



BOB (BOB-O) BELL

Interviewer: Regina Kong
Others Present: Debra Page
Interview Date: July 23, 2019
Interview Location: Elfin Cove
Others Present: Debra Page
Transcriber: Regina Kong
Date of Transcription: July 29, 2019

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-[0:34] Born in Indiana, went to college at Michigan State. “Then I got a pickup truck and headed for Alaska searching for adventure. And I found more than I could ever ask for. First impression of Alaska. We drove to Prince Rupert and ended up getting off the ferry. Took the ferry to Juneau then to Haines and drove up the interior. My first impression was hanging out in Juneau by Mendenhall Glacier Lake in the rain. When we drove through from Haines Junction to Beaver Creek, we crossed Beaver Creek into Alaska proper. There was a double rainbow and it was like, ‘Yeah this feels like home.’ I had no intention of being a fisherman. Actually I came up to do kayaking. I ran a bunch of rivers every summer for probably half a dozen years and then I bought a fishing boat in Fairbanks which is 600 miles from the ocean.”

-[2:30] What made Bob-o want a fishing boat. “Well one of those kayaking adventures I was in Prince William Sound. There were a couple young guys going halibut fishing and asked if I wanted to jump onboard. I thought hey that sounds like fun so I jumped onboard. They didn’t really know what they were doing. We didn’t catch hardly any halibut at all but it perked my interest. Actually later that year I was talking to a guy who also had an interest in fishing and was a good friend of Greg Howe at the Hobbit Hole and he had just seen this little 26 foot bartender in Fairbanks and we went over and bought it a week later, towed it down to Haines. Greg met us in Juneau—that’s when the ferry used to come into Juneau—at 3am to haul this boat off the trailer off the ferry. So that was my introduction to Greg and the Hobbit Hole. 3am in the morning. That’s a pretty good friend to do that. He borrowed a truck to haul that trailer off.”

-[3:53] first time coming to the Hobbit Hole. “The world was our oyster.”

-[4:26] challenges when first started fishing. “I didn’t know squat. And turns out Pat Fisher who I bought the boat with, he was an expert because he’d fished the coast of California for a week maybe. He didn’t know squat either so it was a very big learning curve. That first season, looking back on it, was pretty hilarious. But I thought it was pretty cool you could make money fishing.”

-[5:57] Met Debra for the first time in Juneau.

-[6:50] Medicine show days. “The way I got involved with fishing, I ran a medicine show in Fairbanks. Dr. Ogstad’s traveling medicine show. I could cure anything. It was a crazy wild bunch of people. Music and clowns and juggling. And Patrick that I bought the boat with, he was a puppeteer. He came and said, ‘Hey you interested in having puppets in your show?’ And I said, ‘We’re interested in anything.’ So he joined the troupe and that’s when we started talking about fishing. And as I said, I met him and one day and a week later we bought a boat together.”

-[8:03] Hobbit Hole talent show. “A friend was here. I’m a banjo player and she’s a banjo player so we did a two-headed banjo player with one banjo. One of us did the neck and the other one did the frailing... There was some game where Dennis and I were racing to see who could peel and eat the carrot the fastest. I have no recollection of that but it’s on film”

-[8:48] parties. “There were always parties at the Hobbit Hole. The fourth of July celebration was always the biggest. Now you would never go there on the fourth of July because that’s when we get to fish king salmon. But back then, everyone would take the day or two off. We had a cannon that Joe Craig—this is his place that he built when he was in high school—so you’d fire that cannon off and I remember coming in the fourth of July celebration. The lawn’s full of people and I’m exhausted because I’ve been fishing hard and at that time I had that bartender so I was kind of standing on the back deck. And that cannon went off and I just about jumped off into the water. The parties at the Hobbit Hole were legendary. It was pretty much always a party. Once we got a cook and a gardener, we’d come in at 7 at night for dinner and just relive the day, tell our tales. It was a great atmosphere. We were all growing up together, learning together, and sharing fishing tips and life tips. Pretty amazing place.”

-[10:26] Stories fro Hobbit Hole. “It was pretty much everyday something new and different... There was one flood one day. It rained 3 inches in an hour. And the creek, rocks came down and blocked the underside of the warehouse. All that water was diverted to the warehouse and it was pouring from the front door of the warehouse. Everything just floating. It was a mess. And you know, we kept the calendars everyday. Usually it was Ronald... There’d be drawings, stories, day-to-day stories. We knew that what was going on there was special enough that it should be recorded.”

-[11:55] What made Hobbit Hole special for Bob. “Meeting Debra, just the freedom that we had. It was the camaraderie. Pretty fun group of people. One of the cooks called us the lost boys—Debra included. Because it was. It was magical, sort of never, Neverland.”

-[12:39] Story from early days of relationship with Debra. “... We were anchored in Bartlett Cove and I got back to the dock and decided I’d swim out to the boat. I’m swimming along and the current is running pretty good in the wrong direction. Meanwhile here comes Debra and a couple other people in a raft rowing by. They said, ‘You want a lift?’ And I said, ‘Yeah, that’d be good.’ There were a bunch of us staying on the boat. And I asked one of the women, ‘Hey you want to sleep with me?’ because it was those days. And she said, ‘No I’m sleeping with Patrick. And Debra said, ‘Well I’ll sleep with you.’ And that was that.

-[14:07] Once he and Debra had kids. “Yeah that’s a massive life change, you know. Although most people figure you got kids you’re done with your life, your life of adventure. But we obviously did just the opposite and we started having wilder adventures more in the winters. Taiga took his first steps at Machuu Pichu when he was 9 months old. We drug him all over the planet. So the life of adventure didn’t end, but the life of responsibility increased.”

-[14:58] Traveling in the winters. Family stayed at Hobbit Hole in summer and Fairbanks in the winters, but “60 below in the dark kind of grows on you—grows against you. Once the kids started going to school, they’d go to school for the first semester and after Christmas we’d go traveling for the second half. So we’d get out of Fairbanks for the 60 below. We’d go two to three months and go wherever. We traveled everywhere. It was great... We traveled most often in Nepal, which was always wonderful. And Namibia really stands out. Borneo really stands out. Pretty amazing planet out there. I mean, the Hobbit Hole’s one thing. The planet’s a pretty big oyster too.”

-[18:09] Some of Bob-o’s family history. “There was footage from England. It was Queen Elizabeth’s coronation. Whenever that was, 1953. And my grandparents had gone back over for the coronation. And they were both from the very north of Scotland. And there was footage of Wick, Scotland on the coast of them unloading halibut boats in 1953 and I thought, oh my god that’s my heritage. It just happenstance that I’d fallen into it. But that was eye-opening.”

-[20:07] the main things Bob-o does now. “The main things I do now: Work on boats, that’s one thing. But same thing, adventure. We just went out to the hot springs for four days. You got plenty of kayaks here. We do what we want.”

-[20:43] Competition between Bob-o, Greg, and Dennis. DP: “You and Greg, you won the awards.” BB: “We used to sell to Excursion Inlet and every year they’d have a highliner award and Greg, he was just like a machine. First one up in the morning, first one out. I just remember that first year I finally beat him for the season...It was who made the most money or who sold the most fish to Excursion Inlet. And every year they had a plaque down in Seattle on the wall and they’d give a prize—Greg got a beautiful barometer. When I won it, they gave us airline tickets to wherever we wanted to go...Greg won it 5 times. I just won it twice. Something like that.”

-[22:39] Sense of competition at Hobbit Hole. “Oh yeah, between Debra and I, between Dennis and all of us and Greg. There was strong sense of competition fishing for sure. But then the Hobbit Hole, it seemed like every year Greg would have a big project. So we’d always band together and work. We put in that hydro project in the 80s. Dennis and I hauled that pipe up the hill.” DP: “You didn’t just haul it, you raced it. Snoozy and I would trudge with one pipe and these guys would each have at least one pipe and they’d run up the mountain. That was pretty fun. It was a little competitive.”

-[23:58] Both lived there for about 18 years until the Hobbit Hole went “private.” “We understood but it was definitely the end of an era. And at that time we all lived on our boats. We didn’t have this house.”

-[24:57] Changes in environment. “We fished out of here. When we were fishing back then, the ocean was very different. We made our living in Cross Sound and now there are very few fish here. The birds are dying off. Melting of the glaciers. Global warming is having an incredibly harmful effect on this area. I’ve noticed it in Fairbanks, noticed it here. Vast, vast, vast changes...The difference is, when we fished we called the ocean outside of Cross Sound the big O. And we made our living mostly in Cross Sound and you can’t do that anymore, right by the Hobbit Hole. And that’s what made the Hobbit Hole beautiful. We’d get up in t morning and we were right on the fishing grounds. Now Taiga and Ry are out on the ocean. They’re never here. ‘Cause that’s where the fish are. Cross Sound is melting glaciers in the water. The ocean out there is warming. The salmon like the warmer water, eventually they run back to their natal stream. Until they make their final run they’re just hanging out out there.” DP: “And with how dry this summer is, last summer too. The creeks aren’t filling up and the fish can’t go up. There’re no humpys in the creeks because they can’t go up so they’re just waiting.”

-[27:42] Future of fishing. “When we got into fishing everybody talked about trolling as a dying fishery on its last legs. It’s been on its last legs for 40 years now and something keeps saving us.” DP: “Hard work.” BB: “But the conditions right now are dire. I mentioned the birds. Cross Sound was alive with birds. Massive amounts of murrens. A lot of the other birds too. You don’t see the puffins we used to see. You see a puffin or two puffins now, it’s just remarkable.” DP: “Even seagulls during the king opening. I didn’t have seagulls following me until you got in much closer. That’s kind of crazy. Didn’t have sea lions chasing me. That’s a first.” Pretty much like this all around Alaska.

-[29:46] What should people do. DP: “Start being aware. People don’t believe in global warming. Half the people in this community don’t believe in global warming. But there’s also a huge financial interest here in not believing in global warming, or that the overfishing is hurting the fish stalks. And you know, we’re predators. We catch a lot of fish and have been forever. But we used to have a stronger fish and game to regulate. Now fish and game is kind of owned by the big money which is really sad but it is.”

-[31:15] Reaction to Zach turning it into school. “One point Greg was thinking of giving it to Hoonah, to the natives. 7,8 years. Crazy that nobody bought it. And then the negotiations for actually selling it got a little mired but it actually happened. Hopefully it’s a good thing. We’ll see.”

-[32:38] Concerns about Institute. “The one concern is that it’s too little too late as far as studying the area. They’ve sort of missed the change, you know. But it’s still happening so we’ll see.” DP: “They’re young people and that’s who’s got to take them over.” BB: “And there’s enthusiasm.”

-[32:40] Last thoughts. “The Hobbit Hole’s a pretty special place and always has been. It was a seining site back when they seined. Then Doug and Flo Fried had it for a number of years until Doug died up in Lituya Bay. They called it the pothole then. And they were the ones that started the garden. And then we came in and Ronald was the one who really kept up the gardens and got them going...” BB: “There was a tiny little dock with a haul out that you pulled the boat in. And our skiff was called Green Death because it was an aluminum skiff that wasn’t safe to go around the Hobbit Hole in but we traveled back and forth to Elfin Cove in wind, rain, and darkness.”

-[37:00] Price of fish hasn’t gone up. DP: “Same coho price we had back in the 80s.” BB: “Out at the Hobbit Hole we were the humpy fleet, along with all the other species too.”

-[40:30] importance of radio. DP: “I’d always have things go wrong on my boat and everybody would answer. One day I got jellyfish in my eye. And I said what should I do. Somebody said milk, another said piss...One day I was going through Middle Pass and there was this terrible ping sound...That one everybody was pretty excited about. What would cause it to ping?” BB: “Our early days of fishing we didn’t even have VHF. We had CB radio, no radar. Fathometers—they were accurate but they were just a dot. So this is an advantage that people have now...We fished North Island with no radar in heavy, heavy fog because you could hear the pounding of the cliffs. You knew where certain birds hung out. In closing I’d say the reason we do it is for the adventure. We make money at that adventure and then we can go have other adventures. It’s worked out well for us.”

-[43:11] code wheel. “In the old days, by this time we had VHF radios. We all communicated on channel 15—“ DP: “But everyone else was listening.” BB: “So we devised this code wheel that spun and there were expressions. So if you were fishing at soapstone at twenty fathoms with a green hoochy you’d get to that and say ‘Green split pea soup or shiver me timber.’ There were all these sayings.” DP: “I think Ronald put it all together. It was Fred’s idea.” DP: Story about square-roots code.