



JANE BUTTON

Interviewer: Regina Kong

Others Present: N/A

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Interview Location: Jane and Greg's Home,  
Gustavus

Transcriber: Regina Kong

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“It’s just like the t-shirt says: It’s wild as hell.”

-born Reno, Nevada 1957. Freshman year of college away, then lived in San Francisco for one year.

“And then I fell in love with Greg Howe and moved to the Hobbit Hole”

-[2:00] childhood in Reno. Played outside a lot. Family went to church on Sundays and would go home with a friend afterwards. Less “stranger danger” in those times.

-[3:14] parents. Mother was nurse. Dad was stockbroker then deputy secretary of state for Nevada specializing in securities. “He was a gypsy at heart.” Jane loves to travel—sometimes you travel just to come home again

-[8:00] recently discovered she has a half-sister whom Jane’s mother gave up for adoption

-was doing biochemistry research, after school moved to San Francisco worked at UCSF for 3.5 years. [18:49] “There’s too many people who all want to do the same thing you want to do. It got old”

Lived on Cherry Street with Peggy Montgomery. Peggy and Jane grew up together in Reno and graduated from high school in the same year

-[20:19] “I became a teacher... Taught biology and French which is a great combo. In life science everyone has to take that so you get the full range. In French you get the more academically-minded” First exposure to French was at Olympics in Montreal and fell in love with the language. Decided to major in biology and minor in French in college. Liked French more than biology but biology helped her get a job. Thinks her love for French is a “past life thing.” Has traveled to France often, will go this fall to Dordennes.

-[24:40] coming to Alaska for the first time. “That was amazing. I had wanted to come to Alaska for a long time before I finally did. I came with a friend that I had met in San Francisco named Lorna. We landed in Juneau and couldn’t fly out to the coast because it was too windy that day. We stayed at Alaskan hotel. The next day we were able to fly out. I remember being shocked when I saw clear cuts on the way out. That was 1992... Where they log a whole hillside”

-[27:12] First impressions of Hobbit Hole: “Landed in Elfin Cove... We came to the Hobbit Hole through the gut. I had seen photos from Peggy so I knew what to expect. When you hear about off the grid living and the no cars and no roads. You can’t really wrap your mind around that until you see it. In those days it was the fishing commune. It must’ve been a non-fishing day. It was the month of June. They had experimental openings on certain days of the week... Whatever day we arrived Dennis wasn’t fishing because he came to pick us up. There were quite a few boats with a skipper and a deck hand. There were some family boats...”

-[29:23] “Every night the fleet would come in. They had hired a cook gardener who at that time was Jennifer Thompson—Jennifer Stromy. They hired this person to cook an evening meal and keep the garden going. So that was Jennifer and she was my first friend... The Hobbit fleet was Greg and Fred and Bobo and Debra. There were at least five or six more boats. Steve Stromy and Connelly

Ward...It was kind of like having a big party every night but it would get over promptly by 8 o'clock, probably 8:15. Dinner was at 7 and then everybody would leave. I always thought the worst part of a party is that people don't know when to leave so it was great. It was always over early. I helped quite a bit because that's just part of my nature. Because Jennifer was pregnant...they needed someone to fill in for cooking toward the end of the season and so Greg asked me if I would do that I went back to Reno because I had some commitments there and then I flew back up and cooked probably just for a couple weeks, which was okay but stressful. That was the first time I ever did something like that day after day after day in volume"

-[32:00] what sort of things Jane cooked. "Salmon. I remember making something called pizza rustica. It's a pie, so you make a pastry crust. Fill it with all the things. It was vegetarian so there's the tomato-y part and then the ricotta layer, put some green pepper in there, mozzarella. So it's like a pie...I remember making a turkey one time. That's when Greg said we ran out of mashed potatoes. And I remember going outside and crying. I thought oh geez I'm crying over mashed potatoes. That's silly. So I made more food. Greg was always really good. If there was someone who was late or wasn't there, he'd made them a plate and put them aside in the kitchen...I think there's something that happens psychologically, where the more people you have...they feel a little food insecure and they eat more than they would normally. So you have to make extra to account for that mentality. I felt bad for people at the end of the line."

-came to Hobbit Hole 92, married Greg 95

-[37:50] What made Jane come back the second summer. "I fell in love. Gregory Howe's eyes. He has beautiful eyes and I just wanted to be with him. I was there for like two or three weeks and then I had to go home and then I came back. On the way back I was staying in Seattle for a couple days with a friend who lived off Broadway. And I remember really being in tears because there's nothing natural everywhere. There's just this total pavement everywhere. Nothing green. I was just really touched by that experience of being so close to nature. And I don't think that life would've suited me as a young person. I mean I was 35 when I had met Greg. I had lived in San Francisco, I had done that city thing. I had grown up in Reno which is a small city and I had never lived in the country. So it was a good thing. And my roots. My grandmother was a homesteader in Arizona so I could see the satisfaction of that life. So it was good. It was good for me"

-[39:54] On being in love—did she know when she was in Seattle? "Oh yeah. And it was a good chance to go back and investigate it some more. He just had a good character, much more so than many of the other people I had dated. So it was a good thing I wanted to know more about"

-[40:20] What it was like to return the second time and changes to HH over time "Definitely the second summer was harder but it didn't have anything to do with the two of us. At first everyone was so excited that I was there and that Greg had a sweetie. But then they realized oh this is going to change our whole dynamic here. They used to say Greg has a summer and a winter personality. In the summer he's grumpy and the winter he's not. The whole Hobbit fleet had grown to be pretty big and overwhelming. And he just wanted to come home in the evening and listen to his news and have dinner and go to bed. And there were all these screaming kids all around. He didn't love that, I don't think. But when I was there, of course he wasn't grumpy. He was super sweet. And so the next summer I could see that this was going to change the whole fishing commune thing. And as the years passed I said, you know, why are you doing this if it makes you so unhappy? If it's an evening meal, I can do that. We don't have to have 30 people to dinner every night. And then we floated the idea of building a kitchen and floating it on a barge, where there'd be a mess hall, kitchen, cook's quarter, and storage for all the fishermen in the fleet. And nobody wanted to put their money into that so we said okay this as we know it is over next year. I think that first year after we stopped it I did cook for Fred because you know, special circumstances. There were growing pains. We had a Friday potluck for several years. So they still had the camaraderie but it wasn't every single night"

-Jane thinks 1995 was first summer they ended the commune

- [44:06] when she decided to stay permanently: came 1992, moved to HH 1993. With Greg “we just got along. There was a lot of harmony, which was important to me.”

-[48:18] pets at the Hobbit Hole: “A long line of black cats and black dogs.”

-[50:00] when Jane felt Hobbit Hole became a home. Her family came to visit and understood why she fell in love with the place.

-[54:14] What makes the wilderness so special. “It’s just like the t-shirt says: It’s wild as hell. There’s no 911 except channel 14 on the radio so you need to make sure you have your wits about you. You’re going to see things you don’t see anywhere else. You see 6 whales on your way to check the mail. It just blows your mind...Ugh you’re so cavalier about it now...All those sea lions in Middle Pass. Just the life that you can show people...Seeing all that wildlife is big. And living closer to the land where you know where the salmon came from and you grew some of the food in the garden” Mentions Sand County Almanac.

-[56:48] Living closer to land. “It’s satisfying in a way that having everything so easy if you have money is not. I think that’s why the US is such a consumer culture, because people are looking to fill a hole spiritually because their lives are not satisfying”

-had satisfaction from teaching, working hard

-thinks living to land is about getting more connected to the world.

-[59:40] very connected to people as well as to the land. Got involved in Elfin. Now it’s hard for her to disconnect because not enough people to do those jobs.

-[1:00:56] years following commune. Started guesthouse, built by Kim Ney as potting studio. Made guesthouse into business. Jane got vesselmaster license and started taking people out in boat, chartering. Greg sold his boat the Kita to Ryland Bell and started helping Jane with guesthouse.

-discusses controversy she was involved related to Alaska for Alaskans

-[1:10:54] “I just remember being so impressed with the students. They were so smart. You’d teach them whatever you wanted them to do and in general they did a fantastic job”

-[1:11:21] Beginning of Inian Islands Institute: “Zach came there as a child. I want to say he was like twelve the first time...So Zach’s mother Carolyn Elder Brown named it the Hobbit Hole when she came over with Fred. ‘Cause it was the ‘70s and the Hobbit was big and that name stuck...Zach came over with his dad Bill Brown who was a great friend of Bob Howe...I just remember they were sitting at my table and I made some kind of white clam spaghetti. I remember Zach saying that he didn’t eat processed food...So he was saying something like that at twelve...I don’t think I heard anyone say that...So he’s always been kind of intense. I had no idea it had made that impression on him”

-Decided to sell the property. Realtor ran into Zach on Nagoonberry Trail in Gustavus and that’s how Zach decided he had to buy. [1:14:20] “He caught fire. For us, it was certainly the best legacy that we could imagine leaving. If we weren’t going to find a private buyer. Because we didn’t want it to be a commercial outfit, research extractor. Zach’s vision of changing the future by changing the hearts and minds of young people is brilliant”

-[1:15:16] Reason for selling. “The satisfaction piece was over. It had just become a lot of labor. Greg was the one with all the responsibility. When the power goes out...it’s a big problem to solve and he was just tired of solving the problems. It was just time to go and move somewhere where life was easier”

-Gustavus was the obvious choice. “It’s a very nice town. We have a lot of friends here. It’s so much different and so much easier...Many planes a day...the ferry...the store...That (Hobbit Hole) was kind of a solitary life. It was just time. Time to pass it off to some young people. It’s a young person’s life, all that labor...Your body breaks down and you physically can’t do it anymore...”

-[1:19:48] Making the transition to Gustavus. Difficult by boat.

-[1:21:00] “Sometimes I’d come home to the Hobbit Hole after a day in Elfin Cove. It’d be a beautiful sunny day, blue sky and how green the island is. There’s that Weezer song ‘Island in the Sun.’ There’s no place more beautiful than Southeast Alaska when the sun shines...I miss that for sure. I kind of miss the garden”

-[1:22:15] hard to see the changes. “It’s not really anybody’s home anymore...So there’s not that sort of pride in the way it’s kept that I had. I think a lot of people when they leave a house it’s hard to see what the next people do to it.”

-very busy in Gustavus, [1:26:31] “It is very full. We have happy hour every Friday night”

-[1:27:25] “I’m so so so grateful that I get to have this life ‘cause it’s been really good.”