



DENNIS MONTGOMERY

Interviewer: Regina Kong

Others Present: N/A

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“You can’t fish somewhere and actually go to your own home and sit down and listen to the news. So that was a real privilege and we all got to do it.”

-born Portland, Oregon 1955. Lived there until graduated high school. “I came up out of high school. I went to Ketchikan to become a logger actually. I took the ferry up built a little camp right out of town. Went to the employment office and asked if they had a job for me to do logging and they said, ‘Do you have your corks?’ And I said, ‘What are those?’ And those are the boots you wear when you log and you have to have them and everyone has their own. They knew I didn’t know anything so they didn’t have a job for me that day. They told me to come back, to look at the used clothing store. So on my way back to the camp a guy was sitting on a bench and stopped me and said, ‘What are you doing?’ I said, ‘I came up to become a logger.’ He said, ‘You don’t want to do that. You oughta go fishing.’ And I said, ‘Well how do you do that?’ He said, ‘You just walk up and down the dock, knock on every boat and ask if they need crew.’ And that was a really good time because the summer season was over...So I did that and got a job and made \$600 cash in two days in 1973 when I was 18 years old. That was a lot of money. I never got a job. I just went fishing. I never had to work construction or go logging or get a job as an engineer—I got a degree in engineering.”

-[2:26] Why logging. “In Oregon logging is a big thing and I just didn’t know about fishing. And I like to cut trees down. Chainsaws are one of my favorite tools. It just made sense that you go to Alaska and go logging. I didn’t know about fishing. It just never crossed my mind.” Wanted to go to Alaska to get away from the summer heat.

-[3:13] The family he grew up in.

-[4:50] Travelling across Alaska. “Once I got done fishing that fall—I’d only fished a couple weeks. Took the ferry up to Juneau, visited with Paul, then took the ferry up to Haines and hitchhiked up to Anchorage and took the train to Fairbanks and hitchhiked down back home. I made a hammock out of purse seine web and then got on a freight train in the box car and set up a hammock that was really comfortable. Purse seine web, the fish net. They were working on nets all the time and there were always scraps so I made a hammock and it came in useful...”

-[6:15] Always like fixing things, but a bit tired of it now.

-[7:34] first coming to Alaska. “I was just going to get a job...I was looking for somewhere that was cooler to work. I knew about chainsaws but I didn’t know about much else...I still use a lot of chainsaws. My kids are getting tired of it. I’m on limited cutting here. I have to get approval of anything I do. If I’m going to cut a tree down Alice has to approve. I can’t just do anything I want...You gotta do it right. You gotta fall the tree right or you’re going to wreck something. Falling a tree—by doing it right there’s an art to it. Everything I learned is trial and error.”

-[9:28] Fishing for the first time. “I wasn’t tying the knots right and it was coming apart. It wasn’t very successful at first and I’d always have a messy boat...I got bigger and bigger boats and then I got smaller and smaller boats.” This summer is first time not having good fishing season. “Ocean survival problems. I hope I’m wrong.”

-[11:25] Had deckhands but wanted to participate which was difficult when longlining. Hard for Dennis to take a backseat. “Someone’s gotta drink the coffee and stay warm. I always had to be up there doing all the work with the guys.”

-[12:26] Hobbit Hole. “1973, ’74 in the fall I went up to Ketchikan and purse seined. It would be ’75 that I bought 16-foot Boston Whaler and started hand trolling. I stayed down there for two years. Then I came up here and knew about the Hobbit Hole because my brother knew about Paul Kaiser, Paul Kaiser knew about Greg and Fred. I knew that there was a place to check out and I came up and went through South Inian Pass and could see Uncle Roy fishing pink salmon. He was in the laundry. It’s a flat, calm. He’s in one spot, catching fish after fish after fish. I go, ‘Hey that looks good.’ So I started fishing in Elfin Cove, introduced myself to the boys at the Hobbit Hole. One of the first things I did at the Hobbit Hole, I wasn’t really used to tides. They didn’t have much of a dock so I was sleeping at the dock in my Boston Whaler and they had me up for dinner. I was supposed to take the little back out to the dock, and I did. But I tied it to the piling instead of the dock. And so the tide came in and went back out. So when Greg came out in the morning, the boat was unusually full of water and the outboard had been underwater and never ran again. And Greg forgave. He never found fault with me for being stupid. I don’t know how he did that, but I didn’t do it again. That was a bad one...As I got bigger boats, that’d be the place I’d tie up to instead of Elfin Cove. It was great. I ended up with a fifty-foot boat which is a little tricky to get in the Hobbit Hole. And I froze fish for eight years on it. It was really enjoyable but my kids were growing up and I didn’t want to be away from my kids anymore so I built this place. And it’s worked. We’ve had a great time here. The girls have grown up around adults and we’ve made a lot of friends...The Hobbit Hole was really fun.”

-[15:51] Famous Hobbit Hole paper plate story. “There’s one famous story. People got tired of having to do the dishes because we’re working hard, fishing. So we got paper plates and that was great. That was when we were still sitting down in one place and not doing a buffet. Debra made a big lasagna and had it on the white linoleum table. And Ron Kreher, my brother-in-law, was an energetic deckhand for Greg. He had a couple paper plates and he had three helpings of lasagna. When he went to clear his plates from the table, the rings of the plates were left but the centers of the plates were both gone. He had consumed the paper plates. There’s quite a few times the Hobbit Hole was wild—happy, wild people.”

-[17:02] Expanding the house at the Hobbit Hole and some history of the area. “When it was a small room—when the house was small before the expansion. There was maybe 30 people in the living room and the little kitchen and the breakfast room. Generally not many, many one or two conversations going on because the room was so small. And then when the building got expanded, then there were more different conversations going on...It changed it a little bit. It was good. They found trade beads underneath the foundation. We found stone tools here. We know that the trees are all culturally modified...This land’s twenty feet above where it was 200 years ago because it’s rising out of the water. Isotactic rebound. So the trees below 20 feet elevation aren’t marked because the natives left the land when the white people came. But the trees above 20 feet are almost all scarred. This place was inhabited by natives.” Trees were scarred “to bleed them for pitch. They’d use it for patching cracks in the canoe and everything...We can’t imagine how many uses they had. I’m thinking there’s some part that could’ve been edible. Mix with berries or something. I’m not sure but they did it to every tree so there’s a real reason for it. Might be an experiment to see if you can eat it...Anyway they were very creative and they needed this stuff. This was all they had...The

Hobbit Hole was a big camp and this was a big camp...Southern exposure...fresh running water...The three things you really needed.”

-[20:14] first impression of Hobbit Hole. “When I first went up in the ferry and saw that someone could have a home on the saltwater, and it wasn't the ocean where the waves were crashing in, I thought that's pretty cool. 'Cause I hadn't seen that before. And that kind of became my goal and I got to end up with that. The Hobbit Hole was just that. I hadn't seen anything in a pocket like that...I didn't really relate to the native part of it and the cultural part. I didn't really understand that for a long time and then I went, ‘Oh yeah. Geez.’ I get why this would be the place to hang out...They canoed from Yakutat to here.”

-[22:47] Fishing around Hobbit Hole “was always really good. One of my favorite memories was Greg had gotten to use Fred's boat and they were hand trolling. This was just when the pink and chums and sockeye, coho fish, king salmon...the value of salmon was good. I was tied to the dock at the Hobbit Hole and Greg came down. He was steaming because he was so excited: ‘We had a \$500 day yesterday.’ It was really good...He could do that and be home by four in the afternoon. Nobody else could do that. You can't fish somewhere and actually go to your own home and sit down and listen to the news. So that was a real privilege and we all got to do it...A lot of work got done. Greg enjoyed all the help. A lot of gardening done, volleyball, a lot of late night. I could never stay up late and party like everyone else did”

-[24:38] prank Dennis pulled. “One of the funniest things, a joke I pulled. The other guy Pat Fisher. He was a little older than everyone. He was always playing practical jokes on you. He's the one that sat you and hit you on the nose. One night I said, ‘Hey, he's been down there for half an hour or so. Let's go down there—and it's the middle of June—and let him think it's morning.’ And he's tied outside of Greg and no one ties outside of Greg. If Greg is ready to go it's wrong to be tied still because Greg wants to go and it's Greg's dock. So we tried to mess with his alarm, can't get it to work. So we start the boat on either side of him. That doesn't wake him up. So I jump down and open the door and say, ‘Hey Patrick, Greg's ready to go!’ He wakes up, goes ‘Oh shit,’ gets dressed, starts his engine. And he's untying his lines—and he's only been asleep for twenty minutes you know. And he's looking around and sees people standing around smiling. That's not what the morning would be like. They'd be in their beds being woken up too so he figured it out. It was a really good joke. He burned his foot. He went up to Icy Point and was making coffee the way he regularly does and the boat was tossing and turning and the coffee cone spilled on his foot so he lost some fishing time. It doesn't take much.”

-[26:18] Not many accidents at the Hobbit Hole. “Surprisingly few.” Someone even landed their float plane in the Hobbit Hole “Nobody does that. It's just too short of a runway.”

-[27:24] Other things Dennis remembers at Hobbit Hole. “The talent show was a fun one. I don't remember what year though. There was a closure or something and we all got together and had a talent show. Everybody came up with something. It was a real hoot. There's a video of that. VHS video. Greg rolls two propone tanks at the same time. The girls sang. There's quite a few different skits. I narrated a poem by Roald Dahl and Bob Bell and his wife acted it out. It's called “The Three Bears.” You'll have to look it up. Everyone was sitting in the yard and had chairs. That was when video cameras first came out and Fred had a video camera...Connelly's skit was you have to eat a carrot. I'd tried to keep a candle lit and he (Bob-o) would try to keep a candle lit and I'd try to put his candle out but I had to eat my carrot. Ended up spitting carrots over at each other's candle. You keep trying to light your candle and blow, blow blow out. It was pretty funny. Those things just don't happen that often, when you get enough people together to have a silly thing like that going. There was just continuous hilarity of some sort.”

-[30:00] Story about Captain Snooze (Gary Phillips) and record husband-and-wife hand trolling 2000 pounds in one day. “4 or 500 fish hand cranking. And the fish were thick, on every hook.”

-[33:20] Why Dennis likes fishing. “That was the beauty. You worked your butt off for three months, five months and don’t do anything else for the rest of the year.”

-[33:50] Changes at Hobbit Hole. “After Jane moved in, it got less communal. It wasn’t practical to have 30 people. As far as their life goes. So people slowly started to figure it out on their own. Some had to be told, I’m not sure. It became less of a place you could hang out and not do anything if you didn’t want to. Most everybody did something. That was good. That was quite a while ago, too. Jane came up to visit Peggy so that’s how that connection came on. I met Peggy when I went on a trip to Mexico with Bob Bell.”

-[36:26] Reno connection in Alaska. “Three-way connection of people’s clothes being passed around and people didn’t know each other.”

-[37:10] Thought Peggy was really fun when they first met.

-[37:21] Having a family at the Hobbit Hole. “They came out fishing a little bit but they stayed in Elfin Cove. We ended up buying a floathouse and that sort of worked out...The twins were three or so when I built this. My mid-life crisis was I just couldn’t go freezing fish out on the ocean when I had these three beautiful kids. I just couldn’t do that. And the IFQ system...really pissed me off so I had to do something they couldn’t really take away from me. If I had the right attitude and bought into the IFQ system I’d be a millionaire. And Peggy said, ‘Yeah and you’d be divorced.’”

-[39:32] explains IFQ system. Took long-line fishery of halibut and cod, issued quota shares to individuals based on their records. And quota shares became sellable. Public resource in 1994, but 1995 became private resource. Public ended up with 11% of halibut. Dennis thinks it’s wrong that it’s a private resource now.

-[43:26] Dennis is very happy with family’s outfitting business in Gull Cove.

-[43:58] Sense of competition at Hobbit Hole. “The only real problem was when you sort of had a group...I don’t think there was too much competition. Everybody learned from each other a lot. When someone would figure something out we’d share it with each other...The only competition was who could quit and get home first. Greg was the best at that. It’d be the end of the flood tide—the end of the flood the fish bite pretty well. So you get pretty excited. You put the gear back down, clean your fish, the tide’s ebbing and nothing’s happening. So then you reel your lines in and you don’t have anything on the gear. Oh okay so I’ll go in. Greg didn’t do it that way. Flood’s in, lines are full, pull the gear, we’re going in. There’s a fish on every hook, pull the gear into the boat, steam off to the buyer to sell your fish. Everyone else has put their gear down ‘cause they still think they’re going to keep biting and they’re not. It’s all over. And he’s done it for year after year enough to know it’s over when they’re biting like that. And smoke’s comes out of his stack and he’s off to the buyer. And he’s home listening to the news and had a shower when everyone else is lined up at the buyer waiting to sell. ‘Cause if you’re late and you know, you’re the third one there. The second guy takes a long time...and then three more guys come in behind you and there’s a long line of boats waiting...And you’re sitting there...That was really the main competition: getting done soon enough and going home.”

-[48:20] Anxiety over king salmon opener. It’s luck and knowledge

-[50:47] Fishing style. “Pretty independent. I’m not a prospector...” Dennis’ degree in engineering has proved pretty useful out here. Combined it with oceanography courses in college.

-[54:02] Favorite things to do now. “I like to just keep puttering on this place and make it look nice...And going fishing. Catching fish. Going fishing isn’t so much fun but catching fish is. And gardening...Once we got our light in we built raised beds.” Made something to warm soil in the greenhouses.

-[56:30] Whether Dennis misses Hobbit Hole days. Not really. Enjoyed time there. “We weren’t going to be hippies forever...” Certain people went overboard and worked really hard.” Ron with the gardening. “I guess the only thing I don’t like doing at the Hobbit Hole is the fall time memorial

when everyone goes out to the point and holds hands and talks about people who've died and stuff. I don't like that shit. I started calling it the circle of death and nobody thought it was very funny either...I started showing up late. I just don't like that memorial stuff much. That's okay. No, we're having fun here. It's very rewarding to have people go out on their own, catch... There's a state late if you serve less than 10 people you don't need a permit for you kitchen..." Likes smaller groups.

-[1:00:29] Things Dennis wants to do now that daughter Alice is becoming more involved.

-[1:01:42] Last thoughts. "It's just a real privilege to be a part of that, the Hobbit Hole. And a privilege to catch fish for a living—a public resource. What a deal. It's like sport fishing on a grand scale and getting paid for it. I hope it's not over. You start to wonder sometimes. The thing is, trollers catch some and a lot get away too so you're just getting a sample of the population... We'll just see... Greg was very very generous to help us out. He was totally entertained by it, too. He got a lot out of it. Everyone benefitted. It was fun."