



GREG HOWE

Interviewer: Regina Kong

Others Present: N/A

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Gustavus

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“As I like to say, it was one of those Jesus kinds of days with the big cumulus clouds. Sun shining down through the clouds. Beam of sun shining straight down at the Hobbit Hole as we flew over at 2 or 3,000 feet. And I said to myself, boy that’s a neat spot.”

-born in Ashville, North Carolina

-father was a ranger on Blue Ridge Parkway. Family lived in Yellowstone Park during “Greg’s formative years,” when he was 6 to 8<sup>th</sup> grade. Then father became park biologist in Yellowstone, things got politically active with elk reduction, buffalo management, wolves...etc. Put down Alaska as where he wanted to go next, was offered superintendent job for Glacier Bay National Monument and Sitka National Monument.

-[2:58] “I had a great childhood growing up in Yellowstone. Summers in the backcountry, fishing and backpacking. We wanted to buy motorcycles when we were kids but our parents weren’t up for that. We got a donkey instead. Me and my childhood friends spent our summers in the backcountry of Yellowstone in various remote locations to go fishing, exploring.”

-Fred is three years older. “It was always pretty good. I wouldn’t say we were close but we always got along well. We’re different people but that’s normal. He’s not as social as I am. He’s always been into fishing since he was a little boy tying flies...Brother Fred got a degree in fisheries, biology from University of Alaska and worked for fish and game. I also got a degree from University of Alaska for biology but the purchase of the Hobbit Hole happened”

-[5:42] coming to Alaska for first time. “Coming from Yellowstone, the big sky country where it’s sunny and beautiful all the time, it was a dramatic change to come to Southeast Alaska rainforest. Not having any friends when we first arrived was probably pretty depressing at the time...I just finished my freshman year of high school so I was 14. But I got to know some friends, we got a boat and started going fishing and started doing the things you do in Southeast Alaska. Things started getting better pretty fast. The year we moved to Alaska was the first year the Glacier Bay Lodge was opened (1966)” For a summer ended up being deckhand on the Seacrest, first boat to go up the bay from the lodge. In the evenings, worked in the kitchen at the lodge making crab salads and washing pots and pans. Then worked at Juneau Cold Storage while going to college. Paul Johnson’s dad was manager at the time, buddy of Greg’s in high school. Paul got financed to buy a tender, forester boat. Then left cold storage to be deckhand for Art’s boat, based out of Elfin Cove.

-[10:24] story of seeing the Hobbit Hole for first time, from a plane. “As I like to say, it was one of those Jesus kinds of days with the big cumulus clouds. Sun shining down through the clouds. Beam of sun shining straight down at the Hobbit Hole as we flew over at 2 or 3,000 feet. And I said to myself, boy that’s a neat spot. Up until that time I was fantasizing about building myself a log cabin here in Gustavus and I was working on getting a permit from the state to cut logs to build my log cabin. But I was just out of high school...I saw that spot and I was intrigued by it, came home and

found out it was for sale in the Juneau real estate column and had been for sale for a few years. And I since found a few people who thought about buying it. After we got back from our beach hike up the trip, we got in our family sailboat, my brother friend and Jimmy Mahan...sailed out here to the Hobbit Hole, tied up at the pilings out front, went into the beach. There were dishes in the cupboard, linens in the cabinet. The warehouse was full of tools, chainsaws. There was a diesel generator, gas generator”

-[13:10] previous owners: a couple bought HH from Doug and Flo Fried, who’d bought it from the fox farmers. Fox farmers started early 1900s, but Great Depression came and price of fur went down to nothing so they put it up for sale. Two couples started the fox farm. “The wives didn’t get along.” Feeding stations all along the island and then the feeding stations turned into live traps and they’d pop them on the head.

-[14:16] “We sailed out there and immediately fell in love with the place. At the time my brother’d finished college. It was 1973. I’d gone to college for a couple years.” Went to Mexico and Hawaii and biked around with friends before coming back. Decided wanted to buy HH after sailing to it. “At the time Fred had just finished college so he didn’t have any money...We each had a 10-speed bicycle and a 35mm camera was our net worth pretty much. So we went to our father to see if he’d go to the bank with us and counter-sign the loan. He’d also invested in remote properties and rare deals throughout our lives. He bought an island in Lake Vermillion, Minnesota before we were even born. After he got out of the service and we lived in Yellowstone he bought a few tax-delinquent mining claims above Cook City outside of Yellowstone. Anyhow it was something he didn’t hesitate to countersign the loan. At the B and Barons Bank in Juneau. And then we both had to make some money. That was during the pipeline boom so we both went to Fairbanks and started going to union calls at the labor union. Fred got a job within a week...I got a job driving truck in warehousing for what was at the time Alaska Welding Supply. I ended up becoming the warehouse foreman after two and a half years” took summer off to check on HH and worked one more summer. Greg was offered manager position in Prudo Bay so came back to Southeast Alaska and bought a troller. He’d had hand troller permit since high school. Fred bought first power troll permit that was sold after limited entry. They both became trollers. Greg also got into doing long-lining for halibut. Used to fish on Osprey seiner for winter crabbing.

-[20:08] Was about to go to Prince William Sound just before Exxon Valdez spill. Got a tiny settlement as a result, for being a crewperson from the oil companies.

-[20:20] Sailing through gut for the first time. “It just looked cooler and cooler and cooler. This spot was amazing. There’s no place else like it. It was just perfect, you know. It looked a little bit different from now, of course. There wasn’t the guesthouse, there wasn’t Fred’s house. There were three big mountain ash trees in the front yard which died of old age...There wasn’t the bridge. There was just a float out of the pilings. We used a skiff on the outhaul to go back and forth from the dock...Back when we first bought the HH there was still seining in the passes and it was a very active and very lucrative fishery. And those floats and pilings outside the HH...It was a very busy and much more active place than it is now.” No seining anymore. One year opened seining when lots of cohos going through, affected population for making years so stopped seining completely in the passes.

-[23:23] why was HH so special to Greg, compared to other places he’s lived. “Well, I guess the solitude. And that’s the one thing I miss about the HH, the solitude. But I’m also a very gregarious and social person...But I don’t miss the amount of work it takes to maintain a place like the HH. The firewood and the shoveling the snow. All the things you have to do depending on the level of existence you want to have. It’s a lot less work to be here in Gustavus.

-[24:20] traces of Tlingit occupation when they arrived: “Oh yes. There’s a Tlingit gravesite, which is from 1901 or 1903 or something like that...Wayne Howell thinks that the plateau where the upper garden used to be by the swing tree is man-made. Over the years we found a string of probably 50-

60 Russian trade beads, one at time in various places. One was found in relatively recent time. In the last 20 years on the beach... Wayne also did an excavation across from the main house on the hill and found a pounding stone... There's definitely lots of signs of previous occupation by the Tlingits. As far as we know, the story anyhow is that that was always a summer camp until the fox farm started. And when the fox farms started they chased the Tlingits off. They still come out in the spring for kelp. And I had a number of friends from Hoonah particularly when we were first out there to go hunting or to go fishing. I went out and actually learned how to rod and reel fish for kings from one of the Mills boys. So I had good friends from Hoonah in the earlier days... Greenwalls and the Henchmen"

-[27:32] bought from Doug and Flo Fried. "Doug was a troller, salmon troller. Flo was his wife. They had a gardener-helper named John. John and Flo would stay there and garden and run the place in the summertime and Doug would be off fishing. He fished until he died in Lituya Bay of a heart attack. They were there about 30 years. They were the ones that put it on the market originally, probably in '67, '68. Fellow named Milton Brown in Juneau used to work for AJ Industries. I think he trolled also. His wife was a schoolteacher and they fantasized about living there and her teaching school in Elfin Cove. They came out there and as the story goes they spent about a year fixed things up, repainted the inside of the house, did a lot of that kind of stuff. As we understand it the wife decided she wasn't cut out for living that isolated kind of lifestyle and commuting to Elfin Cove to be the schoolteacher wasn't going to be a very practical thing to do. They put it on the market and it was on the market for about 3 years before we found it"

-[30:00] HH was purchased for \$30,000 in 1973. "I thought it was a great price. Even though Zach paid \$1million he got a great price too. We added two buildings, a docks... There's no place like it in Southeast Alaska"

-[31:10] mother, Doris Howe was a career librarian. Worked for forest service as librarian in Alaska. Organized first library at Barlett Cove for park service. Having her for mother encouraged Greg to read. "I did a lot of reading in the winters at the Hobbit Hole, during those long dark days with no tv or other exterior entertainment. No internet. Growing up we had t.v. in Yellowstone. There was one channel that came from Idaho Falls. But that's the only time in my life I can ever remember having a t.v. and watching it on a regular basis. At the HH we eventually got a t.v. and did Netflix and stuff like that. We got a dish for internet but we never got a dish that was capable of doing t.v. other than what we could get over the internet. When we first got there that was before the public radio station... The first few years there was no radio and I ended up putting in a great big longwire antenna that could pick up stations all over the United States. I've always been a sorta news addict. I like to know what's going on in the rest of the world even though it has no effect on my life"

-mentions how humans keep breeding and using the earth not to their advantage

-[35:28] what's been influential in his life: been a supporter of public radio for many years. "I'm into escape literature... Novels. Something you're just reading to enjoy it. It's a story, not just facts... The Mark Twain, the classics, you know."

-[37:39] Going back to what he said about overpopulation and wisely using resources. "Just as far as the energy of the planet is concerned, and the damage with oil in particular is my big concern. Now they're developing and having a hydro system at the HH. Now that technology is advancing as far as solar and hydro and wind, all those things that are renewable. Although big hydro has caused some problems in the past

-[39:07] HH Hydro. "I was inspired by some notes that Doug Fried left in the cabinet that we found, who'd lived there for the 30 years prior to us. He'd been interested in hydro because Elfin Cove from early in its beginning had a hydro plant there but it didn't run that much of the year, it was dependent on the rain. His notes are what inspired me to do the hydro at the HH. At the time he was investigating which is now 60 years ago, small hydro did not exist. High head low flow. The

volume of water we had wasn't adequate for any of the systems that existed except when there was a lot of flow. I went up to where the existing coffer dam is on our little hydro system. I saw that where that source was was where it was actually coming out of the mountain. So I suspected that it was artesian at its source. I spent an entire year. I went up there everyday with a stopwatch. I built a little dam with a pipe coming out of it. Had a 30-gallon drum up there and measured how long it took to fill that 30-gallon drum up. Every day for an entire year to find out what our flow was. With that data I went to a company called little Spokane hydroelectric. Sized system to produce 7kW at max and down to 800W..."

-[43:35] Drought's effect. "This is the worst drought since the system has been installed. So I don't know what that flow rate has gotten to now. As long as it doesn't go dry, there'll always be something. That main stream above where the dam is dries up in the summertime." Main stream comes up from further up the mountain. "The artesian source could be a crack in the mountain from the lake." Went online in '85.

-[46:10] Pipeline going over forest service property. Wrote letter to Hoonah ranger district explaining what he planned to do, sent Greg special use permit because 2/3 of pipeline went over forest service property. But then got another letter saying FERC (Federal Energy Regulation Commission) saying he couldn't do it. "And I'd already secured my water rights because they're state. By wrote right away to FERC. Application was an inch-and-a-half thick and you had to contact every federal regulation agency, seemingly. I already had the pipe on the beach because that's when I was still buying fish for Juneau Cold Storage. I bought the plastic pipe in Seattle. We got a bunch of cement and went about our business. Dennis had a degree in engineering. We figured out what we needed to do and did it. We went online in '85 and the forest service twice had sent crews out to survey the property line. They hired private contractors to survey and they almost drove a survey stick through the pipeline. They were well aware of the fact that we had the hydro but they didn't say anything to the forest service apparently. And then in more recent time I got paranoid about the forest service finding out about it. So we decided to paint the pipe where it's above ground. We got a bunch of that national guard camouflage green and Jane and I drained the pipe so there wouldn't be any condensation. We spent the day toweling off the pipe all the way up the top and painting it. At 4 o'clock in the afternoon we were coming off the pipeline and our dog alerted us that someone was coming to the house. Here were three or four forest service guys walking up the dock where their skiff was and they waved and we waved and they kept going. Since then and since the institute Zach has gotten ahold of the forest service... You don't want to be in a wilderness area and listening to a diesel generator"

-[50:27] Jane came up with Peggy, whose husband Dennis was another troller. "Jane came up to visit Peg that summer. Peg and Dennis were living on a floathouse on the beach at the Hobbit Hole. They came up and I was just entertaining Jane and Lorna. We went on skiff rides, did this and that. We were still busy fishing and still had the communal dinners every night so it was a busy place. Jane and I just hit it off. She had to go back to Reno at the end of a couple weeks and then she came back up at the end of the summer. And then she agreed to come back... I guess we fell in love, we got intimate... After that summer when we went to Belize was when we decided to get married... Just her personality. Just the way she was. Nothing special. Everything special, you know. Just a person I respected and liked. And she seemed to like me, that was the main thing"

-[53:04] was it a fishing commune? "The only thing that was communal about it was that it was a bunch of young people that'd just started fishing. Rather than going to Elfin Cove. We became friends with these people that we fished with. We shared codes to tell a person where the fish were at. We had a code wheel with the fish you'd caught and dates and where you were. All those things were in the code. You'd turn the wheel with two disks, turn it to the date and there'd be a code that corresponded to three or five hundred dollars. And then there'd be another phrase that

corresponded to your location...Nowadays of course everybody's got cellphones...It was just a good time for us to get together, have an evening meal together, and go to bed and get up at 3 in the morning."

-at most 20 or 25 people for dinner at HH. Fourth of July more people, some from Elfin

-everybody slept on their boat. Debra might have been a tent camper before Bobo came along.

Debra and Dennis are the oldest old-timers that are still around, still fishing. Old college buddy Ron Kreher deckhanded for Greg and was the gardener, built the rock garden in front of the house and fished with Greg.

-in the wintertime, usually just Greg

-[59:48] When Greg and Fred decided to stay together: "We just decided to do it as brothers. We didn't really think about it. I ended up staying in the house because I stayed there all year long.

Neither one of us were really staying there the first summer because we were both fishing. Actually I was still buying fish at that time and Fred was still fishing and staying on his boat. It just became apparent that I was going to be the one living there all the time. I got the house. He could've lived upstairs in the warehouse but he lived in a wall tent for at least two or three years before he built his house" Interacted every day, all the time

-[1:05:00] talks about guesthouse business, which wasn't very big, sometimes hosted kayaking trips.

-[1:07:04] Describe a typical day in fishing. "I fished all year long. In the wintertimes I just rod and reel fished for king salmon. In the summer I powerrolled. The thing about fish is that, I think probably even in rivers, they bite at certain times. The time that's most assured is at the crack of dawn, when the sun first shines. In the summertime it's 3:30 to 4 o'clock. And in June and July I like to have my gear in the water no later than 4, when it's still light enough to see what you're doing. Sometimes you'd make your whole day in the first three or four hours of the day. The next best times are tide changes, or either side of a tide change, where you are at the end of a flood. It's usually a good time when the current's starting to slack off. There'll be a slack water period...The early morning and right before dark is also a good time. When it's daylight for 20 hours, that doesn't give you much time to sleep. When I first started fishing and I wouldn't say deep in debt. I would fish black to black, I would say, which only gives you 4 hours of sleep....If I was fishing in Cross Sound, right in front of the house, I would be out for early morning bite but I would usually quit by 5 or 6 in the evening and have time to sell my fish and have dinner and be in bed and have my 6 hours of sleep...Every day the same old thing. You wake up automatically...And it's hard work if you want to do well. Catching fish isn't that hard. The important thing is to have our gear in the water. You can't catch them if you're tied up at the dock. Basically hard work is the key. Trolling—your electrical aura—your lines that are down in the water have voltage. You just want a slightly positive voltage or you won't catch. There's always people that catch more than other people and there's just little tricks with your gear and all those things"

-still has hand trolling permit but [1:13:35] "not inspired. I spent forty years on the water. I'm done. I wouldn't mind going out and catching a king salmon or two to eat, but as far as catching for money I just don't have any interest in doing that anymore."

-[1:13:51] favorite stories from Hobbit Hole: 4<sup>th</sup> of July fireworks. "There were just so many good things it's hard to pinpoint anything specific." Fourth of July get together every year, talent show.

-[1:15:35] favorite spots at HH: magic beach, eagle crest, top of the island. Used to go up every morning for his physical activity in the wintertime. Used to do a lot of hunting, got wiser about how to do it as he got older.

-[1:17:28] What they ate: "Fish and rice. Venison and rice. When somebody'd go to town or you'd go to town, fresh produce. Always had frozen veggies in the freezer. Broccoli is the one thing I can remember we put up in the freezer. The root shelf where we had our potatoes and carrots...Over 50% (living off the land.) But you know we bought flour, fruit, canned goods, beans. In the younger

days it was more off the land. Fish and rice, venison and rice. Deer and potatoes. We used to be able to get a lot of Dungeness crab. In fact you could fill a Dungeness pot in the Hobbit Hole on an overnight soak. But when the sea otters were reintroduced thanks to my father and the national park service. Their first introduction to Southeast Alaska from the Aleutians was to Cape Spencer. They flew into the Gustavus Airport in a big old Hercules and flew them up to Cape Spencer in the old amphib planes that used to fly out here in Southeast.” flew sea otters in a couple more times were pretty successful. Suggests people should be allowed to harvest one sea otter a year.

-[1:23:14] changes in wildlife. Not really. Only substantial population at island is deer. But isn't that much outside pressure. Topics cover moose, fish, micro-plastics.

-[1:31:30] Process of fishing, selling it out at sea.

-[1:32:15] selling the HH “It was always a lot of work but I never got any younger. I wasn't fishing anymore and we collectively didn't want to continue to pursue the guesthouse business. Fred never spent a winter there. And in the wintertime it's a desolate place. It's just lonely and Jane definitely wasn't into it. And I wasn't either. I was tired of shoveling stone, splitting wood, all those things you have to do. What's going on now, you don't get a grasp of that because you've got a whole bunch of people splitting wood and gardening. But in the wintertime, if you've got your boats tied up to the dock you gotta shovel snow to get there. When you've done it for forty years you get tired of it.”

-[1:35:25] How they actually sold the HH. “Zach met our realtor on the Nagoonberry trail here and found out it was for sale and immediately expressed an interest... We had some interest but nothing serious and then Zach became seriously interested and had to have an appraisal as a nonprofit. The appraisal come out seriously less than we were asking. We had one other cash offer but it was somebody—a deckhand who got involved with some rich girl—who was going to turn it into a lodge.” Thinks fish is a public resource, should be available to everyone but charter people have money and take too much. Goes on to discuss views on tourism

-[1:43:20] pet graves at HH. Doris' ashes there. “She wanted to be with the boys and we picked that spot so we could watch us come in and out of the gut at the end of the fishing day.” Bob used to host Howe Hour every Friday night.

-[1:48:25] Transitioning to life in Gustavus = “easy street”

-[1:50:15] “I feel some satisfaction about having worked hard enough and frugally enough so I have enough money to do what I want to do, within reason and not have to cut my own firewood. But even if you cut your own firewood you still have to burn gas”

-[1:54:08] “I'm a little bit concerned that Zach has too many big groups of people. He should restrict his groups to 10 people or something just because it affects the experience and it's also going to affect the whole trip. Hundreds of people going up and down the mountain, the trails and all those things”

-took 3 years after deal that Greg and Jane took to move out

-on Inian: “I think it's excellent and that's one of the reasons we were happy that Zach did it. 'Cause it can't hurt and it can only be good as far as the future of the earth is concerned. I hope it has some impact. Enough of the right people get there who are strong believers in making some sort of change and do it and not just talk about it”