



KIM NEY

Interviewer: Regina Kong

Others Present: N/A

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“I came to Alaska when I was 25, totally ignorant of what Alaska was but happy to be here.”

-grew up Georgia, lived there for 21 years. “Then I moved to California and I worked there for 5 or 6 years. I worked with physically challenged people. My college degree was recreation and I minored in ceramics. So ceramics was my love and passion and I thought that was what I always wanted to do...I got a job at a community college and fired their kilns for 5 years...Then I met a friend who had been to Alaska and told me ‘oh you should go up to Alaska. You like to be outdoors and it’s great. You can go to Seattle and jump on a boat and you can find a job...So went to Seattle and no it wasn’t so easy to find a boat to jump on and I knew nothing about fishing. Ended up coming up to Alaska on a sailboat with a couple who needed help. I thought oh I’ll learn all about sails and learn how to tie knots. Well, they knew probably a little more than I did but not a whole lot. It was an interesting ride up. We got to Ketchikan and the captain had a punctured lung and went to the hospital. So I jumped ship and traveled around a little bit. He told me he’d help me find a job on a fishing boat and of course he’s in the hospital so I’m on my own now. So I thought well I’m here early so I might as well try to see the state. I went from there to Petersburg, Juneau. I flew up to Anchorage and hitchhiked down to Homer. In Homer there are a lot of fishing boats there. A 90 foot crab boat was going to Kodiak and gave me a ride over to Kodiak. They decided they were going to hire a cook for the summer on their boat so I said I would love to be the boat and maybe I’d learn more. I spent my summer in Kodiak. Went around and around the island numerous times buying fish so I learned a lot about seining and gil netting. It was very enjoyable. Then they went to the Bering Sea to do king crab and they let me go and be the cook. I went over to the Bering Sea and we call it the ‘boring sea.’ We were there for 50 days then we came back to Kodiak. And I’d met another cook on another boat who lived in Fairbanks. She invited me to come up and visit so I went up there and ended up staying there for the winter, taking more pottery classes because in the back of my head: ‘I’m gonna be a potter, I’m gonna be a potter. And I met people who were affiliated with the Hobbit Hole in Fairbanks. This is the 80s. ‘Oh the Hobbit Hole this, the Hobbit Hole this.’ I met Bob-o and Sandy Craig. And Sandy Craig set me up with a fisherman to go fishing with out of Sitka...It was disastrous. He was an alcoholic. We went out to the outer grounds and we put the hooks in for two days. There’s a particular bay out there that you can only get in and out of when the weather’s calm and the weather was horrible so we got stuck out in the bay. He and his buddy proceeded to get drunk every night and talk, ‘Oh I’m going to shoot this person or whatever.’ And I was, ‘I gotta get off this boat.’ Finally they ran out of alcohol and the weather broke. We ran back to Elfin Cove, we got to the docks. I jumped off the boat and said I quit about the same time they said you’re fired. And one of the other friends from Fairbanks was on the dock and said ‘Come with me. I’m going to the Hobbit Hole.’ So that was how I first got to the Hobbit Hole—I got rescued from this horrible troller onto the Hobbit Hole. I had no idea really what the Hobbit Hole was.

-[4:53] First experience at Hobbit Hole. “I just heard it was kind of a fishing community. That was where Bob-O fished out of. But Bob-o had his own little boat and he took me fishing for a while, went hand trolling. I thought ‘this is really fun. I could do this.’...There was something coming through who needed a deckhand and he was going to Port Althrop, end of Barinoff Island. I thought that’d be fun, see the country. I jumped into his boat and then we trolled there. Then the season was over. Then the gardener who was there, Tara, she was this girl from New Zealand and wanted to go fishing with Dennis. So she wanted to go fishing and they needed another gardener so I came out to the Hobbit Hole to be the gardener and then I just finished up that season. I went back to California and the next season they asked me to come back to be the gardener again. That’d probably be ’81 or ’80. And then I was the gardener for the whole summer. I’d never gardened before in my life. I had a lot to learn. I was very nervous, reading books, like how do you garden and whatnot. The whole place was very new and exciting to me. I’d never gardened. I’d never been around so much fishermen. It was kind of a communal environment. There’re a lot of firsts for me—I’d never been out on the water, never run a skiff. I was never really good at reading maps and knowing where I was and the terrain. Even going from the Hobbit Hole to Elfin Cove was like ‘Will I get lost?’ Well no you won’t get lost, you know, keep the water to your left and right. It was all very new and exciting and I felt really privileged to be there. All the experiences I had and all the people. People were always coming and going. Learning new things. I smoked a ton of fish and I canned fish like mad. So all the fishermen offered me half of their fish to can. I would can halibut and salmon and I’d smoke fish. I think one summer I canned 30 or 40 cases. Back then it was actually cans, and the cases come in 30 to 60 a case. We had an oil stove to begin with so I was doing all this on the oil stove, regulating the oil stove before electricity. It was all really exciting. I met a lot of people, new experiences. Then I started fishing with Greg. I fished with Greg for 4 years. That was at first very fun. I enjoyed fishing. After a while I didn’t enjoy it so much. The fishing is kind of the same banter over and over again. After a while the fishing got to be too much. And it’s really hard on your body. So that’s kind of the long short story. But I liked being at the Hobbit Hole. The hot tub and we had projects all the time that we did, had a lot of help in the garden and grew a lot of great food. Did a lot of landscaping, got to go on super adventures. But part of what still happens at the Hobbit Hole is that you always think you have to be doing something. Instead of just having fun, spending the day doing nothing or go camping for a weekend or something, you didn’t really do a lot of that. Really, I didn’t explore a lot of that area until I left. I didn’t kayak around and now I have kayaked around there now. I never went kayaking, hardly ever went camping. We did climb up to the top once in a while, that was a big thing. We did climb up North Mountain, that was really fun. And Fourth of July was a huge deal there... We used to have all kinds of great games and fun times on the Fourth. But more than that, more than less you were always doing projects, you know. Chopping wood or moving the garden or canning fish, which I really appreciated. I didn’t really get to see—I never went to Three Hill until after I left the Hobbit Hole... So I didn’t even go to Three Hill until years after I left the Hobbit Hole. I just knew there was a canon there but I never even went to Three Hill. I mean, we’d go to Elfin Cove and get our supplies and things like that. Yeah, it was a very unique lifestyle. I really treasured that I got to be a part of that and meet the people that I met but it just became a time when I became ready to move on and enough for enough. My studio was a dream that kind of happened and kind of didn’t, but it’s being put to really good use now. The guesthouse was my studio. Building that was very cool. I had so many people that helped, people that came and went. Carpenters and friends, just a labor of love so I really appreciated that.”

-[10:48] Being busy at the Hobbit Hole. “We always had projects, which were fun. For me, the first time skinning a deer or canning venison or going halibut fishing or salmon fishing. We did go to Dundas and pick berries which was quite fun but we were always project oriented or food oriented, which at first were really fun but after a while just became chores.. I was the gardener then Greg

and I we were in a relationship and I was his puller. I fished the last four years I was there. Greg fished for humpys. I kinda headed the humpy queen. He had a little boat which made it easier for me because I wasn't really a boat person. So it was great for me. His boat was little enough so we could only haul x amount of fish. After we filled it we got to go home. So you were inspired to work really fast because you knew you got to go home. And he also liked to come home every night. It was very rare that we got to spend the night out on the boat, which was mostly what everyone else did. It was interesting.”

-[12:20] Kim's gardens. “They were already established when I got there. I helped do the flower gardens, so that area to the right of the Hobbit Hole where there are the cherry trees if they are still there. Jane put in the white rock path. So I kind of started that. I did not finish that by any means. But the only garden that really was there was the garden—I'm not even sure if it's a garden anymore—but you go up past the house. I read a lot of books and I had a lot of help. It was relatively successful. Kind of hard to remember now really much about the garden. Seems like it was more about fishing and chores. Chopping wood and kelp...in the compost or you put it around the plants for minerals, it's a really good fertilizer...There was a woman over in Idaho Inlet who had a place called Nip and Tuck. She had really beautiful flowers so I dug up her flowers when she got ready to leave. She invited me over to dig up flowers so I did bring those up over. I don't really have a memory of starting any flowers. There's a lot of things that are foggy...Mostly food (gardens)”

-[14:12] Kim lived at the Hobbit Hole for 5 or 6 years, “not continuous. There were some winters I went away from myself, some winters that Greg and I went together. I did stay some winters. But I was young and I liked to travel and do other things. I went to Mexico, or wherever someone would go with me. I'd go back to Georgia and see my family—I always tried to do that once or twice a year.”

-[14:49] Whether Kim has any favorite memories. “All of it. Just the new experience, having all the fish. The community spirit. Living on an isolated island, that was really fun. I could never even dream or think about a place like that. It was all just really special and magical. The same things that I loved about it were the same things that drove me crazy towards the end: People were coming and going all the time. You don't really have any control, really of who comes or goes or how long they stay so those were the kinds of things. Sharing the house with one person or twenty people. I think the magic kind of wore off after a while but it was very magical. I think also it's location and your ability to take hikes, you know. You're there and you have to plan to go somewhere else so you're not so mobile really. You're not just isolated because there are also people coming and going, but you're isolated because you're at the whim of other people. I did learn how to run the boat and learned how to go to Elfin Cove. So that was a huge step for me because I didn't grow up around motor boats or on the water—Georgia's in dry land. So that part was pretty challenging. (Growing up) we fished at a lake in the summertime. But otherwise, I had very little knowledge about salmon or halibut. It was all big eye-openers for me and a cool experience.”

-[16:46] Why Kim decided to leave. “Every day of course you start early and you see the weather. But you're on a boat and you're listening to the engine and you're smelling the smells the boat makes. And you're killing fish all day long, you know. I kind of got tired of killing things all day long. And getting up early—I'm not a morning person so that took a lot of getting used to. Greg is clockwork, up and out and there you go. Get your lines in the water, that's the motto. EMB, early morning bite...I didn't do any ceramics out there. The whole time was just a dream to do ceramics. Did build a studio but it never was an active studio...”

-[18:37] After leaving, Kim went on a trip to Australia and New Zealand. “Before I came to Alaska, I wanted to go to Australia and New Zealand so I said I'm going to go to Alaska so I can make enough money to go to Australia and New Zealand. It took me 6 years to get all that money and energy to go. And I had friends here in Gustavus and I really loved Alaska and wanted to come back

and garden more and learn more about gardening. And this still be near the water. This is probably the community that meets that bill the best...I should also mention Doris and Bob (Howe) and I were very good friends. They kind of helped me out when I first came here and I gardened at their house when I first came here. It was nice having a relationship with Doris, very sweet and Bob was an interesting man full of vigor. I came here and house-sat and moved around from house to house until I finally decided I wanted to live here and find property.

-[20:03] What it was like leaving the Hobbit Hole. “It was very difficult. Probably one of the most difficult things I’ve ever done. Very emotional, very hard.”

-[20:23] gone in Australia/New Zealand for 9 or 10 months. “And then summer came and I just knew I had to be back in Alaska. I got the fever, got the disease and needed to come back. Amy facilitated me coming back. She had just started a smokehouse business so I came back and worked at her smokehouse that first summer. Then I got a job at the park and so I worked at maintenance at the park for 9 or 10 years.”

-[21:06] “I love to garden. It’s my passion as you can see. I’ve got the tricks down. Mostly it’s weeding, it’s not really gardening. I absolutely love gardening and making things grow. Being able to have my own food and know where it comes from. I just love being able to eat what I grow, knowing what I’m putting in my body, that’s real important to me. After I came here, I didn’t really realize when I was there how special the access to fish was. So when I came here it was like ‘oh my gosh.’ I just kind of took it for granted that oh yeah you can get fish all the time. Well no you can’t get fish all the time, and the quantities and whatnot. And venison. I really loved the venison. I loved having fresh meat. You don’t really realize. As they say, ‘They paved paradise / And put up a parking lot.’ I really appreciate even more so now. We get a lot of fish, I still can and smoke. My smoker was Bob Howe’s old smoker. He was getting rid of it so we hauled it over here. It’s like a 60 year old smoker probably.”

-[22:58] Going back to the Hobbit Hole after leaving. Kim went when Doris died, remembrance weekend. Went back a few times during the winter: “I don’t like being around a ton of people at once so it’s nice when it’s real quiet and there’s not quite so many people there...It’s a great place. There’s not too many places like that.”

-[24:20] Kim met Wayne after leaving the Hobbit Hole in Fairbanks, but that’s “a whole other story.” They bought their current property in ’91 and moved into their house in ’95. Built 90% of it.

-[25:17] Skills and knowledge Kim has taken with her from the Hobbit Hole. “Fish. Learning how to process fish, smoke, can. Venison, how to smoke and can it. Firewood. Skiffing, learning how to drive a skiff. I’d never driven a skiff before. Learned all my nautical skills from the Hobbit Hole. Bread making, learned how to make bread out there. That’s a lot.”

-[26:31] Kim took Wayne out to Hobbit Hole and he’s now very involved with Inian Islands Institute.

-[27:21] Recently closed her ceramic studio. Sold pieces as part of art co-op then in her gazebo. “If I could’ve charged people for taking a photograph of my gazebo I would’ve been a lot richer than from my pots.” But Kim started having wrist issues and arthritis so decided to give up pottery. Makes willow baskets now.

-[29:19] Kayaking. Kayaked at the Hobbit Hole once with Dennis “who is a madman. He had this little speedy kayak. We went out through the Laundry through to where the sea lions are. He wanted to get out and see if there were any eggs in the nest. I thought he was absolutely crazy ‘cause there’s this surf. And then we paddled back home and I thought, ‘I don’t know if I need to do this again.’ I never go in another kayak there. I watched Debra get out and kayak...I thought these people are crazy. I’m sticking to the stiff. I was a total skiffhead. And then when I moved here I don’t know what made me finally decided that I needed to try kayaking. But we do two or three week trips all the time. I hardly want to go unless it’s for three or four days anymore because who wants to put all

that energy into—same amount of energy for three days as it is for one day...I love the slow pace and being able to see everything. I love campfires and at the Hobbit Hole we hardly ever had campfires, which kind of astonishes me now. I keep thinking how come we never had a fire pit? I guess we didn't want to burn wood because we burned it in the woodstove and in one evening you burn up a week's worth of firewood for the house. So that was pretty funny. I hardly ever went camping when I was there, I love to camp. But I guess you were outdoors a lot so that fulfilled my need to be outside."

-[31:30] Gustavus compared to the suburb of Atlanta Kim grew up in. "The community that we moved into. My dad was a pharmacist and he started a new store there...It was kind of new so we all grew up together. In that way it's kind of like here with the familiarity of knowing everybody's parents." But "no one had gardens...But the familiarity of your neighbors and your friends' parents was very similar."

-[33:31] Decided to stay in Alaska. "I just liked the lifestyle. The people, the openness. Not being in a big city. I'm not a shopper or a big city person. Not a crowd person. There were a lot of things. The bell went on...Definitely did not want to be in the South. The heat. I hate the heat. I didn't like the atypical Southern outlook of females, having to prove that you were equal to a man. I didn't want to waste my time doing that. My age, my era that was definitely what we grew up with. Every woman was supposed to be a teacher, a secretary, something like that. I was on the edge of that transformation...I thought California would be a great place to live but there were so many people there." Lived in the Bay Area. "I worked with physically challenged people and that was a real eye-opener for me. I really valued that time. Learning that what it is like to have a disability and how you can't overcome it...Watched a lot of people die because of their disabilities...We don't get faced with death a lot in our younger years."

-[36:20] "I came to Alaska when I was 25, totally ignorant of what Alaska was but happy to be here."