi here in the 70's, in the late 70's, Copper Valley Stagelines -- Copper Country Stagelines. I take it back. We had a yellow 206 with Copper Country Stagelines painted across the side and I called it the 300 horsepower canary. But I have flown commercially since the late 70's and I have been very active here since that time.

KAREN BREWSTER: And did you continue prospecting once you sort of got into the guiding and flying?

GARY GREEN: I did up until the early 80's I think I was fairly active in prospecting and then it became obvious I could make more money if I paid attention to flying than looking for gold. I think they were both fun at the time and I still go back and prospect now and then, but it is only when I have free time. It is not how -- it is not my get rich quick scheme. I don't think I have gold fever anymore because it never happens.

KAREN BREWSTER: I don't know that you ever get rid of it.

GARY GREEN: Not totally. You can always hope, but I mean I spent enough years hoping for the big strike and it just trickles in. It averages out to where it is a lot of work for what you get and it seems like more work all the time.

KAREN BREWSTER: Well, and I know once the Park was established here in 1980 things changed. Did it affect your mining or the prospecting?

GARY GREEN: It didn't affect mine because I was a pick and shovel operator. I think technically now you are not -- it is vague on how the rules read, but I think you are supposed to dig with your gold pan or fill it with a tablespoon. Pick and shovel work I am not sure about, but it affected big mining operation or equipment use more than pick and shovel operators.

KAREN BREWSTER: Yeah, people who had official claims?

GARY GREEN: Yeah, and used equipment. And in all my years of mining, like I say, I brought a suction dredge out the first year, but I abandoned it right away and I became just pick and shovel.

KAREN BREWSTER: Okay. Can you talk a little bit about the lifestyle you led? You know, you came over -- when did you move into McCarthy permanently?

GARY GREEN: Well, I came to the Wrangell's in March '73 and I spent the first two or three summers either prospecting or hanging out in McCarthy with the old timers that were then cause they were fun. I wintered the first two winters in Strelna and Chitina. I bounced -- because neither one -- I didn't own a place either one. I stayed in a cabin that we built at Nelson Lake or Sculpin Lake and any of the old buildings in Chitina, various ones and the hotel after it was shut down. I lived in that for a little bit. I built my first cabin in McCarthy in March '75 and then winter, summers were here after that.

KAREN BREWSTER: So even out at Strelna and Chitina, the whole valley, what kind of a lifestyle did you lead?

GARY GREEN: I spent the winters doing -- when I was out there I did a little bit of trapping, not a lot. I did more of that once I got established here. But it was just a -- it was the winters that I spent there and it was more or less just existing which was fun cause it was a novelty. We had the coldest temperatures I have seen in the Wrangell's was one of the winters I was at Strelna and we hit 66 below and Chitina hit 60 below two or three times

in those years. And dressing up and I would walk from Strelna to Chitina to check the mail and it was 15 miles each way, but I would usually then I would camp out in some cabin in Chitina for a day or two before I'd walk back to Strelna. And I remember walking that distance. I mean we didn't have anything else really to do so it was an okay walk, but dropping down in the Copper River when it is 50 or 60 below and there is a flow of air in the river valley you could definitely get frostbite crossing the Copper River Bridge was in at the time and crossing that was the coldest part of the walk.

KAREN BREWSTER: But you walked you didn't ski?

GARY GREEN: No, I walked in. I did a lot of skiing around this country starting about 1975 after I built my cabin.

KAREN BREWSTER: So was it snowshoe walking or was the road --

GARY GREEN: No, there is a snowmobile trail. It was -- cause there was a trapper living at Lowsie (phonetic), two Lowsie brothers were living at Long Lake which is 40 miles in. They would come and go to Chitina now and then and then they would run their traplines in the Long Lake vicinity. So there was always some sort of a snowmachine trail and we would just walk -- it would be hard enough to walk on.

KAREN BREWSTER: And so were you collecting firewood and you said you did some trapping?

GARY GREEN: Did some trapping, collecting firewood and I actually ran a saloon in Chitina off and on during that time, but a bunch of us did. It was kind of a loose arrangement, but we'd hang out in Chitina and drink at the saloon and shoot, I don't know, the winters went by and I think we had enough activities to keep us busy. The Chief of the Chitina Indians was around at that time too, Paddy King. We would have him out to our cabin at Strelna now and then and that was always entertaining cause he was a big Indian and he would -- when he would get drunk he would chant old Indian chants. And he was a character, but he fell in -- he fell in Town Lake while he was drunk walking on the shore and drown in I think '74. So that was the last of Paddy King.

KAREN BREWSTER: So it sounds like you get through the winter with a lot of drinking, drinking buddies?

GARY GREEN: Well, I didn't -- I mean I didn't have any money so I didn't drink that much, but it was part of the activities.

KAREN BREWSTER: It is part of the lifestyle?

GARY GREEN: And we had a local -- the young fellows I was living with all played instruments. I didn't. I am not musically inclined so they made a washtub bass for me to play with them and we'd play at Strelna or in Chitina, but it didn't take them too long -- they never asked me to play anymore.

KAREN BREWSTER: But that was a good entertainment activity, you know.

GARY GREEN: Yeah. I mean one of them played banjo, one played guitar and then harmonica and a juice harp and they were all music fans. We had -- the Beatles were not very far from the peak of their popularity in those days and so and they were all Beatles fans too. Blue grass and Beatles, I don't know how that mix came together, but different people, different music.

KAREN BREWSTER: Right. But so you weren't living by yourself then?

GARY GREEN: No, I didn't live not in Chitina. I did when I would camp out in a cabin in Chitina, but at Strelna, Mark Kinsir (phonetic) built a cabin out of the old telegraph poles

along the railroad route and I got there the first winter he spent in it. The cabin was basically done. It wasn't finished, but it was up and he asked me if I wanted to winter with him there and there was another fellow from Texas that was there, but he lasted half the winter and then he went back to Texas. And it was an entertaining winter and I have fond memories that we had to chop holes through the lake ice, you know, to get our water and that was the 60 below winter. So our hole through the ice was -- we were chopping down like five feet through the ice. And we'd build a snow cave around or an igloo around it to keep it from freezing. And cooking took -- we didn't have anything easy to eat. It was beans and rice and we were getting rabbits. We were snaring rabbits and stuff. So cooking took quite a bit of time.

KAREN BREWSTER: No moose hunting.

GARY GREEN: We didn't have any moose. I think we wished we had, but.

KAREN BREWSTER: And was the cooking on a wood stove?

GARY GREEN: Yeah. We had a 100 gallon barrel stove and we cooked on it which it also took that to heat the cabin in those cold days that 100 gallon barrel stove would be hot enough to do most all our cooking.

KAREN BREWSTER: And none of that scared you off? You still -- you ended up settling here.

GARY GREEN: I was 22 years old then and that didn't scare me. It was just part of the adventure. I mean it was and during that time too I started logging. I remember now I borrowed a dog team. I didn't borrow it, somebody asked me to take care of their dogs and cabin at Moose Lake in late '74 and early '75. And so there was a 10 x 10 log cabin at Moose Lake and I lived there with a small dog team. I think like five dogs and I started cutting the old fire killed trees which were -- it was a black spruce forest so the poles were only five, eight inches in diameter and I cut a bunch of them and hauled them out with the dog team and that is what I built my first cabin with. And I did that those winters too, later in the winter when the days were getting longer and the snow was deep. I forget where I started that story, but I was --

KAREN BREWSTER: More things I guess.

GARY GREEN: It was just more activities. There is plenty to getting firewood, getting logs or snaring rabbits and cooking. It was just -- the winter went by and it was fun.

KAREN BREWSTER: And we were talking about that you didn't get scared off and you decided to stay.

GARY GREEN: Right. The adventure to me of living in a little bit of an old-time Alaska like that cabin I stayed in at Moose Lake was built by Billy Buck, one of the Alaskan Scouts from World War II and that is what I patterned the cabin that I built with those logs. His were built out of the same timbers. That fire was in 1947. And it was seasoned poles and anyway the cabin was old and rustic and I was building along the same lines. And there was enough materials out here to salvage like I didn't have to go to a hardware store and buy hinges or buy spikes because McCarthy had had a fire in the -- 1940 I think it was and half the town burned down. You could still run around and find all kinds of bent spikes. I went and pounded them straight and you had -- and there was hinges. There was windows kicking around and so I was able to build my cabin with materials I scrounged or logged and so it didn't cost anything and I was ending up with maybe preserving part of Alaska's history in my newer cabin.

KAREN BREWSTER: So that cabin with those spruce poles that was here in McCarthy?

GARY GREEN: I built it here in McCarthy pretty much in town McCarthy. I moved it out to my home spot now about half mile out of town.

KAREN BREWSTER: Now growing up in Kansas did you grow up in a rural setting and you learned how to do this stuff and where did all those interests come from?

GARY GREEN: I did grow up on a farm and it was pretty rustic. We were in the poorer part of Kansas, but I was so young I don't think I learned to do anything then. I left there when we were -- when I was five or six. And I remember the farm really well and I liked farm life, but I was not really old enough to do any chores or learn.

KAREN BREWSTER: And then living in Anchorage, did you go hunting and camping and stuff with your family and your dad?

GARY GREEN: Yeah, we went camping and fishing. I did a little bit of hunting with my dad, but I don't remember us ever being successful, but I enjoyed the hunting trips. And we'd pick berries, made jams and jellies and anything that had to do with being outdoors and camping was the life that it attracted me and so when we weren't hunting, my dad's 30.06 rifle was standing in the closet and all that. I bought equipment and started reloading and started shooting it all the time just for -- just to carry it around and shoot it and it was just being out in the woods or the mountains was the life that attract -- appealed to me.

KAREN BREWSTER: What I was going to ask you why did you decide to stay and settle here in McCarthy?

GARY GREEN: I only came out for that first summer because I worked for my dad in Anchorage with this service station maintenance and installation and it was a grease monkey job which I actually was a decent mechanic, but I am not sure that I liked being greasy all the time. When I took that one summer off to go prospecting it was just because I spent all the money I made in Anchorage getting out of town on the weekends, run around the hills. I decided to just spend the summer doing that and it agreed with me so I never left. It just -- it was the life for me and living out here back then the sense of discovery and exploring this country, the whole Wrangell's were abandoned and yet it had such a rich history in mining that I have yet to visit all the cabins and mining spots that I know of in the Wrangell's. I thought I would probably make it to all of them and I am beginning to wonder anymore because some of them, the ones that I haven't made it to are quite remote and hard to get to and I have not had enough time, but it is just -- is great fun me.

KAREN BREWSTER: Well, you mentioned airstrips and landing on all these airstrips. Why are there all these airstrips around the Wrangell's and how did they get there?

GARY GREEN: Most of the airstrips I would say started with guides and hunting and most mines had an airstrip too if they had a suitable place to put an airstrip. That was always questionable because some valleys just you couldn't build an airstrip. But hunting guides put strips all over the country to get into good game country and in more recent years there has been a few more new strips and they are more recreational oriented because people want to get in the backcountry. But there was plenty of airstrips around the Wrangell's to start with, plus flying out here is bush flying. You're flying Super Cubs or tail wheel Cessna's that are fairly capable and you could fly around and just pick out landing spots. And if there is a reason to go there and you land there again, pretty soon it just turns into an airstrip. It is not something that you manufacture. It is just something that it just develops itself with use.

KAREN BREWSTER: So you're landing on gravel bars and tundra spots and things like that?

GARY GREEN: Mountain passes, tundra, gravel bars. You can land on the glacier ice and all that, but again I have found less need to keep going back to some of those places because it is hard to build a campfire on a glacier.

KAREN BREWSTER: Right, but airplanes started to be used around here when?

GARY GREEN: Well, I think in the very early days the Wrangell's didn't have as much flying history as some of Alaska just because there was a railroad supplying the southern half of the Wrangell's and they built roads from McCarthy to various mine sites around here. We definitely had our flying, but it was just a little bit less necessary than in western Alaska where there was no roads and no railroads. And but anyway --

KAREN BREWSTER: Cause I think of like for guiding I would think like the 60's is when airplanes started to become more dominant?

GARY GREEN: Right. So in -- it was probably in the 50's Mudhole Smith and Cordova Airlines supplied this area, 30's, 40's, 50's, but I think guiding really did take off in the 50's and in the 60's and Jack Wilson was here during that time, Howard Knutson and a few other guides that didn't live in this country but that used it from Anchorage or wherever they were at. And so it became -- well, when I first came out here there was no road to McCarthy. This place was quiet. If any airplane flew over, all six of us in town would look up and say who's that or if you don't recognize him, run up to the airstrip to see who it is. Nowadays you don't do that. You don't even look up. But even during those days when you did all look up when hunting season came around then all of a sudden there was air traffic and activity for a six week period. The sheep hunting season there would be planes coming and going to McCarthy fairly regular and all over the Wrangell's.

KAREN BREWSTER: Yeah, I was going to ask you when kind of sport hunting started to become more popular from the McCarthy side. I know the Nabesna side with Conkle's and Ellis' and stuff were doing a lot of that in the 50's.

GARY GREEN: In the 50's.

KAREN BREWSTER: But I don't know about this side.

GARY GREEN: This side the same. The 50's is when it really got going. I mean there might have been a little bit of it before that, but it wasn't significant, but in the 50's and especially by the 50's hunting and Dall sheep were becoming a premier trophy animal. And the airstrips when I started using them in the mid-70's personally, but I was flying in and out of them with Howard Knutson then -- '74, I knew the history of a lot of the airstrips. He said well I built this one in '57. Jack Wilson built that one in '57 and so I mean Hubert's was Jack Wilson's strip. The Skolai strip that we use today Howard Knutson built. Jack Wilson had one on the other side of the valley but it went away. Nobody used it after Howard developed his. We had strips up the Kotsina Valley that Howard told me the years he put those in. And anyway the strips around the country you knew the creator of and they were mostly sheep hunting guides.

KAREN BREWSTER: Right, cool. And now you had mentioned with your guiding that you guided for Howard in other parts of Alaska, right?

GARY GREEN: We did our sheep hunting mostly in the Wrangell's and if it was brown bear hunting, we went to the Alaska Peninsula or down the Copper towards Cordova and in the mid-70's Howard thought the Wrangell's were a little bit crowded and so we moved

out operation to the eastern Arctic in the Gates of the Arctic. Or not Gates of the Arctic, the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge and we established a hunting camp up there that we used for 15 years that I participated in and then I quit. Howard stayed on after that. But we had a new piece of country to ourselves for quite a few years and now it is popular up there too.

KAREN BREWSTER: And what were you hunting up there?

GARY GREEN: We were predominantly after sheep, but we would do caribou and moose also and we actually hunted wolves too.

KAREN BREWSTER: And where in the Refuge was it?

GARY GREEN: We had -- this was right at the same time guide areas were established. We had the whole eastern half of the Refuge. The Kongakut, the Sheenjok, Coleen, Ekalgrak (phonetic).

KAREN BREWSTER: Beautiful country.

GARY GREEN: There is a lot of great country because it was pristine. We had it to ourselves and just, yeah, very nice.

KAREN BREWSTER: Well, I find it interesting how the guiding businesses didn't -- they went to various places around Alaska. I think of a guide you learn your area, you know your area.

GARY GREEN: Well, guides did spread out and they were given three areas each when it became guide area, you could, different regions and that is because I mean you might have a sheep hunting spot. There is no brown bear in our sheep hunting spots. There is griz -- mountain grizzly and stuff, but if you wanted brown bear you had to have a coastal spot. Prior to that if you wanted marine mammals, you'd have to have something on the coast.

KAREN BREWSTER: Right, if you were a polar bear hunter.

GARY GREEN: Right, but that had gone away in '71 I think for the Marine Mammals Act.

KAREN BREWSTER: Right. So you were here before there was a National Park established?

GARY GREEN: Uh-huh.

KAREN BREWSTER: Can you talk about when the Park came in and what that meant to you, good and bad?

GARY GREEN: Well, mostly I'd have to say the Park Service has affected the Wrangell Mountains in a negative manner in that I'm not a big promotor and a National Park just labeling it that and making a map of the state with different colored regions saying National Park is a big promotion in itself. It works for me when I travel somewhere, but if you promote something enough it gets overused and you need to put in place more regulations because and so you end up with less freedoms. And this country I think it appealed to me so much when I first got here because we were totally free. You didn't get permission to do anything. I mean we abided by hunting seasons and regulations, but the country was pretty much wide open and if you wanted to cut down a tree, you didn't need a permit. If you wanted to go mining, you didn't need a permit, just whatever you wanted to do. And now we have more regulations being implemented all the time and even when it was first -- when we were being sold on the ANILCA provisions and then all the land acts, it was promoted that we -- continuation of existing lifestyles would be allowed and that was for many years, but it seems to be fading now. And I think I liked less people and less regulation. It was a better quality of life for me, but I am attracted to ghost

towns. If I take a road trip in the United States, if there are any ghost towns that are off the grid I'm still -- that's kind of where I want to go because I am not looking to be in big crowded environments. And the Park promotion and development of the area has just increased people traffic.

KAREN BREWSTER: Yeah, I was going to say how do you feel about McCarthy in the summer?

GARY GREEN: You know, there is good and bad because I'm in business. I have a flying service and there is lots of people to fly. There is more now than ever, but the quality of life and the quiet -- I mean it used to be when I'd be at home if there was any noise that you could hear I was making it myself. And I mean I ran chainsaws. I'd shoot my gun. I fly airplanes, but when I stop doing all those things then it was quiet and I'm sure people that live all over the region because we're spread out enough would have the same experiences. And now McCarthy is kind of noisy. When I go home in the afternoon, I can hear all the traffic noise and air traffic is nonstop on busy days and I tolerate all those things because I do all the same things myself, but now there is no break from it. So I think the quality of life is less.

KAREN BREWSTER: And it is not like living in a town versus living in the wilderness?

GARY GREEN: I say we're in the rat race. This is a zoo. You can't stop and stand in the middle of the street and talk to your friends anymore because you'll get run over and I used to like to stand in the middle of the street and drink a beer with friends.

KAREN BREWSTER: Right. And now the people you are flying around can you talk about who your clients are and who you are flying and where and maybe that has changed from when you started?

GARY GREEN: When I first started everybody I flew I knew. Now I mean I think I fly far more people that I don't know their names, but I do fly a lot of locals. There is quite a young person population base here in McCarthy now that are adventurous and love the wilderness and they all need to get to their side of the river or to where they can start their pack raft trip. And so I fly a lot of locals, but a lot of them are just tourists visiting the National Park.

KAREN BREWSTER: So you are flying a lot of recreational hikers and rafters?

GARY GREEN: Yes. And I mean my flying is probably somewhat balanced between recreational backcountry use and flightseeing because we have phenomenal country to -- that you can't see anywhere else and we have the best scenic grandeur in the country.

KAREN BREWSTER: I have done it. Flown around the glaciers over there and it is spectacular on a clear day.

GARY GREEN: Yeah. It is spectacular on bad days.

KAREN BREWSTER: Yeah, that's it. It is more blue those glaciers the one that we flew on a cloudy day.

GARY GREEN: It has all it. I mean it is hard to get away from scenic grandeur here.

KAREN BREWSTER: Right. And you fly in hunters?

GARY GREEN: Yeah and hunting season which is taking place right now I have many hunters out in the field and the thing about hunters is weather does not ever discourage them. They -- it can be pouring down rain and they are ready to go. Whereas, some recreational users say this isn't such a good day. I don't want to go today, but hunters always go and they're motivated. They're -- they love what they are doing also, but there is a motivation

that just sucks them on. Like prospecting you might go up a valley that you wouldn't -- is not a pleasant hike because you are looking for something and hunting is the same way. You'd -- you go places that normal people don't go. And I spent my years guiding and hunting down here that I know that to be the case and you end up with some amazing experiences by going where you wouldn't normally go.

KAREN BREWSTER: Right, I know. When did you stop guiding?

GARY GREEN: I stopped guiding in '89.

KAREN BREWSTER: Yeah, when you are flying out hunters, you're not guiding or you're not

GARY GREEN: I'm not guiding.

KAREN BREWSTER: You are not an outfitter?

GARY GREEN: I am just air taxi. I stopped guiding a year after I got my air service going and partly at that point in time I had been spending a good portion of my seasons away from the Wrangell Mountains and McCarthy. During the hunting season I would go to the Brooks Range. I'd be in Bristol Bay during the fishing season and when I started an air taxi it was allowing me to stay home in the Wrangell Mountains which I really loved and so I quit guiding and became an air taxi operator.

KAREN BREWSTER: So the hunters you're flying out are resident hunters --

GARY GREEN: They are resident hunters.

KAREN BREWSTER: Who don't need guides?

GARY GREEN: Yeah and I do fly for some guides now and then when they need help. They have damaged an airplane or something they need help one way or another. So I fly out for some guide camps, but mostly it is resident hunters.

KAREN BREWSTER: Uh-huh. I want to get back to about the changes with the Park. You talked about regulations. Is there anything the good that has happened with the Park being here?

GARY GREEN: You're challenging me.

KAREN BREWSTER: It is okay if there isn't.

GARY GREEN: There must be.

KAREN BREWSTER: Or I guess one of the -- in 1980 when they were proposing this, how did you feel about the idea of there being a Park?

GARY GREEN: In 1980 when they were proposing it, I was against it. Everybody that I knew was against it because I think we all that lived in the Wrangell Mountains were happy with our lives. If you are happy with your life, you don't need change. The good that the National Park has brought is more money and I am not a hundred percent sure that that's good.

KAREN BREWSTER: Well, as a businessman, it might be, but.

GARY GREEN: Well, again in might be, but it's questionable because I make more money than I would have, but I pay for that in what I consider a diminished lifestyle, a degraded lifestyle.

KAREN BREWSTER: Well, you did answer the question. Okay, in 1980, you were opposed to it, has your opinion changed? Some people back then were opposed and now they are okay with it.

GARY GREEN: No. I'm of the opinion that the Wrangell Mountains is parklike quality. That is why it became a Park. But as soon as you make it a Park, the parklike qualities start

deteriorating. And after all these years of being a National Park I feel if it had never been created as a National Park, we would have more wilderness right here today if it hadn't been made into a Park. Now a hundred years from now that might be reversed. I don't know cause I don't see the future that well. But right now it is not as quiet. You don't get to hear the wind blow. It is just not as much wilderness qualities.

KAREN BREWSTER: But you are continuing to live here and why?

GARY GREEN: Well, I -- I'm always open to new areas and I travel a fair amount and I've covered most of the state. I've yet to find someplace better.

KAREN BREWSTER: And you wintered over here, I don't know if you still do.

GARY GREEN: I consider that I still do, although in the past four or five years, five or six years, I have been gone quite a bit. Last winter I was only gone one month, the month of January. And this winter I figure I will be here most of it because I like to travel, but when I do, I am kind of missing what I do here. But I have overwintered here 35 winters, I don't know.

KAREN BREWSTER: So what's life like here in the winter?

GARY GREEN: That is our best season because the tourists go away and I am not against tourists. I am one myself whenever I travel, but in the winter you do find more time to do little things. Things that maybe aren't all that productive but that you want to do and you never find time to do it when you're busy with the summer activities. And so winter the country opens up a little more. If you got a snowmobile, the rivers are frozen and you can cross them so you can range further by snowmobile. It is definitely quieter. When you go down a trail, I used to have lots of trails I considered my own or when I was on them I owned the trail because there was nobody else on it. In the summertime, that is almost impossible, but in the winter it is still possible and I like that. So that you can stop -- you can stop a snowmachine in the middle of the trail wherever you wanted and open your thermos, have a cup of coffee and enjoy your surroundings. If it is too busy or 10 snowmobiles come by or that disrupts that.

KAREN BREWSTER: And has winter tourism recreation increased around here?

GARY GREEN: Not so much. In the late part of winter when the days are long and the snow filled up, there is an increase in activity for sure, but during the darkest, coldest months, there is not a great deal of change. McCarthy's home base are people that have built cabins here has increased so much now that I'm -- and it is increasing rapidly so that I think there is a change in store for the winters too because there will be somebody that is wintering here all the time more than there used to be and people will be freighting materials for building and stuff in the winters. And it just -- there will be more winter activity than there used to be.

KAREN BREWSTER: And in the winters in the early days, did you guys socialize with each other?

GARY GREEN: Well, there was very few people here and we did all socialize. Yeah, cause I think you craved -- craved it then because there were so few people. I was friends with everybody in the country with at least one exception. And now though there are so many people that I don't feel and I have gotten older so I don't do it the same as I did when I was younger. But I don't feel the need to socialize as much because I get more than I need just in daily activities you are running into people.

KAREN BREWSTER: And are there -- you mentioned people out in the country. Has the number of people who live out in the backcountry, has that changed?

GARY GREEN: Not if you go far back, but within a 10 mile radius of McCarthy it has changed tremendously because over here Sourdough Hill was University property and they subdivided it into 10 acre parcels and there is a cabin on almost every parcel now and at the end of the Nizina Road, there is homesteads that have been subdivided and so there is cabins and activity in all these places. And they used to be backcountry, now I consider you have to go beyond that to get to backcountry.

KAREN BREWSTER: But like Dan Creek, May Creek, up McCarthy Creek, Nizina there used to be people living out there? Are there still?

GARY GREEN: Well, there was very few. There was one family living at May Creek and then one old timer. Dan Creek is growing a little bit because they have subdivided also and there is mining activity there. At Spruce Point area, there is -- the family that used to live there is gone and a friend of mine owned that and they -- it is not, it is probably not changing that much. Dan Creek has a few cabins going up, but I don't think there is any real new residents there.

KAREN BREWSTER: It just seems like, yeah, in the old days people lived more remotely and now everybody sort of congregated around McCarthy.

GARY GREEN: There was a few old timers when I first got out here, but they were mostly summer residents. But there has been a change of the guard for sure because the old timers are gone now and it is -- the backcountry hasn't changed that much.

KAREN BREWSTER: Interesting. I need -- I am just going to change tape.

End Part 1