



FRED HOWE

Interviewer: Regina Kong

Others Present: N/A

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“...you were right on the edge of the earth.”

-born in Mississippi, where father was working on first position in National Park Service, Natchez Trace Parkway

-then family moved to North Carolina where father worked Blue Ridge Parkway. Fred got into fishing because their house had two streams there. “We built a raft once out of old scrap wood and lots of nails. It was so heavy with nails it almost sank when we put it in the creek. That’s when I started spending a lot of time looking under rocks and finding various critters. I was also very curious about butterflies. I started collecting butterflies. My dad knew a lot of people and he got me lined up with a butterfly collector who knew how to do lots of things. One of the favorite things I did was go up on the Blue Ridge Parkway at night when my dad was on patrol. Every time we’d see a big moth or something fly into the headlights we’d stop and I’d jump out with my net. That was my real big interest there. Between fish and butterflies, it was a pretty interesting life for me. We were there about five or six years. That’s when my brother was born. From there we went to Yellowstone National Park. The fishing there was great. That’s where I was learning how to fly fish and to flies and getting even more into fishing. I just loved it there.”

-[4:08] Deciding to move to Alaska “When my brother and I came home from school—that was November probably. Our routine was to come home and have some cookies and milk then we’d go sledding until dark. That particular night, Mom said she’d like us to be home early so we could have a family conference. I knew what that meant because my dad’s been wanting to go to a park in Alaska for as long as I could remember. Sure enough, that was what it was about, to move to Alaska or not. Of course, we all voted yes.” It was Fred’s last year of high school

-[6:07] first impressions of Alaska. “I was taking a lot of photos on the way up on the ferry so I was sort of disappointed when I started looking at them because they all looked about the same. Water, trees, and mountains...So that began Alaska. My first summer in Alaska I went to work for the forest service on a trail crew. My mom got me all set up to go to University of Alaska Fairbanks.” Next summer got job with department of fish and game working on weir, a gate across stream that stops salmon from going up or down. Next summer working on Kenai Peninsula with fish and game, doing lake surveys. Carried canoe and depth sounding gear and basic maps of particular lake, do bathometric survey.

-[9:23] in school, one of chemistry lab partners turned out to be a commercial fisherman and asked Fred if he wanted to go fishing. That was Fred’s “first, real commercial fishing experience. It was pretty tough because I got seasick a lot and I was almost ready to quite once but Don the skipper said, ‘Keep with it. You’ll like yourself better if you stick with it.’ And that’s become something that’s been very important to me. It’s really important to just stick with a project once you get started. Finish it up.”

-[13:30] story of sailing to the Hobbit Hole with Greg and Jimmy Mahan. “The house was just like somebody had walked off and gone to town for the weekend...A big warehouse full of incredible amounts of stuff because anything you need to repair out there—there’s really no down the street hardware store. Fishermen in isolated places in Alaska tend to collect a lot of junk and most of the time it comes in useful sooner or later. It’s funny...right out behind the liquor store is Bruce Smith’s stash. When Zach came along and bought the Hobbit Hole we had to thin out a lot of the stuff in the warehouse but we tried to keep from getting too carried away.”

-[16:12] Story about biking across Europe with a friend then adventure afterwards. “We flew to London. I probably was..22 or 23. We camped out and we found a place called Houndslow’s Heath. This kind of forgotten area. We found a bicycle store with some old guy who said he’d build us some bikes. We told him what we wanted to do. So he put together some bikes for us. We headed out, rode to southern end of England and took a ferry across, rode down the coast of France and inland along the north Pyrennes mountains. And we crossed into Andorra. It was quite an adventure. For me, neither one of us spoke French or any French. That was quite a long time ago, before people were going to Europe, going on bicycle trips. Most other bicycle people you saw were people in some race or something. We were camping out so we’d always try to find a place out in the corner of some pasture somewhere, set up our tent, cook whatever kind of dinner we had. I remember one place...these old stone buildings and there were a couple of logs across the river. And we carried our bikes across the logs and find a real nice place to set up camp. Who knows whose land it was, but nobody bothered us...”

-[23:55] Fred’s adventure spirit. “That’s what’s bothering me a lot right now because I don’t seem to have it anymore. I’m wondering if I’m just burned out or what.”

-[24:56] Top adventures. “One winter I had one of my little fish boats down south, it was docked in Port Townsend. I ran into an older guy who was doing some work on his sailboat. I started talking to him and it turns out he was a second-generation boat-builder from New Zealand who had a boat shop in Port Townsend which was pretty famous. Cecil Lange was a real salesman. Before the day was over he had me talked in to coming in and looking at his shop. Before I knew it, I was signed in to come down next winter and build a sailboat. That was my big sailboat adventure. And it was really quite an adventure. I got a state loan, I sold my fish boat. Went down and went right to work in the boat shop and watched my sailboat—watched the fiberglass part of it being laid up. So you start out with the hull. That’s the easy part. Then you’ve got to add all the other stuff. I spent the whole winter working in the boat shop, really enjoying it, learning a lot, and getting to meet a lot of the local sailors. That next spring we got the boat done in one winter. It wasn’t completely done but it was far enough along so I could put the fishing gear on it and take it up to Alaska and go fishing. For the next two or three winters I kept taking it back to Port Townsend to finish up stuff.” Eventually ended up buying a house in Port Townsend.

-[30:43] Building the boat was “a really neat experience. I was learning from the masters about how to do stuff, how to use various tools. The other big adventure was I ended up not having enough money to pay for the boat...I had to go get a bank loan. For me, that was quite an adventure...Just because I had to do a lot of things I’d never done before. And I knew if I couldn’t get this loan I’d be in a lot of trouble”

-[32:30] “It dawns on me that most of my adventures have been work-related. My first job was working for national forest service when we first came to Juneau. One of the big adventures I had there was they flew me and another older guy out to Admiralty Island to build recreational cabins. And Admiralty Island is home to the big bears, beautiful wilderness area, back before there’d been too much logging done on it. We got along fine, the old guy and I. We went fishing every night. The next two or three jobs working with the fish and game department were all summertime adventures. Fishing, tromping around in the woods. Couple of the winter jobs I had for fish and game when we

were doing the stream samples I mentioned before. A lot of it was flying on float planes or helicopters...”

-[35:50] Theme of islands in Fred’s life. “Part of my background as far as islands are concerned. That’s an interesting thing to note. When my mom and dad first got married, the first thing they did was buy a piece of land on an island in northern Minnesota. My dad’s father was a carpenter so they built a cabin on it. When we were living in North Carolina, when we had vacation time, that’s where we would go. You’re right, that’s the beginning of the island legacy.”

-[36:55] Family stories. “Both my mom and dad, because we ended up in the park service and we were always going to different places. It’s like our other family besides us the immediate family just didn’t stick together very well. We sort of lost track of them. I haven’t been very good about keeping my family together.”

-[38:12] History of family “Both my mom and dad’s family were pretty much centered in Minnesota. My grandfather on my mom’s side—we usually went to see them at Christmas. We’d drive across the prairies from Yellowstone to Minnesota. My grandfather had a huge collection of Alaska Sportman magazines. That’s where I first got exposed to Alaska. Because it was wintertime and it was cold and dark and snowy. We’d go out once or twice a day and walk down to the lake where there’d be lots Canadian geese wintering over. Other than that, it was just sitting inside so I’d be looking over Sportman magazines all the time. That’s what got me hooked. So I knew all about Alaska when we got a chance to come up here. I was already looking forward to it.”

-[39:53] What excited Fred about Alaska. “Just the wildness of it. The lack of lots of people. The fishing of course and the hunting. In those days I was still into hunting. And I guess...I got a job working on the Alaska pipeline. After we got the Hobbit Hole we had to pay for it. That’s right when the pipeline was happening...I of course was sort of against the pipeline but on the other hand I realized it was going to happen whether I liked it or not. So the best thing to do was take advantage of it...The first job I had up there was using a tagline to hook these big hooks in the ends of these pieces of 40-inch pipe that were about 50-feet long and weighed several tons. And they’d lift them up with a crane and set them down on a truck. But all this was happening when it was 20, 30 below zero and the wind was blowing 20 or 30 knots...There was only one other guy from Alaska who happened to be my roommate. The rest of them were pipeline people from Oklahoma. They thought we were pretty funny, had pretty funny accents.” Made enough that winter to pay off most of Hobbit Hole loans. Went back one more winter to make enough to make down payment on another boat.

-[44:26] When Greg and Fred decided to buy Hobbit Hole together. “We were both pretty young. As Jane said about Greg, he was the first person she met who had a mortgage when he was 20 years old. It just seemed really natural because we both liked the place. We didn’t fight over it. We just did it....Greg always thinks he got the bad end of the deal. It’s funny he ended up being the one that stayed there most of the time because he’s more gregarious. And that’s where I found out I don’t like crowds but I don’t like being all by myself all the time either...I stayed out there by myself one fall. For a while it was okay but then I just didn’t like it. I decided that’s not how I wanted to spend my winter. Both being alone and the fact that it was dark. I like being outdoors a lot. When it gets really cold and wet and rainy you just don’t feel like going out much. The funny thing is, in the years after, a lot of times in the fall or spring Greg would take off on a trip or go somewhere...and I’d be there by myself and it never really bothered me to be there alone...But I’d gotten into a steadying nature a lot. There was always entertainment. There were always birds and otters to watch, nice places to go for walks. So as I got older it didn’t bother me as much. And I realize now that a lot of that was because I was so taken up by fishing. I just didn’t need anything else for a while.”

-[48:17] Fred and fishing. “I just didn’t realize how many other things in my life I was kind of passing up because fishing was always in the forefront. Relationships with women...Travel

opportunities. Fishing was a summertime thing. That pretty much meant I was going to be fishing...My dad and I had a chance to go to the Galapagos Islands with a friend of my dad's who was a guide. That wasn't even in the summer but at that time I didn't have a lot of money. And it just was too much money. So I didn't do it. And I wish that I had...I was too wound up in fishing. That's the crux of the issue, I guess. That's why right now I've kind of lost my drive to go fishing. I don't know what's going on. I guess it's part of retirement, getting old." Fred was fishing for money but also because he just really liked it.

-[51:40] Favorite fish to catch. "Steelhead. Because they're hard to catch. They're really good fighters and they're really pretty fish. Mostly because they're in rivers. I really like fishing in rivers. That's one of the reasons we really liked fishing around the Hobbit Hole because there's a lot of tide there. The commercial fishing—trolling anyhow—it's almost like fishing in a river. You're working in the currents, in the back eddies, behind points and all these things. You basically learn to live by the tidebook because depending on where the tide's going, that's where the fish are. 'Cause the fish use the tide. When it's flooding, that's where you want to be fishing. In some places, when it's ebbing the fish don't want to fight the current so they pull off into some back eddy somewhere. If you happen to find them you can have some good fishing. It's fun. It's like a game, I guess...It's a challenge. Everyday's different. You learn something everyday. You learn to be very observant. You've got to pay attention to what's going on. You can't be slacking off or you'll be in trouble."

-[54:29] Interactions with all the fishermen at Hobbit Hole over the summers. "We all got along real good."

-[56:02] Not liking crowds. "Growing up in Yellowstone Park in the summertime there are lots of people. All us kids found out that all you had to do was go back in the woods a quarter of a mile to some lake or some river or stream and we'd have it all to ourselves. The crowd thing is part of being an introvert...We had our disagreements (at the Hobbit Hole). There were some times when I kind of would've liked to have had more space to myself."

-[57:18] Places at Hobbit Hole Fred would go to have space to himself, process of building his house on Hobbit Hole. "When I first got the sailboat I pretty much lived on the sailboat. So that was my space then. Somewhere along the line I started setting up a tent up on the hill there right where my house is now, just a mountain tent. That's where I sleep, a place I could read a little bit in the evening. Eventually I got a tent top, a tent on a plywood platform. I had a reading light on that. Eventually that's when Jane had showed up and Greg and Jane got together. They were kind of in the big house. That's when Greg said to me once, 'I bet you Joe Sergeant could build you a real nice house.'...I hauled all the gravel for the footing from over on Magic Beach. I'd go to Magic Beach with five-gallon buckets. I'd pull the skiff up on the beach when it was flooding so it wouldn't get stranded. I'd put one of these white fish totes in the skiff...fill it full of gravel, motor it back to the Hobbit Hole, unload it again into another tote and then wheelbarrow it up the hill and dump it into one of the old hot tubs that was there until I had enough gravel to do all the footings. We borrowed a cement mixer from a guy in Elfin Cove...It took us four days to get all that material up the hill."

-[1:04:17] When Greg, Jane, Fred decided to sell the Hobbit Hole. "Greg retired a few years before I did. At that time he was starting to get tired—he didn't want to be out there in the winters anymore. And the other thing is the Elfin Cove population started dropping so there weren't as many people in the wintertime...After Greg retired there...We just didn't have the energy to keep up with everything. And Greg had done most of the work out there because he was the one who was there most of the time...He just got tired of it. I wasn't really ready to sell it but it was obvious it was more than we could keep up with. It was obvious we couldn't really split it up...There'd been a guy out a few years before who'd been in the Coast Guard who was getting ready to go into real estate. While he was in the Coast Guard. He told Greg, 'Okay if you're ever ready to sell this place, let me know. I'd like to sell it for ya.' So when we decided to go ahead and do it, we had that guy come out.

Mike something or other. We didn't know much about real estate then and he signed it up with a three-year contract which is kind of unheard of. But we didn't know any better. As the story goes, it's when Greg bought him back to Gustavus in a skiff, he was waiting for the airplane when he ran into Zach and somehow they came up with this idea. For a long while, like two or three years, we knew that Zach wanted to do this but we were in this contract...I remember telling my friend Ellen who was more business-like than I am about Zach. She said, 'Oh you know it's just a kid with a dream.' And I said, 'Yeah, I know, but that's how everything gets started, with a dream.' It was just this long process. Eventually Zach got some help on starting this nonprofit. By that time, our three year contract deadline had run out so we didn't have to worry about the realtor taking a chunk. So then actually a friend of Ellen's was a realtor in Seattle. We knew Zach had this idea but he didn't know anything more—we didn't know anything more. We never knew if it was going to happen or not. I thought it would be prudent to keep it on the market. And so I got in touch with this friend of Ellen's and he actually came up. We gave him a thousand-dollar retainer. Apparently he was having some family trouble at the time so he never really did much. I don't even think we had a contract with him. The dream kept getting stronger and stronger for Zach until finally they came up with an offer. We all sat down and went through the offer. Greg and I and Jane didn't care for it very much. We were going to have to insure it and a whole bunch of stuff that we thought should've been his responsibility...What we really want to know, if you're gonna do this Zach, let's get on with this. We want to get out of there. And Greg and Jane by that time really wanted to get out to Gustavus. It didn't really matter that much to me, but at the same time I was getting ready to quit fishing. That got Zach moving, then we came up with the idea of leasing it for 2 years and having Zach pay for the insurance, and Greg and Jane would stay on to run the guesthouse and do the cooking and I could keep fishing if I wanted to. That's right about the time when I got tired of fishing. I started fishing less and less. My crewmember would get upset with me because we weren't fishing enough...It was gonna happen in December of the second year of the lease but it didn't have it quite together so the actual transaction happened right after the first of the year, must've been 2016 or 2017."

-[1:14:19] The transition. "It was kind of hard, to tell the truth. Last summer was my first summer away from the Hobbit Hole. For me, I'd just quit fishing too. I'd just sold my boat. So last summer was a tough summer for me, and I think it was for Greg too. I don't think he realized how much it affected him. I'm sure it was the same with me. I hadn't really anticipated how I would feel about leaving a place and a occupation that I'd been doing for forty-some years. It was kind of hard, and I'm still dealing with it. I'm still not really all that there yet."

-[1:15:41] Has Fred found anything to take the place that fishing used to have in his life? "No I haven't, and that's another big thing that I'm wrestling with...(Friend who's a life coach named Judy) told me, 'Quit worrying about it and just let it happen.' So that's where I'm trying to be right now. Trying to get some projects."

-[1:17:10] Fred explains history of the house in Gustavus that he's living in. Used to belong to parents.

-[1:28:43] What Fred misses most about living at Hobbit Hole. "I always had so much freedom there to do what I want. It's like if I wanted to go somewhere I could jump into either one of the boats or I could go for a walk. It's not that much different from here actually. There's a lot of freedom here. But out there, you were right on the edge of the earth. It's such a dynamic place. There's just so much going on, and I'm sure that's what really attracted Zach to it. It's such a beautiful place. And I guess I really enjoyed the privacy. I guess I've always really liked wild places, and it's a pretty wild place out there."