



DEBRA PAGE

Interviewer: Regina Kong

Others Present: N/A

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“...that was the dream of all of our lives, was to live in the bush and have a life like that.”

-born New Jersey. Came to Alaska when she was 20. “I followed a man to Alaska in 1973 and I’ve been here ever since.” The Hobbit Hole story starts in the winter of ‘74/’75. I flew out to Elfin Cove with a friend. I heard that it was out there and at that time, that was the dream of all of our lives, was to live in the bush and have a life like that. The next summer, I came fishing with a different boyfriend who still lives in Elfin Cove and is a very good friend still. Then I spent the winter in Elfin Cove and that must’ve been ’76...in the house that my son now lives in and owns. Part of the winter—that was when the hippies versus the rednecks was absolutely horrible. There were a number of people in Elfin Cove who thought I was white trash and wanted me out. It finally got to me, so I got in my kayak and started kayaking across South Pass ‘cause I knew there were a couple guys out at the Hobbit Hole. And I sort of didn’t leave for 18, 19 years. I was back and forth that winter from the Hobbit Hole to here and hooked up with one of the two guys and we were there all the next summer and I lived there with him the whole winter. That spring was when I bought my first boat. Actually I borrowed a boat and bought an engine for it, an outboard. I dredged up a few whole pieces of gear and started fishing. I can’t quite remember. I think I made either 200 or 800 dollars that summer. But it was enough for me to go back to Yosemite and climb so that was all I cared about. By the next year I bought a real boat. It was still a hand troller, so no power involved in getting the fish up. I was fishing and at that point, Fred was fishing at the Hobbit Hole. Greg was running the packer, the fish-buying boat for Juneau Cold Storage. And ’78, that’s when Patrick and Bobo came on the Man of Aron, a little double-ender that they bought in Fairbanks and brought down. And Dennis Montgomery was in the Boston Whaler and he showed up about that time. Captain Snoozy came that year or the next. At any rate, the original crew was Greg and Fred, Reba, Van, and Ronald. Those were the five guys and I joined them. And in the summer we had a wendy who kept the gardens and sort of took care of everybody. We lived on our boats. I often lived in the back room. Many things happened. We all shared the cooking, we all shared the work. We acted like a commune, although Greg and Fred were all sort of supporting us. We all chipped in in our ways. The Hobbit Hole sort of grew from there. Then Kim came and lived with Greg and fished for him once he started fishing, on the Quest. He fished his dad’s sailboat for part of a summer, in between working, running the scow. And then a variety of other people started coming in and out. As we fished more we got crewmen, who added to the population. I think at one point there were 40 people living there and it had stopped being a family. It was sort of a business. By then, Jane and Jennifer Stromme were the paid cooks and they actually made their living by cooking for all these fishermen. So that just was a little too much. But the glory days of the Hobbit Hole were when we were all very young, in our 20s. We were all dreamers. We were living the dream of dreams, living in the Alaska bush and being concerned for one another and being concerned for one another and making that stuff work. I moved in and out. I was climbing so I’d go to Yosemite in the spring and

fall and come back for part of the winter and most of the summer. And we all fished. And we all learned to fish by working together. Fred had the only real boat for a long time, which must've been 38 foot wood boat. But he had radar and at one point, all of us little boats. We were mostly skiffs, we were mostly handtrolling—mostly skiffs with outboard engines. When the fog would come, we'd make a long line behind Fred and he'd lead us. And we'd all fish, even though we didn't have any equipment. I didn't even have a depth finder. I didn't have anything. I had no equipment, I'd just listen for the surf and use landmarks or get behind somebody who had electronics. I think it was like '79 before Bobo—I'd hooked up with Bobo by then—put a depth finder. So finally had that. I could see the depth, that was the only thing I could see. We just shared all the knowledge and there was one boat out there. We knew what a good fisherman he was. We'd try really hard to get close to see what kind of gear he was running. I remember one morning I was getting really close, trying to get a look and one of my poles ran right into his boat. And I was so embarrassed.”

-[10:00] Hobbits. “Greg was so driven that he'd just made us all do it. He would get up at 3, 3:30, 4—he would get up later all through the season because daylight's later. And when he got up, that was it. We all had to get going. Nobody ever tied outside of him because that would be really dangerous. We just worked. We put in our long day then we all came home and made dinner and talked and laughed and played cards and did things together. And that was really great. Kim and Ronald did the gardens. At one point we had an ornamental garden that was just outstanding. We'd go to the beach and pick up buckets and buckets of white stones so we could make the white stone path. We'd spend hours and hours doing that. My job was always the strawberry beds. I didn't know anything about gardens. I didn't know anything about soil or anything. I was a hunter-gatherer. But I knew how to weed so I'd weed that strawberry bed because I love strawberry beds, and I kept that going. And then I got pregnant and had Taiga. He was a blessing and a curse. It was a little hard for all the guys to suddenly have a baby around. He was by far the first baby. So there were some hard points. I was naïve enough to really think they were all my brothers and would just accept that he was there child too. It didn't work out that way, but they were all extraordinarily accepting that we lived there and they loved the kids. Everybody was wonderful and the kids just remember it as paradise. They had beautiful lawns and dogs. Out on the point they'd go out to the tidepools and go fishing and they'd go hiking. Taiga was a very adventurous toddler.

-[13:15] Story about Taiga. “When he was about two, a few times he disappeared. He would take off into the forest. It was terrifying. Suddenly my son would be gone. And Dick Hoffman was there at that point and he had a search and rescue dog. We actually sent the search and rescue dog after him. Of course the big fear was that he had somehow gotten to the dock and gotten into the water. And people were just searching every which direction. And we find him like a quarter mile down this path down the beach by swing cove.

-[14:11] Another Taiga story. “When he was four, Joe Handtroller—another of the guys—came running down from the sauna saying, ‘I found Taiga with a hatchet.’ We just looked at him and said, ‘Yeah he's chopping some kindling.’ He grew up on my boat. He had a knife in his hand when he was two years old. Might've been a real dull knife and I let him poke at herring that came out of fishes' bellies. But when he was four or five he actually pulled his first line of fish—handtrolled it. I had carpal tunnel in both my hands. He knew that I was having a really rough day and he said, ‘I'll do that Mommy.’ By golly he cranked that thing up and they always helped with the fish. That's how they learned to count was they got a penny for every job. Every job they'd move from a fish tub into a tank. Any job they did. So they learned to count, learned to count really high.”

-[15:37] Debra and Bobo fishing separately. “I always had my own boat and Bobo always had his own boat. Except for the first year, when Taiga was born, I did not fish. I came out to the Hobbit Hole intending to fish but I just could not pull it together. Then the year Ryland was born, Bobo and I decided we would fish together on his new boat. And that was the biggest disaster of our life.

I'm surprised that he's still alive. I'd have that gaffe hook in my hand and I'd just be looking at him—I have a bad nature and it was really close. We're both captains. I do not take well to anyone telling me what to do. Ever. And on a boat, someone telling me what to do? We were working really hard. I remember the worst moment of all that summer: We were fishing humpys, which is just crazy hard work. Taiga came out of the wheel house and said, 'Ryland's awake, he's crying.' Of course, I was gonna get up, feed him and comfort him and put him in the Johnny Jump up or something or put him on my back and get to work. And Bobo just turned to me and said, 'Keep pulling.' That was the moment when I'm really surprised that he did not get a gaffe hook through the side of his head. It just looked just like a humpy at that minute. We never tried fishing together again. I don't know whether I'm supposed to say things that awful but it's true. It was bad."

-[17:53] Debra's stories about Ryland. "The boys grew up on the boat. They were on the boat almost every day. I tried to get in early so they could get some beach time everyday. There were a few times when I could bring them here (to Elfin) with a friend. One year I had a nanny and she stayed in this cabin and their best friend was in the cabin that Taiga now owns. And she would watch the little kids so I could go out for a few hours and do that—occasionally. Otherwise they were on the boat. I had to read to them and we had to sing songs and tell stories while I'm doing the work and trying to keep them from not killing one another or falling overboard. Or, once I had a powertroller, the equipment's dangerous, and that was difficult." The "worst story" about Ryland: "Ryland was a baby. He was still nursing. He must've been one and a half or something. We were in my double ender, two lines going twenty fathoms deep. I was in really big current and I hit bottom with one of the leads. Ryland had just woken up and I was nursing him. He didn't have a lifejacket on. The bartender had a **folksill** where we all slept. Then it had a carport and an open-back deck. So the carport roof was open but I hadn't put a lifejacket on because I was just going to nurse him and hope that he would go back to sleep and lie down. But when the lead snagged, the boat has these big arms. When the lead snagged, that boat arm pulled over. The current was pushing it sideways and the next minute, the gunnel of my boat was in the water. I had an immediate choice: I could try to get Ryland down, in which case the boat could've flipped. Or I could just drop him down where he was and reach for the steering. I decided to reach for the steering. Meanwhile he slid. I barely caught hold of him as he was going overboard. This was a rather panic-ly, really bad moment. I got him abroad. Of course he's crying at that point. I put him on the floor. I'm fighting the steering and fighting the boat, getting on the VHF, the radio and saying, 'I'm really in trouble I need help.' And we all listened to the radio, were glued to the radio all the time because we were all beginners... That was a really bad moment. I went in that night. Bobo came in. We were actually going to have our August closure in a couple of days and Bobo said, 'No you're going to town.' So I got Ryland and we got on a plane and went into town that evening because I was really flipped out. Paula met me at the airport. We're driving down the expressway and Ryland manages to open the car door. No carseat of course, but he managed to open the car door. That was a really, really bad day. That was a really dangerous one."

-[23:42] second story about Ryland. "I think he was seven or eight. We were in the Madam Ching by then. Taiga was my crewman—he's about four years older, so about twelve and crewing for me. It was a heavy fog so I told Ryland he had to drive the boat with the radar. And he was saying, 'I can't do that.' And I said, 'No. You're going to pretend it's a videogame and you're gonna drive the boat because you can see the radar and the electronics. I can't. I'm in the back.' And we were really catching fish so we were really working hard. And by golly, that kid got on in there and drove that boat for us. He probably only lasted for an hour or so but it was probably the tide change. We were really catching fish and he did it."

-[24:40] Story about Ryland when he was nine. "We were at Dundas Bay and got into an incredibly hot bite. And he was nine years old and this was power gear. And he got on one side and he pulled

up those fish and it was fall, so they were 7, 8 pound fish. I'd run over there and conk it on the head and run back to my side. He'd pull it in then he'd pull the next one. I'd run over, conk it, run back and run my gear. He probably did that for two hours. He did a man's job, no doubt. So the boys did grow up on the boat and they both learned to work really, really hard and they're the two best fishermen in the fleet now. And Ryland has Greg's old boat, the Keta, which is one of the best fishing boats out there. And anyone would agree, they're two of the best. Both great fishermen and both really know how to work."

-[26:40] fishing with Hobbits. "Besides learning to fish together, having that safety net was just a big part of it. In a one week period, I think I saved Jimmy Jimmy. Jimmy Jimmy saved Patrick. An engine stopped or something happened and you move as fast as you can to get in there, throw them a line, and pull them out of danger. It's funny that in a week each of us had the chance to help the other ones. Besides that, the knowledge was really important."

-[27:31] "This was the whole life that I've always wanted. And still is, obviously. I've been fishing since '75, so this is 44 years. I'm still doing the same thing. And my kids are, too. I couldn't imagine living somewhere else. I don't live at the Hobbit Hole anymore but it's a very similar life. We're in Elfin Cove but a little bit separated from it. We have gardens. Because it's the families—both my sons are here, both my daughter-in-laws and Bobo and I. Taiga and Amy and the kids live right next to us. We still have this communal thing going. And it's still the same thing." All fishermen in her family watch over each other. "My kids are such good fishermen not because we taught them to fish but because they learned from all those guys. They just were little sponges. And everybody thought, Oh they're just kids.' And pretty soon, you know, they took over the world."

-[31:10] How Debra got into fishing. "After high school, I was supposed to go to Vassar, but I decided to put out my thumb and hitchhike west. I'd met a guy that winter and he'd moved to Colorado Springs so I thought I'd go visit. I fell for a lot of guys in my day. I fell for some guy in Colorado Springs and ended up staying there. I went to University of Colorado for a year and couple months and met another guy. That was the guy I followed up to Alaska."

-[32:20] Debra's family. Older brother. Parents very different. "My dad would look at the woods and just got ooh. They liked golf and tennis. I grew up in the suburbs but I always dreamed of wilderness from day one. I resented every time they tried to put a dress on me, which they tried a lot. My mom, an absolutely beautiful woman. She looked just like Ingrid Bergman. My dad started a newspaper. In the beginning we didn't have a lot of money but my mom knew how to be stylish..."

-[34:40] relationship with parents. Debra was always close with them, but "They really hated my lifestyle. They wanted me to go to a good college so I could marry some rich guy and live in New York City and have the good life. My idea of the good life was just really different."

-[36:00] Of Alaska, "This is my perfect place."

-[37:05] Started climbing when she was living in Juneau, probably '75, spring before she moved out to Hobbit Hole. "I ended up going up on the glacier and I stayed there for a month or so. I didn't want to come down so I camped up on the glacier and learned to climb. Then John took me to Yosemite..."

-[38:03] "Taiga was the youngest person to ever climb El Capitain. He was four months in my belly when I climbed the shield. I was the first woman to climb the shield, for whatever that's worth. I didn't tell my partner. He just thought I was a little fat. I told him afterwards and he just shook his head because I took a forty-foot fall up there. You're wearing a harness, just swung a bunch. I don't think that it hurt Taiga."

-[38:53] What attracted Debra to climbing. "It's mediation. It's the strictest form of mediation. You lose your concentration and you die. It's pretty straightforward...It's absolutely physical. There were such great people there...Culmination of wonderful people, exercise, outdoors. Sun on rock. There's nothing better. That Manzanita smell. Yeah. Bloody hands."

-[41:00] Living at Hobbit Hole during summer, winters elsewhere. Once Debra and Bobo started making more money, travel the world. Namibia is Debra's favorite place their family went because of big cats, sand dunes, and the isolation.

-[43:50] Debra and Bobo got married '81. Together '79, met '78. "I decided that he was the one and pursued him until he finally relented. I was on a winter ski trip with a girlfriend. Probably Mount Debra was where we were. One night we were sitting in the tent and she said, 'Okay, of all the guys you've met, who's the one you'd want to marry.' And I'd never even thought about Bobo that way and I said, 'Bob Bell.' And I sort of stuck by it. I went out and pursued him. In many ways, the moment that I finally won his heart I went up to Fairbanks in February..."

-[47:47] First attempt to go to Hobbit Hole. "My first time heading to the Hobbit Hole when I was living here, I misread the tidebook. It was the middle of winter. I got into South Pass thinking that it would be flooding and it was ebbing. And the ebb grabbed me and pulled me out into the tide rips. I've spent a lot of time in a kayak and I managed to fight my way out of it. I was stupid, misreading the tidebook and not seeing it in time. I came back to Elfin Cove. I didn't see anybody on the way in... I got back into the cabin and for a while I was wondering if I had died because there was no way for me to tell whether I was in a death state or a live state. I was there. It was really intense."

-[49:50] First impression of Hobbit Hole. "Oh I cried. It was the most beautiful place I'd ever seen and it was the most perfect place I'd ever seen."

-[51:49] Elfin Cove in 1970s. "There was a strong redneck population. I really was called white trash, because I was a hippy... There were families here. There was a school. A bunch of families lived here and they resented us young people moving in. It wasn't just me... That first winter I came here, the battlelines were sort of laid out... Those things have gone by the wayside."

-[53:59] Being one of the few women. "The guys were always really great, really helpful, really encouraging. Gender roles were still pretty established at that point. I did a lot of cooking out at the Hobbit Hole. Did a lot of everything at the Hobbit Hole. I would often be cooking when the guys were chopping wood or something, but then I'd go out and chop wood, haul wood. We all did all the things but Kim and I did a lot of the gender things. I wasn't expected to work as hard as Bob. I couldn't because I had the kids. I definitely did the kid care. I have some resentment about that, I have to say, but it was also natural at that time before things changed as much as they have nothing."

-[55:35] Being a lady fisherman. "Crewmen on boats get their status from their captain so that the crew that works for the best boats, they have the highest status of all the crews and that's important to people. But since I didn't have a defined status, even though I turned into a pretty good fisherman, I was never as good as Bobo or Greg. But I was as good as anybody else obviously. I couldn't get good crewmen very often, I couldn't experienced crewman. Bobo could get anybody and they wanna come back here year after year... I had one crewman who refused to do anything I said. I actually had to have my 9-year old Taiga tell him... That was very frustrating. I finally traded him for someone else. Sometimes he'd listen to Taiga. Usually Bobo would have to yell at him at the end of the day. And everybody—still—doesn't know what to call me. I mean, I'm doing the same job as all the other fishermen. Why don't you call me what you call them? You wouldn't call Bobo a fisherperson." No other women fishing at Hobbit Hole.

-[59:10] "It was one of those golden times. I talked about the smell of rock and Manzanita and the chalk on our hands and the blood. I'll get whiffs of it once in a while and it just wants to bring me to my knees. It's so lovely. That golden feeling at the Hobbit Hole. Those days on the porch, in the sun, all sitting around and being together. That was just an amazing special time. Watching those kids roll around on the grass and play."

-[1:08:24] End of commune days. "A commune is about a lot of pressure. Who's doing enough... Greg was the big kahuna. He was the king, presided over everything. He was just

absolutely generous. He's the godfather of my kids. I was reading a bunch of journal entries from way back. I'd be at Yosemite. Just the number of letters I wrote back to Greg. Having kids I added a lot of tension to the Hobbit Hole. There's no doubt about that..."

-[1:12:17] Holidays at Hobbit Hole. Easter and 4th of July. "Kim would do a whole bunch of Easter parties. There'd be Easter egg hunts, the kids from Elfin Cove would go over. 4th of July...we must've taken off or just fished earlier or something. We'd have volleyball, sack races, all kinds of games. People would come over and we'd have a big potluck. Sometimes we'd come to Elfin Cove and we'd have Elfin Cove versus Hobbit Hole games, whatever. Big party for everybody. This was all before lodges."

-[1:13:50] talent shows at Hobbit Hole, "there'd be music and there'd be weddings...we'd have berry-picking expeditions, kelp-gathering expeditions, and lots of wood...That was an ongoing project for everybody to fill the woodshed and we always got that done"

-[1:15:44] Thoughts on Inian Island Institute. Debra thinks should try to include Elfin Cove more.
-Debra thinks should have Inian come to Elfin and include Elfin more