

INTERVIEW OF MARK VAIL  
INTERVIEWER IS KAREN BREWSTER  
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IN MC CARTHY, ALASKA  
PART 2

KAREN BREWSTER: I hear you live nine miles off the road, but you still consider yourself part of the community of McCarthy?

MARK VAIL: Yes, mainly because this is the hub of activity for the valley. It is where I get my mail at the air -- we get our mail flown in twice a week. That has changed from the early years it was once a week in the 80's and early 90's. Yeah, I --

KAREN BREWSTER: So talk about the community.

MARK VAIL: So because I come to town I have gotten to know the people. In the, you know, 80's and 90's when you came to town mail was the focus of community. That is where information was exchanged about what was going on. We didn't have phones. We had KCHU or KCAM radio in Glennallen with one-way messages on the Caribou Clatter service which was a one-way message service. So friends Outside could say hey, we're coming next weekend, you know, get word to us somehow if you need anything kind of thing. And then in the -- well, in the early years shortly after I moved here in 1987 I moved in full time and by 1990 we were starting to see the effects of the creation of the Park. Now I knew I moved into a Park. I had been on the north side pre-Park and I had come as far as the Kuskulana pre-Park. I was happy to see the creation of the Parks in the state. Growing up in the crowded East Coast I recognized that, you know, the preservation of large spaces is a great thing for the future, you know. And I happen to benefit from that creation in having access to resources in the Park.

So in the early 90's and I can't say the specific date, you could -- someone could research it, it became apparent that we were going to face constant change and constant growth because we were now in the center of a National Park and albeit in the early years we weren't on anybody's map, you know. It wasn't like a place to go yet because people hadn't heard of Wrangell-St. Elias and to a large degree that is still not, you know, it is not like Denali. You know it is not the first thing people think of when you say go to a Park in Alaska, albeit, the head of the National Park Service gave us a shout out on the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary in an interview with NPR. They asked him what, you know, Park he, you know, thought was keen. And he goes well, I will give a shout out to Wrangell-St. Elias and he was superintendent here in the 90's. So and he was in my estimation one of the best superintendents we have had because he knew how to get things done in the bureaucracy and we met here as an organization.

So just prior to his arrival we had a town meeting where we just all got together to talk and I had been contemplating that -- the idea of the fact that we were a small community. We have no layer of government. We have no codes, no covenants, no taxes, no authority, but we are in an area where there is large organizations that have authority and have a play over the social and economic and, you know, development status of this area. We have the National Park Service is our biggest neighbor. We have the University of Alaska owns 12, 15, 20,000 acres out here. The state of Alaska owns 20,000 acres in the Park. The Ahtna people and the subsidiary Native corporations, you know, own a million

acres in the Park, plus or minus and then there are the individuals that own property in the Park and the Outside forces are bureaucracies that have power. And we had this town meeting and I thought about it the night before and wrote up this little thing about how the Park was creating a plan. They did the 1985 20 year plan for the Park. And it is like here we are as a community and no one had ever sat down to think about well what is our future going to be, should we have a plan. So we formalized an organization and in the beginning it was called MALA, the McCarthy Area Landowners Association. And it was just a dedicated forum for discussion and working towards consensus on issues that became prevalent so that we could stand up with one voice if we came to a consensus to address these Outside interests.

And that was, you know, in the early 90's, '92 or '93 and that was just about the time John Jarvis came. So we invited him as the new superintendent to meet with the constituents of the Area Landowners Association. And he came and we sat right outside the building I am being interviewed in and I remember there was a Flicker drilling a hole in a tree right outside the garden the whole time we were there. He was rapping away and calling real loudly, but John asked us what the community needed and there was frustration at the time because the Park was 10 years old. They had a temporary headquarters in Copper Center and at headquarters they were sending people in here. Well, there is a road into the Park, but the Park didn't own anything here. They had no infrastructure. They didn't have a ranger here in the early years and yet they were pointing people this direction. And we're like we need toilets. We need public services. You can't put that burden on the few people that live here cause at the time there was and even today there is only 45 people who live here year round, you know, and yet we meet the demand of the visiting public, you know, through either the infrastructure we have created. But anyhow John Jarvis stepped to and within a month had five public outhouses at this end of the road, one in town, a couple in Kennicott, one across -- a couple across the river which we were like wow that's amazing to see, you know, someone step to and address issues that we brought to them and over the 90's the Landowners Association decided that we should become a grant receiving organization mainly because we wanted to study our water sources here in McCarthy's downtown. It is a limited access thing. There is, you know, and we wanted to protect it. I mean everyone gets -- in town here gets their drinking water from Clear Creek.

KAREN BREWSTER: That's that little creek --

MARK VAIL: The little creek everyone crosses to get into town. So it is perched in a precarious position, but the town is here because of that spring. Paul Barrett's grandfather homesteaded here because there were springs here and it was the first flat ground closes to the Kennicott Mine and he knew they --

KAREN BREWSTER: He was a smart man.

MARK VAIL: He was a very smart man. He would be able to lease land to get the railroad across his property and lease them land to have flat ground to do their engineering, oiling and stuff which all occurs up by the museum, the depot.

KAREN BREWSTER: So the landowners group morphed into something else?

MARK VAIL: To McCarthy Area Council which was a 501(3) (c) and we have a board with 11 members on it and we have been in existence for over 20 years now. And I have been president on numerous occasions over those 20 some years and currently I think I am in

my sixth year as president. We have received over those years a couple of grants. One and I couldn't say who it came from, probably DEC or DNR to study the water. And I think we got, you know, a little -- \$17,000 or something, but we did test drilling and we did aquaphor testing and we did sampling of the water itself and essentially you got to have a lot of money to drill a well and you got to have good luck hitting one of the aquaphors which are limited here. Once you go below the water bearing layer which isn't that deep you hit a strata of silt sand that goes at least 120 feet with no water bearing layers in it.

And we learned that when the trams that used to access the town were starting to be overwhelmed by tourism. No one was willing to take on the liability of maintaining the trams and Don Young was head of the Transportation Committee and got in the Transportation Bill special funding for non-vehicular access development and we qualified perfectly for that to upgrade the trams to a footbridge and that funding was specifically for that kind of project and our organization, you know, queried the state and the state, you know, got federal money. There was a design parameters that we wanted and design parameters that they gave us and we ended up with the truss bridge that we have which when it was built was wide enough for small vehicles which it wasn't designed for so they had to do some reengineering and there were wars over the access on that bridge.

KAREN BREWSTER: The bollards being removed.

MARK VAIL: The bollards being removed. That went on for a couple of years. I had sat as chair for many public meetings during the upgrade from the tram to the footbridge. And there is people today who, you know, still say that we should have had a vehicle bridge, but it doesn't take a very astute person to come to town and see that if all the cars that were in all the parking lots on the other side were here, we wouldn't be able to move because there is just not adequate parking over here. The old roads were narrow, you know.

KAREN BREWSTER: Well and as you said when we were walking over here, you know, there is all these vehicles and people that --

MARK VAIL: Right.

KAREN BREWSTER: You don't know and it would just increase that even more.

MARK VAIL: Right. So, you know, once we got the footbridge that improved access ease. Now it didn't improve it if you are glued to the butt of your car seat, but it improved it in that you didn't have to pull yourself 490 feet across the river on a wire which frightened a lot of people, you know especially during the outburst flood of Hidden Lake every year when you were only that far above a raging river you know. But it, you know, it definitely increases the flow of people and then in the early 2000's there was a private service bridge built by subscription.

KAREN BREWSTER: That is the Rowland's Family Bridge?

MARK VAIL: Yeah, the Rowland Family Bridge that allows people who live on this side and do business on this side to get a pass to bring a vehicle over. It is generally not there for the general public to access. I don't know the exact parameters they used to control that, but they have come to the community. They came to the area council this summer and said should the community ever come to a consensus on restricting the bridge further or in any way if we could come to a consensus, they were amenable to hear that case which,

you know, says they want to be part of the community too and they don't want things to get out of control. So if we see issues arising that they can control through, you know, further restricting to who they'll sell passes to, they are willing to look at that issue which was nice of them to put out.

KAREN BREWSTER: Now do you think having -- having that bridge has that been an okay thing or how that has changed the community?

MARK VAIL: You know the whole change thing in the community is always a very interesting subject because if you are here and in the long run you are always here change is always incremental and it is only little bits at a time, but if you only come to visit once every 10 years change seems drastic. So when you live in a place and you see change, you automatically accommodate it into your worldview and so trying to catalog it as dramatic or it is hard to pinpoint, but there are things that have changed the community. And communications is one of those. When I moved here, there was no phones. There hadn't been phones since the days of Kennicott and they had phones locally and telegraph to get to the outside world. And we had in the 80's there were radio phones and both lodges had radio phones which cost five dollars a minute. And in the late 80's both Copper Valley Telephone and KCHU radio out of Valdez, public radio, came to a MALA meeting and asked us if we wanted improved communications and to a large extent it was unanimous, although there were people who said they didn't want it improved, but they would be the first ones to use it if it was. And I think at that meeting there was 45 people and it was a mid-summer, late summer meeting, so you could tell that the town was still small because even in the summer at a public meeting that was critical to the changes looking forward, it was still a small number of people and it took place in the McCarthy Lodge which was happy to have that many people stop in and maybe get a burger. So I would say the communications has changed the community more than access by vehicles, although there is definitely a noted increase in vehicles on this side which is, you know, tantamount to the fact that everybody who lives on this side has at least one vehicle -- not everyone, but the majority of people.

KAREN BREWSTER: Whereas before the Rowland's Bridge --

MARK VAIL: The only way to get a vehicle here was across the ice in spring and there was a one month window where the Department of Transportation would put in a ice bridge down near where the present private bridge is and you could drive supplies across, including vehicles for that one month period while there was stable ice on the river. And, of course, that ice bridge doesn't happen anymore now that there is a private vehicle bridge. So in those years there was limited vehicles on this side, you know. There was the vehicles that ran the shuttle services that have changed over time and there were a few people who lived here who felt they needed a vehicle. And most of those people lived further away from the river crossing than downtown McCarthy.

KAREN BREWSTER: If you lived up in Kennicott, maybe.

MARK VAIL: Right or out the Nizina Road somewhere and, you know, and then there has been other development. There has been the university subdivided 60 parcels on the south side of McCarthy Creek and the Zach Family Trust developed a subdivision around the north end of the airport. The Barrett Family has opened up a new subdivision outside of the Old Townsite of McCarthy. And each of those has, you know, been bought up and people have built cabins and so there is a steady slow population increase, definitely cabins, and

these things, you know, have all changed the face of the social structure in town, but like getting phones was an interesting event when phones came to the community because now instead of speaking publicly on issues you could have private conversations and thus you could design discussions before they occurred by getting a consensus among a group privately without having to meet face-to-face. Where before you went to mail if you wanted to meet face-to-face and you had to speak publicly or we used CB radios in the 80's. And you either went to your secret channel, click-click-click, you know.

KAREN BREWSTER: Yes, switch to 72, then everybody switches to listen to you.

MARK VAIL: Right, right, right, chase you down, you know. It's like let's go to the other channel. Well, there is only 18 of them or 40 of them, you know. It is like just roll through until one starts buzzing, you know.

KAREN BREWSTER: Well, that is interesting how you say it changed the public conversation versus private conversations.

MARK VAIL: Yeah, I mean I observed that, you know, and a lot of that was at the same time as we were dealing with the footbridges and so access became a point of contention whether it should be a vehicle bridge, you know, or just a footbridge. Well, I remember there was five people who wanted vehicular access at the time that lived here. Now there may have been other entities outside who wanted vehicle access, but it wasn't huge, you know, and it was going to affect us so there was a creation of the -- so we had MAC which was operating as a nonprofit discussion forum and then there became CAM, the Coalition for Access to McCarthy. So they were the counterpart and they were pressing for vehicular access which was tantamount to like divisiveness that, you know, albeit it may have been there, you know, the ideology may have been there beforehand, but being able to discuss that without traveling once phones came in. You could build coalitions in other words privately before you came to the public with you know --

KAREN BREWSTER: Yeah, it is interesting.

MARK VAIL: You know and that just changed the discussion, the way discussions happened in the town

KAREN BREWSTER: And this -- the McCarthy Area Council is interesting. You know, I know small towns they always have factions and nobody can agree on anything.

MARK VAIL: Right, right.

KAREN BREWSTER: So how did that all work that you had issues that you could come to agreement on?

MARK VAIL: Well, there are certain things that, you know, in the 90's as the community was really facing the changing growth we had outside -- I'm --

KAREN BREWSTER: Pressures?

MARK VAIL: No, coordinators. People who came here to help us move through this process.

KAREN BREWSTER: Like mediators?

MARK VAIL: Mediators, exactly and so we would sit down interminable community meetings for days on end repeatedly to like hash out. It is like what do we want to preserve? What's -- what is really at essence here, you know? And everyone recognized we are in a unique situation and we would like to preserve uniqueness, you know. Well, it is like how do you go about that when you have no power of government as a community? We have no power of taxation, codes, or covenants. Those can happen on a smaller scale at the

subdivision level by the entities that make subdivisions whether you are a private landowner and subdivide or whether you are a university.

KAREN BREWSTER: Well, that is what I was wondering -- how do you guys -- do you sort of -- how could you "govern" as a council?

MARK VAIL: So we had 12 -- well, we had 140 items which we narrowed down to like a basic set of we want the water to remain clean so everyone can drink out of Clear Creek going forward. We want kids to be able to play in the street without getting run over. We want people to have a place to go to the bathroom to keep a healthy and sanitary environment area wide. And we want access, free and fair access. Now some people think free and fair means you have to bring your vehicle or you should be able -- allowed. But a lot of us don't necessarily agree that vehicles are, you know, tantamount to freedom. They come with their own burdens, you know, especially congestion. It would be a main one, but we narrowed it down to basic issues that we could agree on and we focused on those. So the area council cleans and maintains five public outhouses in McCarthy and we put in a well at Tony Zach's which is --

KAREN BREWSTER: It's the community hall.

MARK VAIL: The community hall which belongs to the Blackburn Heritage Center which allows us to meet there as a community center per Tony Zach's wishes, you know, for his heritage and we address other issues and we are an open forum for discussion mainly. So people who have, you know, it is like in the 90's the Department of Transportation came in and said we need to make your airstrip bigger, you know. Well, they wanted to spend five and a half million dollars and we are like all we need is the hump taken out of the middle because a plane at this end can't see a plane at that end and if they are both taking off from different ends they could meet in the middle and that is not good. So if you could just flatten it out. Well, engineers never do it, you know.

KAREN BREWSTER: Simply.

MARK VAIL: Simply, but we did talk them down from five and a half million to two and a half million and we got a big, nice runway that AT&T Alascom landed a Lear Jet on the day before the construction started to tell you that, yes, you know, the old one was adequate, but not safe, you know. So community discussions led to moderating that development to what we needed as opposed to what an outside entity said you should have, you know. And there has always been an underlying understanding that what serves us best is organic growth where the people who create businesses here generally are people who have investment in the community as a place to live before they go into business. So all the businesses here are owned by people who lived here and liked the place before they went into business. So it behooves them to not over develop because they will be spoiling what they like about it, you know. And having had long discussions trying to identify what those things are, you know, and then negotiating that with outside interests so that we don't become overwhelmed because they could pave a big highway all the way in here, but then what would happen, you know? McCarthy would no longer be the quaint, quiet town it used to be. And that is changing and it will continue to change, but it is like not getting the cart before the horse. It is like don't build it and they will come. It is like oh, if there is more people coming, let's do something to adequately meet that demand.

KAREN BREWSTER: So how many people are on the council?

MARK VAIL: There is I think 11 sit on the board and then membership is open to anyone who maintains a residence between Crystal Creek and the Canadian border in the Chitina Valley. So and it costs five dollars a year to become a member.

KAREN BREWSTER: Do you have regular meetings?

MARK VAIL: We meet every month March through August -- March -- so six times a year and we don't meet in the winter. That allows us two spring meetings before there is summer people here. So if there is critical business that the people who live here want to address we have time to bring it up in one meeting and move on it in the like March meeting and April meeting are critical to the people who live here. Where the summer meetings anyone who lives here and has a summer cabin and is just here for a short time is welcome to participate. So those meetings seem sometimes to overwhelm the winter meetings where it is just the population that lives here, but it is sort of strategically, you know, set up to, you know, if there is something drastic that needs addressing that we don't want the summer residents to be able to vote on, we can.

KAREN BREWSTER: So that is what I was going to say, so the summer residents can become members?

MARK VAIL: If they maintain a residence, you know, if they maintain a household, you know, cabin.

KAREN BREWSTER: Not the summer employees?

MARK VAIL: Right, so we strictly summer employment, tenting, camping do not count.

KAREN BREWSTER: But people who have cabins here but maybe only live here in the summer.

MARK VAIL: Right.

KAREN BREWSTER: They can become members?

MARK VAIL: Right, exactly.

KAREN BREWSTER: So what is the most recent pressing issue that you guys have talked about and dealt with?

MARK VAIL: Currently we have a subcommittee working on the backcountry wilderness plan that the Park Service instigated a year ago. So we have people who will sit and review these plans and come to the council and present everyone things that they find out of sorts or in a positive light and reinforce it to the group saying, you know, if you are going to comment in this process now is the opportunity and these are the points we either find egregious or we find need support. So that our community is represented in the best format possible because when we talk about the Park their constituency is nationwide. Our constituency is tiny by comparison, but we are the most effected in some levels of what the Park does because people that live here use the Park and, you know, the resources are part of -- we are part of the Park and the resources of the Park are part of our lives and that is in the ANILCA legislation.

KAREN BREWSTER: If you are subsistence users?

MARK VAIL: Right. You know and the same thing with commercial access to the Park. Commercial access is restricted just like it is any -- in other National Parks. So if commercial activity starts to impinge on resources that we have used historically, you know, we can point that out to the Park. So that is one of the things that, you know, is a current ongoing thing because that is a process that the Park is doing now. We address when they did the Kennicott Historic Monument Plan. The same thing we set up a

subcommittee that met face-to-face with Park planners and community members so that our interest points were fully, you know, put forth to the Park so that we could work mutually into the future.

KAREN BREWSTER: Well I have wondered that, you know, what it is like for a community and McCarthy and living here, what it is like kind of living within the boundaries of the National Park?

MARK VAIL: It is well, one we live in a scenic wonderland, you know, that other people don't live in. They get to visit and go, ooh and aah and we get to open the blinds in the morning and oh, yeah. I live in one of the most beautiful places in the world. And largely the scenery will never be destroyed by commercialism or any Park rules and regulations. Well, I, you know, given the current law and current --

KAREN BREWSTER: So right that is a good thing about living out here.

MARK VAIL: Right. The challenges, you know, are more on the commercial level than they are on the subsistence level, albeit there are some people who might find, you know, take a different stance on that because of their means of applying their subsistence rights and here I am mainly talking about vehicular access whether it be snowmachine or four-wheeler or, you know. The rules that the Park works under the resource is the finite boundary. When resources are impinged upon, they can write rules and regulations to protect the resource, but until that time, as long as we are not impinging on the resource, we should have adequate and fair access to the resources that surround us. The argument becomes whether recreationally using snowmachines anywhere in the Park is a subsistence right, you know. And it is like that is to the individual and the nation to decide, you know. And so that is where you run into friction sometimes because there is people who say well, I live here, I should be able to ride my snowmachine wherever I want and, you know.

KAREN BREWSTER: Versus using the snowmachine to run a trapline?

MARK VAIL: Right or to come get your mail or go get firewood, exactly. You know, and that is where it steps out of one realm into another is at the recreational level, you know. It is like so then the question becomes if I live here and have the right to subsistence and I decide that recreation is part of that right then does Joe Blow from Cincinnati who also is a recreationist get to go wherever I do, you know. And how do we regulate that without impinging on resources, you know, and what resources do we defend as a nation, you know? Is quiet a real resource? In my estimation it is, you know, and it is, you know, packing a trail into an area where wildlife habitat is critical for the wildlife to be isolated because they are on a mountain top surrounded by steep deep snow that once a snowmachine packs that down and all of a sudden a pack of wolves can access a herd of sheep it is like where is that line, you know. And it is like when does recreation become harmful and who does it harm?

KAREN BREWSTER: And if you live someplace else in the same lifestyle that you are living, do you live -- not surrounded by National Park, you wouldn't be facing these issues and have to think about these things?

MARK VAIL: No, but you would --

KAREN BREWSTER: And still do it?

MARK VAIL: Well, either that or you would be able to go do it because if you weren't in a National Park surrounded by public land you wouldn't have access because everywhere



else is private land and you can't just go recreationally ripping around on some farmer's back forty because you want to because it is recreationally, you know. So finding that, you know, weigh point between those two balances it is like that's an ongoing discussion, you know.

KAREN BREWSTER: I do find it interesting that you came out to the end of the road and you are a mile off the road and you built a life for yourself out there living off the land, but at the same time you are very involved in the community in the council and sort of the local politics.

MARK VAIL: Yeah, well that has been one of the most interesting aspects of my life because I lived in Anchorage in a little trailer court on the east side for nine years before I moved here. And it is like I didn't even know who my assemblyman was. I did because I have always been, you know, adequately informed of who represents me in the government, but I had never shaken hands with him. And since I've lived here, I have personally known every superintendent of this Park, which I could go to Washington, DC and talk to the head of the National Park Service because I know him personally from having lived here and so that is an accrual of power just by dint of being present in a place where you are not overwhelmed by the presence of other people.

KAREN BREWSTER: Well, I was also thinking is there something about living in a small place where you are invested personally.

MARK VAIL: Right.

KAREN BREWSTER: It makes you become more involved in continuing to be in the place you want to live?

MARK VAIL: Right. And that is an interesting thing that I always look at is because each person comes to a different conclusion depending on their own set of beliefs and behaviors coming in and I came from an area where I was five generations deep. My five great grandparents ago fought the Revolutionary War, you know, and hopefully, they didn't kill Indians, you know. Accordingly, they didn't, they were peaceful, but they were at the forefront of the frontier.

KAREN BREWSTER: Right and well, here you came in as sort of a relative newcomer.

MARK VAIL: Yes.

KAREN BREWSTER: Compared to some of the earlier people in the 60's and the 70's, how did you integrate or how did people accept you or not?

MARK VAIL: Well, it was interesting because one of the old-timers I remember having a discussion with him and saying well, this was like in my first summer. It was like who are you? Well, I am Mark and I just bought property at Fireweed and I am going to live here. And he goes, oh, yes, he rolls his eyes and he goes we have seen thousands like you and five years later we had become friends and he goes you have done it and you have never come to town going I need this, I need that, I need help, I need you to do this, this way or that way to satisfy my needs. I did my own thing and I didn't become dependent on the social structure and I have rarely worked for anyone in town other than on a volunteer basis. I have done a few small contract jobs, you know, where I worked for three weeks and helped someone move a project forward. So I am not beholden to any of the commercial interests in town. I volunteer at the Wrangell Mountain Center which is another nonprofit that their goal is to, you know, educate people through arts and sciences about the Park and its surroundings. And being in that position where I don't have a

vested interest in the businesses, the commercial aspect of town, it allows me to talk freely and that is one of the reasons why other people say I am a good representative to sit as the chair. I don't make the decisions.

KAREN BREWSTER: No.

MARK VAIL: I just moderate the discussion because I slowly get to know most of the people who come here and settle, you know, build cabins. I don't know them all, but that is generally by their choice not mine. I mean if they would show up at the meeting, I would get to know them.

KAREN BREWSTER: Well and it sounds like you proved yourself by being so self-reliant and independent you then became --

MARK VAIL: Right.

KAREN BREWSTER: An insider or whatever.

MARK VAIL: Right, exactly and also by dent of time. It is like I am in the top dozen people in longevity here, you know. I'm in that class of people who has lived here longer than the mines operated, you know.

KAREN BREWSTER: So what about people who have come since or people who come now, are they integrating into the community or how does that work?

MARK VAIL: It is always a learning a curve and a gal I met when I first, you know, in my early years she had lived here a number of years and she told me a quote that she got from Les Heglund who was killed in the massacre and he said to her, Bonnie, there is always room in the country for good people. And I still think that's adequately describes the culture that we strive to move forward. It is like if you are socially well behaved, if you are not dependent on super infrastructure that isn't here when you get here, you know, other than meeting the needs that are created by visitation, I don't think we should push an agenda forward to create more. I think that as that it allows more people over a longer time to experience an area that is not super developed, you know. It is like we have discussions about what would the end of the road look like? Well, it is per chance that everything along the end of the road is privately owned. So that is going to develop, you know, and whether it develops it to our liking or not as long as we don't have a layer of government where we have any control, it is just going to develop, you know, and we will have to either accept it into our, you know, world view and say I won't go do business there or this is wonderful. I will encourage other people to go there and thus it just perpetuates, you know, the consensus, you know, because if more people that live here say oh, you should do this than that is the focus visitors get, you know.

KAREN BREWSTER: Well, that is what I was wondering. Has there been discussion about applying a larger layer of government, self-government?

MARK VAIL: Numerous times.

KAREN BREWSTER: And nothing has come of it? The council is as close as you are getting.

MARK VAIL: Our boundaries go out well into the Copper Basin on this process. We don't want more government than we have because one, we don't have a economic base that would support a layer of government that we don't need and right now it is like yes, there are sometimes issues that it would be nice, you know, but for the large part as long as people are well behaved and don't impinge on other people's rights, we are all happy to just go along and get along.

KAREN BREWSTER: And you said room for -- as long as there is room for good people in the country. Is that true? Is there still room or is McCarthy getting too big? Or is there a finite limit to --

MARK VAIL: Well, there is a limit on resources, you know. Where that limit is we won't know until we get there. You know, there is going to be a limit on firewood because eventually you -- especially if you stay here and climate change doesn't make it constantly warmer which we are looking at climate change being a huge impact on what happens here. It is like the glacier is melting, you know. We are looking at the state economy driving what happens here. It is like they have pulled our maintenance, local maintenance district away from the community. It is now 70 miles further away. So will we get winter plowings? Will we get any plowings, you know? Will they come and maintain the runways? It is like where does that money come from and it is like when does our economy here adequately meet a level where we should be paying for our own services, you know? And right now we community share from the state that is going away. So as a community right now we are bankrolling our savings to stretch them out, you know, to try to moderate what the state is looking at economically because no one knows, you know, where we are going to be a year from now even.

KAREN BREWSTER: And the other thing I want to ask you about which is I am sure you have been talked to death about it is the whole story of the Pilgrim Family and I have read the book about them and one of the things I thought about when reading it is how did this community of McCarthy not see the kind of con job and how were they accepted into the community?

MARK VAIL: They weren't.

KAREN BREWSTER: Okay.

MARK VAIL: They were accepted on the individual basis and the children were educated on the individual basis when it was -- when the community was able to. Papa Pilgrim ran up against reality here and it was because we are an educated community and yes, some people were -- well, two things. One, we are generally very accepting of anyone as long as you don't step on other people's toes. It wasn't long into their picture that they were stepping on toes. And it wasn't long after that that 80 community members marched on their camp and told them that their behavior was not welcome in the community. And we would do that again if another charlatan showed up with, you know, a bunch of brainwashed children.

KAREN BREWSTER: Well and also they were asking for a lot of help at some point, weren't they? They were not quite so self-reliant?

MARK VAIL: Ah, yeah, they weren't getting the help here, you know, except to -- after they got into their big fight with the Park Service and then the lands rights issues were raised. And they got support both locally and nationally from lands rights organizations and access, you know, but I in particular I heard about them the day they came. I saw them a month later when they came back and rarely if ever had an interaction. And the interaction I did have with them I did an about face. I said, yes, you don't know me and did an about face because my perception was that something was not right about this thing and so I avoided them, but I also intently observed the entire process, you know, and there were, you know, bad behaviors on both parts, you know, at the national level and their level. But clearly when it came to light the situation his kids were in that he was

the aggressor and the one at major fault, but the Park never prosecuted their case against them because the Park had overstepped some of its, you know.

KAREN BREWSTER: I mean there are two -- there was the issue of the cat road and the access.

MARK VAIL: Right.

KAREN BREWSTER: Versus the personal family.

MARK VAIL: Right.

KAREN BREWSTER: Saga which kind of came out later.

MARK VAIL: Right.

KAREN BREWSTER: It was sort of the big brew haha about the cutting into the road and all that.

MARK VAIL: Right. And that was between the Park Service and the family. Their personal behaviors and the, you know, the things they did in the community were aggressive to the point that the community said no. This is not the way you come to our community and behave, you know. And on the individual level when they were running their little different businesses, a shuttle business, a horseback ride, I had friends who would question the kids to try to make them aware of the situation they were in and in the end it was the kids who questioned their own situation, you know, and it changed their lives because, you know, in the end the kids challenged their own situation. And I don't think Papa Pilgrim realized he was walking into a community that would do that, you know. I mean there were people who were willing to still talk to the kids beyond all the bad vibes that surrounded them.

KAREN BREWSTER: It was to challenge the kids to think about -- to think?

MARK VAIL: Right and then be there and with open arms to help the kids escape the reality they had grown up in, you know, and make it into the real world and become educated and you know literate and all that stuff which, you know, I look at the community -- they came back to us. The kids came back to us with a letter and thanked us for helping them, you know, move on. And it is always here when something is challenging like the Pilgrims were a challenge to the community. The massacre was a challenge to the community. The bollard wars were a challenge to the community. All these things pass over time, you know, and they are magnified by the absence of people. It becomes a scene that the whole world gets to see because there is people, you know, passing through going what's going on here? And so it is like, well, what's going to be next?

KAREN BREWSTER: Life just goes on.

MARK VAIL: Yeah, exactly, you know, it is like one of these days the Kotsina Bluff out at Chitina is going to fall off the face of the hill and we are going to be isolated or there is going to be a big earthquake and the Kuskulana Bridge is going to fall in and if it happens in mid-summer, there is going to be 300 tourists trapped here, you know. And that will be the focus for whatever time period that lasts. And if they can't rebuild the bridge then we will matriculate back towards 1983 when we were a self-sufficient community that figured out how to do things on our own, you know. So I am here for the duration to see how it plays out.

KAREN BREWSTER: All right. Well, I say you obviously like it here.

MARK VAIL: Yes.

KAREN BREWSTER: There is something that has kept you here?

MARK VAIL: Yeah. It is --

KAREN BREWSTER: Can you put it in words what is so special about here?

MARK VAIL: I think the fact that the community is accepting of different lifestyles and personalities as long as -- again as long as they don't, you know, interfere with others individual's rights then we are willing to just do our own thing, you know and search for commonalities amongst us all even though we are all individuals that we can move forward in, you know, preserving, you know, some aspect and it is -- it is hard to define what that, you know, how would you name that particular thing?

KAREN BREWSTER: But there is something about the people who live here which I don't know how you describe them.

MARK VAIL: Right, yeah, it is -- it is hard. Now you know there is a common understanding that the people that live here were drawn here by forces unknown to themselves, you know. Whether they were, you know, had a religious awakening or whether they just found the landscape totally welcome. For me it is like living in the woods it is just like I feel totally at ease in the woods. I don't carry a gun. I live with grizzly bears. I live with moose and it is like other people I see they are like terrified of it, you know. So I know that they are never going to be my neighbors, you know. So and other people I know that live here they carry a gun, but I don't obligate them to believe the way I do and they don't obligate me, you know.

KAREN BREWSTER: It is amazing that I mean I know there is animosity, small town, and there have been all kinds of animosity

MARK VAIL: Right.

KAREN BREWSTER: But sometimes you guys all figure out a way to live together.

MARK VAIL: Right and how do you describe that because it is such a unique place. It is like --

KAREN BREWSTER: For this day and age.

MARK VAIL: We do it without law enforcement unless someone is threatened in their life, you know. They either have to be dead or physical violence has to be, you know, imminently threatened before anyone here would even think to call the police, you know. We'd rather have social mores expressed what we want how people to behave.

KAREN BREWSTER: More like the old frontier days in a way?

MARK VAIL: Yeah.

KAREN BREWSTER: It doesn't exist in so many places.

MARK VAIL: Right, right.

KAREN BREWSTER: But it used to be more the standard.

MARK VAIL: Yeah, exactly. It is sort of like a throwback to the Gold Rush Days.

KAREN BREWSTER: Yeah, yes.

MARK VAIL: You know, you have your claim and as long as you aren't claim jumping, you can do on your claim whatever it takes to make your goal, you know, but if you start claim jumping, someone is going to hang you in a tree, you know. And it may be the whole town, you know. If you are egregious enough, people have been run out of this town.

KAREN BREWSTER: Oh, they have?

MARK VAIL: Yes. People who just were too aggressive in their behavior or, you know, ill-representing the general community. It is like most of the time it was like summer employees and it is like this is not working. You got to get this guy out of here, you

know. And it is like someone would put him in a car and drive him out and say don't come back.

KAREN BREWSTER: It is like the old blue tickets.

MARK VAIL: Yeah, exactly, exactly. My friend who was an archeologist here just wrote a book called Blue Ticket.

KAREN BREWSTER: Oh, cool.

MARK VAIL: And --

KAREN BREWSTER: Well, Mark, this has been great.

MARK VAIL: All right.

KAREN BREWSTER: I don't know if you felt like you've shared what you wanted to say.

MARK VAIL: Yeah, no, I think we covered a pretty good gambit of what my --

KAREN BREWSTER: You said you wanted to talk about community, but we got that.

MARK VAIL: Yeah, yeah, exactly, you know, how the -- we are organized and how that came to be, you know. It was mainly to have a forum for the community that didn't include the outside interests first, but that we could then welcome the outside interests in to communicate with us.

KAREN BREWSTER: And the Wrangell-St. Elias News did that provide some --

MARK VAIL: Well, in the very first issue I wrote the opinion piece that said as a community we should think about having an organization to have this forum and it, yeah, I miss the paper. I have all the old copies, you know, and at times I was frustrated because Rick and I didn't see eye to eye on certain aspects, but I went back at various points and re-read various articles in there and always found that Rick and Bonnie had a very objective viewpoint in the bigger picture even if I didn't agree with it, it was objective which I found surprising because at certain points in time I would become totally frustrated with it, you know.

KAREN BREWSTER: Well, I was thinking that it was another forum for that expression that your council provides that the newspaper kind of provide that for people.

MARK VAIL: Yes. Yeah and it was, you know, and that is one of those interesting things. It is like the different forums where progress is made or halted, you know, because the area council is only one forum and you don't have to belong, you know. And there is many people who don't belong and, you know, they are just not political people, you know. They don't have the time or they don't care or they do care and they don't have the time or, you know, they support us, but they don't, you know, have the time, you know, cause I have the freedom of doing whatever I want because I have developed a lifestyle that I am not dependent on other people.

KAREN BREWSTER: And I only have a couple minutes left, but the lifestyle, sounds like it has been a very male oriented community, is that fair --

MARK VAIL: Mail as in US mail?

KAREN BREWSTER: No, M-A-L-E.

MARK VAIL: The other male. You're right we don't have a female man, no, well maybe we do. (Laughter)

KAREN BREWSTER: Is that true that it has been more male dominated?

MARK VAIL: Yes.

KAREN BREWSTER: And has that changed?

MARK VAIL: You know, as far as domination, I don't like that terminology.

KAREN BREWSTER: Well, I mean population number wise.

MARK VAIL: Population number wise, yes. And it is interesting because the couples that do live here, the women that live here are strong women, you know, and --

KAREN BREWSTER: They tend to come as couples?

MARK VAIL: Not necessarily. I mean there has always been a contingent of single women who they're more rare than single men who are willing to face the same challenges and they do it adequately and better in a lot of cases.

KAREN BREWSTER: And has it been more women coming in more recent times than when you first got here?

MARK VAIL: No, I think it has always been, you know, just strong women that want to face the same challenges that do it, you know. And sometimes they marry off and sometimes they leave, but yeah, the numbers -- because I know women who have built their own cabins and, you know, proceeded and then met someone they fell in love with and married and moved off and just come back on occasions, you know.

KAREN BREWSTER: Well then people maybe switched --

MARK VAIL: Oh, yeah, we didn't --

KAREN BREWSTER: Other communities.

MARK VAIL: We don't want to go there, but there is a lot of history, a lot of history.

KAREN BREWSTER: We are not here about gossip.

MARK VAIL: No, no. Knowing a lot of it is the truth, but we won't recount that today.

KAREN BREWSTER: Well, Mark, thank you so much. It has been great.

MARK VAIL: No problem, my pleasure.

KAREN BREWSTER: I really enjoyed it, thanks.

End Part 2