



STEVE STROMME

Interviewer: Regina Kong

Others Present: Erik Stromme, Brandon Peterson

Interview Date: July 22, 2019

Interview Location: Elfin Cove

Transcriber: Regina Kong

Transcription Date: July 28, 2019

“You’re kind of part way there, half way there and then suddenly you’re part of the fleet and you’re like well why would I go anywhere else?”

-born Fort Gordon, Georgia on September 11, 1954. Parents from North Dakota. Grew up in Oregon. Signed up for draft after high school. “Then I was at a party—I was 19 or 20—and we hooked up with some guys from another town down the road away. This is like 1975 and I’m hanging out with these guys and they’re all driving brand-new pick-up trucks. And they’ve got stereos. They got quarter ounce chunks of Afghani hash that they’re smoking. I go, ‘What is it you guys are doing that you can make the kind of money you can afford this?’ And they’re going, ‘Oh I work on my dad’s fishing boat.’ And I go, ‘Well how do you do that?’ I mean honestly, I was from the valley in Oregon. I didn’t know anything about fishing, commercial fishing that is. He says, ‘Go down there and hang out at the docks and see if you can get on the cannery.’ So I moved down to Port Althorp...I got a job at the cannery and then I worked into working on boats. Then I had my own boat out there. I fished a lot in California...I remember distinctly it was Thanksgiving 1982. My brother Stan who lives in Ketchikan calls me and goes, ‘What are you doing?’ I go, ‘I’m waiting to go crab fishing.’ He goes, ‘How does it look?’ I go, ‘Not good.’ And he goes, ‘Well why don’t you come up here?...There are a lot of fishing jobs.’...So then I fished in Petersburg for a long time...and I met Greg herring fishing. We just got to know each other on the docks and stuff.”

-[5:55] ’87 was the first year that Steve trolled his own boat in Alaska. “In ’88, ’89 we started spending more time out (at the Hobbit Hole). Greg wanted us to hang out over there. You just kind of blend into the fleet, you know. You’re kind of part way there, half way there and then suddenly you’re part of the fleet and you’re like well why would I go anywhere else. We lived in the float house. This was before Eric was born, before his sister was born. We pulled it up to the dock out there, I tied it up to the dock. There was a living quarters in there with a shower, a toilet, an oil stove and couch. We lived in that. The next year, Jennifer auditioned. There was a cook’s job at the Hobbit Hole, a paid position. You either bought groceries and contributed it into the pile or you did some kind of labor-work thing. The deal was that as the cook-gardener and laborer, you got the studio. And the studio doesn’t look anything like it does not. It was bare-bones. Wood stove upstairs and the light didn’t even work...We got that place. There was one summer we lived upstairs in the shop. And she just kind of slowly worked her way in. It was more of his mom taking that job. Her and Greg got to be really really good friends and stuff. And his mom is more than capable of feeding 20 people. She just could do it. She’s a fast learner. It’s a bunch of fishermen. Usually we had fish four or five nights a week. It was like fish and Jennifer would bake bread everyday. Routine was she’d get up. Everbody’d take off and go fishing, you know. The whole place would be empty except for her and Katie and Eric sometimes. There were quite a bit of kids around. She’d make up her yeast and her dough and she’d make a soup or stew or something. She’d say somebody bring me

a fish so we can have barbequed fish and some nights she'd make a chili or something. Some nights we'd have deer burger tacos, something like that. It was pretty much, we'd go out and fish.

-[10:15] “There was a really, really, really strong work ethic. You did not fart around at the Hobbit Hole. You were there to work, to make money, to fish. Greg didn't take no slackers. Now if you were hurt—I'm not trying to say that Greg was a slave-driver or anything. But you know, you were hanging around his place. You had to follow the line there. It wasn't a big deal. We were there to make money. I can remember sometimes Greg would walk around the boat and yell, ‘You're burning daylight.’ Or he'd just say, ‘Get cracking.’ Greg would never warm his boat up. Greg goes in, starts his boat, walks back outside, unties it, drives away. Fred, goes in there, checks his engine meticulously, puts on knee pads, puts his headphones on, checks the water, checks the oil, starts the engine up, lets it run for 5 minutes...slowly puts out the dock. Two very different dichotomies of how they lived and how they approached things. But it worked very well.”

-[11:41] Steve's style. “My style was this. I never really felt that I was that good of a fisherman so I'd go early because I needed all the fucking time I could get. Time equals quantity. It's all about how much time you put on the ocean. Now, right about now we're not fishing because there's no fish around...Now you have to remember I was about 30 years younger. I was a lot hungrier then, I had little kids, I had boat payments, insurance payments, moorage payments. I had a lot of overhead. So yeah, it was all about making money. I also fished in the winter time on crab boats and stuff.”

-[12:31] Thoughts on communal aspect of Hobbit Hole, two funny stories. “You know, Greg and I were pretty good friends. I've never been one for hanging out with a certain group of people. I'm just not prone to that too much. I mean, I'll hang out with a certain four or five different people or something like that, but being in a communal space like that was something new for me. And it was all right. And it varied in how many people were there at a given time. I'd say it was about 15-20 people steady at all times. In some ways, it's an experience that a lot of people wished they had. I just never thought about it like that. It was pretty fun. There was a hierarchy there. Greg used to sit in his chair in the corner, right? And he'd hold court. And your power base was delegated by how close you got to sit to Greg when he was in his chair having his martini. The more power you had, the closer you got to sit to the king. Sometimes that power'd be usurped. You had a bad day or somebody'd corked you or something. Usually, there was definitely a pecking order. As you gained a little bit seniority in the group you rose to the higher. Even though you might not been on the first tier, we'll let you sit here for a while but don't think you'll sit here all the time. The other thing, we'd used to have a rubber chicken. We used to hide the rubber chicken on everybody's boat. And when they'd get out fishing and find the rubber chicken, it was bad luck. We went through great lengths. I actually took the rubber chicken all the way down to fucking Washington and hung it in the Village Idiot when it was in O'Conner, Washington when Bobo-O first bought the boat because I wanted to see his new boat. I went to Archie McPhee's and got a rubber chicken and hung it in the mast. But you'd take the burlap off your gear and you'd look down and there'd be the rubber chicken and you'd like ‘Aw shit!’ Everybody'd come in at night and I'd go, ‘So who had the rubber chicken?’ And it's like, ‘I didn't have it. Did you have it? I didn't have it.’”

-[15:26] Parties and interesting people. “We used to have some tremendous parties: Fourth of July was just. We used to have a talent show on fourth of July. That was pretty cool. We did have Rick...He was a true, backwoods, living the hill—I'm sure he never made it past eighth grade, ninth grade probably. Really smart, everything about cows, horses. Anyways, at the talent show. He was so shy he could barely come up and eat dinner. He hadn't been around anybody ever. Peggy, Dennis' wife, talked him in to doing a talent. And that son-of-a-bitch could actually twirl a rope and jump through the hoops. He walked around on the deck twirling a rope and jumping through it at the Hobbit Hole. We were like, ‘Whoa, dude.’ He never wore a pair of rubber boots the whole time he fished with Connelly. I said, ‘What're you wearing.’ He goes, ‘I'm wearing my cowboy boots.’ I go,

'You're gonna wreck em.' He goes, 'There're just boots.' Another time we were watching him. We saw him and there's this great big king salmon. And he doesn't gaffe it, he doesn't net it. He just takes it and flings it on board. We see him on the dock that night and go, 'You always throw the king salmon on board like that?' He goes, 'It's just a fish.' That's all he'd say. And we never saw him again but God he was such an interesting guy. So cool. Pasty-white, freckles, kind of chubby. So shy, just so shy. But we got him pretty warmed up and stuff. That was pretty funny. And then there was Max on the Magic Minnow. I remember the first time I saw Max, he'd come from Philadelphia. He had two choices: either come out west and go fishing or join the service. When Max got here, he's at the Hobbit Hole and I thought what the hell is this neo-Nazi doing here. He had full-sleeve tattoos, an earring, his head was shaved. And he was a delinquent. He was a semi neo-Nazi skinhead. Well after about two weeks at the Hobbit Hole of eating deer meat and smoking dope continuously for two weeks, he abandoned his skinhead lifestyle and pledged himself to the Hobbit Hole. He lasted about two or three years. Greg lent him the money to buy a permit and he actually fished. He was a good fisherman, too. But he was young and he wasn't into it. He didn't even know that a battery had a negative and a positive cable to it. And I go, 'How the fuck did you get through life not knowing that a battery has a negative and a positive on it?' And his mom was here and she was a masseuse in New York City. She goes, 'Max's dad was a jazz drummer. All he knew to do was go [jazz sounds]. We lived in New York City, in Philadelphia. We never had a car. We took public transportation, we took a bus, we took a taxi.' It had never occurred to me that somebody lived like that. Anyway, his foray was pretty short but he was a great guy. He's some big club DJ in Manhattan now."

-[20:23] Story about Ryland, Debra Page's son. "I'm taking a shower down on the scow. All of a sudden his mother open the shower door. I'm standing there with soap in my face and all over. She goes, 'Do something. Ryland just fell off the boat coming into the gut.' I go, 'What?' I jump out of the shower and just kind of put my pants on because I'm naked and there's Ryland right in the gut, floundering. Holy Jesus, fuck. So I dove in the water, starting swimming across. I got about halfway across the gut and Debra swings around and grabs him with the boat. And he's just wailing like a stuck pig. Meanwhile I'm like, 'I hope I can make it back to the beach. This water's cold.' I dove in. I didn't know if I could make it back to the scow but I knew I could grab him and climb up on the rock on the other side there and he'd be okay. He was only like five or six when it happened."

-[21:30] Story about fishing with Bobo.

-[24:57] Unwritten rules. "In the morning you come up to the house—Greg didn't drink coffee because it upset his stomach. So he drank cocoa. He used to call it. He'd get up, have cocoa and three bowls. I go, 'What's that?' He goes, 'A bowl of cereal, a bowl of pot, and a toilet bowl.' And you did not beat Greg to the bathroom. It was just an uncertain thing. You did not go in the bathroom until he had done his business first. She's wide open, you know. As his mother used to say, 'You don't want to talk to Greg after he's done fishing until he's had at least one martini.' He's got his one martini in, he's mellowed out, he's okay."

-[26:13] Work at Hobbit Hole. "I was there in the heyday. We did some massive work. We put out Greg's firewood for the winter. When you put out a winter's worth of firewood, that's a lot of firewood. I'm talking six or seven cords. Six feet long, six feet high, six feet wide is one cord." Story about picking up Greg at Juneau airport because Greg's thumb was smashed by a building. "There's Greg out on the front and he's got a stainless steel bowl like this and he's got his hand like this. He's got the shittiest look on his face. I mean, he looks pained...The whole building drops on his thumb. And he's stuck there underneath the building."

-[30:55] A story about rescuing someone's boat. "When Jane and Greg got married that scene kind of quit. But that doesn't mean we didn't come over and hang out all the time. You just didn't live there per se. Actually you could live there but you just couldn't go in the house 24-7. It's March and it blew westerly. We went up to the house, drinking coffee with Greg and Jane...Sure as shit, there's

like this 60-foot yacht lying on the rocks just getting beat. And Greg comes up to it, drives around, looking at it, goes, 'Well are you gonna get off?' I go, 'Well I sort of like to look at a boat before I climb on it, you know. Just to make sure that it ain't gonna roll on me.' I looked down at the engine room and there's a little bildgewater in there. So then I go up to the engine panel..."

-[34:17] Story about Dennis Montgomery and Greg's halibut hat getting ruined by fish guts. "Greg used to have his speedboat called the eye-catcher..."

-[38:32] Two Swedes who were Steve's "deckhands." Bobo is involved in story..."I probably took ten years off those guys' lives."

-[44:10] First time in Alaska story. [49:00] "For the first three months I was in Alaska, I barely touched land." Decided to stay in Alaska because he had steady employment. He liked the Bay Area but it was fast-paced, hard to make a living.

-[58:07] "The whole thing about Alaska, more or less just coincided with the time in my life. I was just free-flowing, you know. I was 28 when I moved to Alaska. I didn't think I'd ever get married. I kind of did that solo lifestyle of being a commercial fisherman. Then I met his mom the first year I was here...Life just happened when I was here...I'm a nomad. I don't call anyplace home in that respect."

-[1:03:06] Steve's story about Fred's sailboat. "Fred always had female deckhands. Because they were cleaner...But they never lasted because he was so finicky. Fred had such an OCD thing going that he'd sort of drive them away. Fred used to wash his hands 20 times a day. Fred would never ever walk in his wheelhouse with his raingear on. He would take a hose and wash it off...Not to mention he has a severe parmesan cheese, mayonnaise addiction. Anything white. We used to have spaghetti. He'd put parmesan cheese on top until you couldn't see the spaghetti..." Goes on to tell story of someone who got stranded on rocks coming into Hobbit Hole and another about someone who fell in the cove the first night Steve and his ex-wife Jennifer were at the Hobbit Hole (it was a closure party).

-started fishing around Bay Area, came to Alaska and stayed because of jobs

-lots of stories about Hobbit Hole, ex-wife Jennifer was cook-gardener