



RON KREHER

Interviewer: Regina Kong

Others Present: N/A

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“I think Robert Service said something of the effect, Alaska is the last place you want to send a young man because it will ruin the rest of the world for him.”

-born Michigan then moved to Massachusetts then Rhode Island. Father was in the Coast Guard. “My best bud at the time, parents were Arctic archaeologists and they invited me to come north with them in '65 or thereabouts. (aged) 14 to 15. So I spent almost 6 months in the Arctic and came back to Rhode Island, which seemed really tiny after being in Alaska. When I graduated from high school I was still into archaeology so did some archaeology in British Columbia and ended up at University of Alaska Fairbanks where I met all the Hobbits, who were not yet Hobbits.”

-[1:30] first impressions of Hobbits. “Greg and Fred were impressive just by their size. They were big guys, heavily bearded even at that point and time—most eighteen year olds weren't packing big beards. Vance Sundberg was there, and I think Roy Cart, Jimmy Mahan, Paul Johnson. Just a whole bunch of folks. In fact I met my Barb (his wife and Dennis Montgomery's sister) and Dennis' brother Monk we called him in Fairbanks before I met either of them and before I'd been down to Inian Islands. There was a connection there early on.”

-[2:38] Connection to experience in Arctic. “Oh yeah. Absolutely. I think Robert Service said something of the effect, Alaska is the last place you want to send a young man because it will ruin the rest of the world for him. Something to that effect, anyway. So yeah, I just kind of bided my time until I could get back to Alaska. And the University of Fairbanks accepted me so there I was.”

-[3:33] What about Alaska was so special for Ron. “That's really hard to explain it, but certainly the land. The enormity of it. We spent a lot of time with Woodland Inupiat and being out there with them was transformational in a lot of ways. I think at an early age I learned to take what you need and you leave the rest. Just a lot of things, learning by doing. But mostly the land, the life, it was just mind-boggling. Still is.”

-[5:23] Mother worked at a lobster restaurant in Bristol, very socially active.

-[6:10] Ron “flunked out immediately” from UAF. “I was having way too much fun. It was the ROTC thing... That was sometime in the 70s. I had to go back to Rhode Island and pay my dues. Went to Roger Williams College there. Actually went to school and did all the things you're supposed to. Then returned to Fairbanks. I was kind of on the fence. There was a lot of things to do and I was always interested in archaeology... A friend who had been the resident advisor for us at the dormitory showed up at my house in Rhode Islands, my parents' place, and convinced me to come back to Alaska... I think Tom knew I needed to be in Alaska. He had come back East to see his parents then drove down from Boston and picked me up. Freaked my poor parents out quite frankly. He showed up in this massive yellow Cadillac—he looked like a pimp. He had a Captain America long-sleeve shirt—this is sometime in '75 or something like that. Star-spangled pants,

yellow leather shoes, and long curly blond hair. My parents were pretty conservative, but not that conservative. My mom was kind of like... 'That's Tom I told you about.' But anyway we got on a plane and flew back to Alaska." Ron went back to school, studied anthropology and archaeology, ethnography. Got master's degree in anthropology.

-[8:35] Ethnography work. "At that time I had been making trips down south, down here and I'd gone commercial fishing as a deckhand just messing around. I got interested in communication between fishermen and communication networks and how they passed on information in different ways and how they entertained themselves as well. When I came back after the first summer that I'd collected all these recordings and stuff my professor told me that occupational ethnography was not... She wanted me to deal with Native culture in Alaska, kind of thing. So I stopped doing that... Interested in how fishermen organized themselves. And the Hobbit Hole was an interesting place for that because there was a cluster of people that were fishing very close together and they had a pretty tight social involvement outside of the fishing thing. How the interactions between them and how they coded and transmitted information. During that whole period of time there was an evolution in how things worked. You'd have codes, you were communicating over a CB radio or a VHF radio and then there were scramblers that came on board, so somebody that had the right receiver could hear you but everybody else would just hear squawk. I got out of that little bit of research before cellphones came online."

-[10:23] Importance of communication to fishermen. "You gotta be where the fish are, and if you aren't there, somebody else might be. So most fishermen had a, for lack of a better term, a coding group. People that they knew and they had ways of transmitting information as well as they could. Just for an example: The Hobbit Hole folks developed a wheel, a two-disk wheel. On that you had 'green pickles' or 'green pickles and ham.' Then you'd have a sheet that'd tell you 'green pickles and ham.' So the inside ring was places, with the general area where most of the fleet was fishing. And the outside ring was information on what was being caught and how many. So you'd say 'How are things going today.'... 'Oh green eggs and ham, um I saw a bluebird.' And you'd do the spinning on the magic dial there and you'd know they're at Icy Point and they'd caught 50 fish. That kind of thing... It gets complicated because Fisherman B is down here... where there's 30 hungry boats and if he suddenly goes steaming off... So there were all sorts of things that guys and gals did... And then there's the competition issue. If there's not that many fish you might not be calling back when someone asks you how things are, that kind of thing. Lots of intricacies to it."

-[13:01] Ron began living at Hobbit Hole sometime in mid-70s. Crewed with Greg, fished with Dennis after he married Barbara. Came to Hobbit Hole on a tender that ran between Juneau Cold Storage and Elfin Cove. "Paul Johnson was the master of the Nova and Greg worked on it too... There's a place (on Inian Island) called Nova Beach that is where Greg ran the Nova aground when he was on watch coming from Juneau... Greg—I don't know if he would've told you the story—dozed off."

-[17:18] First impressions of Hobbit Hole. "Well it's just so idyllic. You're standing there. Even then before it was all gussied up as it is now, it was just like 'This is so sweet a spot.' From the whole standpoint of the anchorage and the dynamic nature of these islands in their own right. The currents, just everything was mind-blowing, still is. The other cool thing was there was tons of Dungeness crab... everything of plenty. And it needed people to take care of it."

-[18:16] Things Ron did while living there: Gardening. Helped build greenhouse in upper garden. Painted buildings. New woodwork for house. Milled. "They were all out going hand trolling so I pretty much pumped around on the beach and had a grand old time doing stuff. And then I'd go fishing on occasion. After Greg got the Quest he and Kim fished it and I'd fish it occasionally when Kim wanted a break to be on the beach. I'd just kind of kick around and fish with the folks. There's so much to do on the beach, smoking fish for one thing and there's always work to do. So the big

projects were certainly doing the work on the house and the warehouse and the pipeline and the hydro project...Folks that were spending time there were interested in having a garden and things like that. Chickens, roosters. We had pigs. Dennis and I brought two piglets up from Port Townsend. It was an interesting trip for the pigs. We built a little shed for them on the stern...They were fractious creatures, little piglets are. They squeal and they don't like anybody and they want mama and all this. Well after a few days of them being on the fantail...we were in some really big water...they were real friendly after that...They were wildly excited about getting on the beach and all that stuff...They became food...It's a horrible story about the demise of the pigs...They were allowed to grow too large to the point where, well when you harvest animals you want them to be at a prime point, not morbidly obese like Brownie and Spot were by the time they went away. They would've been much better eating earlier in their lives...I advised them not to be named. I try not to name my food...They got sick. My dad, his family raised swine so I called him up and he came me all sorts of advice on what to do because these poor animals were sick...Get chunks of coal...Give them coal to chew on, some charcoal. And I described what was going on with them and he said 'It's an iron deficiency.' So we called up the vet. By this time they're four feet in length. I couldn't put my arms around them. They were big animals. They had no energy. They were just laying there in their little deal so we called the vet, told them what we needed, how much we needed and they sent it out. But they sent it out, they didn't give us a needle that was sufficient for a pig, for any large animal because they've got a lot of hide on them...I came up to them and I stuck Brownie I think it was and he exploded out of the sty, screaming and banging around...A gentleman came from Gustavus. He was in his 70s or 80s then and he knew how to slaughter pigs as well as other animals, the whole process of boiling them. He commented that they needed to be harvested a little sooner. So yeah, no more pigs. The livestock after that, we had geese for a little while, ducks."

-[26:30] Community at the Hobbit Hole. "It was like a big fish camp. In the early years nobody knew how to fish, to speak of, weren't familiar with the gear and certainly weren't familiar with the area so there was a lot of hit and miss...There were times when there'd be 10 to 15 boats out on the dock. Just a thicket of masts and stuff when it was party-time. At some points when people were fishing close to the islands and the passes...you could have 20 people for dinner. The place would be packed with people. It was great fun but there were people living there too that weren't living on their boats. I think that made for a lot of challenges for certainly the people that were living on the beach. People would stay up late playing guitar in the living room or the kitchen was tiny in the early days and you'd have 15 people in there and it was about as big as this alcove. So the community, when there was heavy lifting to do you got a lot of hands, but there were always slackers. I was working in the gardens one morning. You get up early in the morning, especially if you're fishing in the Hole out of the passes. North Island was a big spot to fish, and the passes here and Three Hill and whatnot. So if you're fishing here and the general area of the islands, you didn't have very far to go. So I'd get up in the morning and I'd weed or I'd pick strawberries. And somebody who was a regular there and tried to save up all of his energy for fishing stopped and was watching me pulling weeds and said, 'Ron why do you bother?' And I just thought, wow I guess I have to explain it, I guess. It's an endless thing, weeding. Some people get it, some people don't.

-[30:04] Why Hobbit Hole was special. "It was really a unique environment, as you might imagine. To give you an example, I was wandering around and it was a particular time when there was a whole bunch of people. Folks that would see regularly, might've been a closure or something. Thirty people in the house. I was just wandering around looking at the clatches of people talking. There were 5 women. The groups were segregated. There was a bunch of guys talking and there were a bunch of women talking. I walked over and said well I'll just go by the ladies here and see what they're talking about. Well they're talking about fishing. They're talking about gear. They're talking about landmarks...I thought well that's cool and I walked over to where the guys were and they're

talking about baking bread. You know, oh Greg was going on about his sourdough—it might not have been sourdough but he made good bread. It was kind of a very eclectic. There was a lot of fun but at the same time everyone's fishing. You're basically competing with everyone around ya. If fishing's not good people get a little stressed and you get tired because 16-hour days, working hard so it wasn't uncommon for people to get a little short. Generally it was a lot of fun. I guess community should be a lot of fun. Had a volleyball court, croquet. Wasn't like club med because there was always stuff to do. Totally different in the wintertime 'cause it'd only be you or you and a couple of other people.”

-[32:25] A winter Ron spent there with Reeba and Greg. Young men from Hoonah came in to fish in the area. Sometimes get 3 or 4 young men from Hoonah to go deer hunting. “You weren't always alone. I remember Reeba and I were there. We used kerosene lanterns back then, primarily woodstove. The only other people on the island at the time were Lane Ply, over here in Inian Cove. So Reeba and I are sitting in the front room reading or doing whatever we were doing and there's a knock on the door. It's pitch black and we were both just jerked out of our seats, we might've even jumped up and hugged each other out of fear. Who's gonna knock on your door in the middle of the night. Well it was Lane. He'd only been there for a little while. He'd decided that he was gonna hump over the island for a little visit and got a little disoriented which happens very very easily and ended up having to walk over the end of the island. It was early in the day when he started but he got trapped by the tides. That learning experience. So it could be pretty interesting.”

-[34:49] Hobbits interacting with Lane Ply. More interaction at first, less so now.

-[35:43] Fun things Ron did besides work, although he enjoyed his work. “Just trek around in the woods, row boats. Deer hunting in season. Wasn't big on sport fishing. When I was fishing that's pretty much all I did. Yeah there was nothing in particular. One winter I thought I'd do some trapping and uh, I caught my cat. Didn't quite catch him—he was a big cat and it was a mink trap but he stuck his face in it. I said, ‘God I wonder what tripped that little trap?’... Mostly just beating around in the woods. After I got married and had to get serious about earning money I fished around in the fall and I was an assistant guide with Paul Johnson for bears and deer, birds, fish, whatever. Didn't like it though. Wasn't really wild about trophy hunters... You know, it was just a matter of being there. There were always places to go, things to see.”

-[38:26] Where Ron lived at the Hobbit Hole. “Depending on the time of the year. In the winter time would sleep in what was then called the pantry room, had a little bunk in it. Or upstairs in the warehouse. When I was fishing, slept on the boat. Tents, whatever. Literally. Mostly on the boat once I was fishing 'cause you had all your stuff there and it was usually warm. Smelled bad but usually warm.”

-[39:15] Gardens both ornamental and food. “Lot of energy went into the food portion of it. Jane did a great job and Kim was a great gardener too for that matter. But wasn't the friendliest area... They definitely needed a fair amount of tending... It was never enough... I don't know how much was spent on groceries to feed the folks there... Greg took on a lot of that burden... Yeah there was just always something to keep you busy.”

-[40:40] Shipping in food. Besides fish and meat, from mainland needed “flour, rice, beans. But there was a lot of subsistence food consumed in the fish and clams and all that kind of stuff. Prawns, crab. We used to eat a lot of crab. So a lot of that stuff was right there. Lettuce, spinach. Berries... We experimented with it all. We made sausage, sauerkraut, and fruit leather. We were later-day hippies by and large.”

-[41:46] Ron, Reeba, and Van were making Hobbit Hole calendars. “They were just brief illustrated descriptions of what may or may not have happened that day with an illustration that might or might not have been related to what happened that day. There were doodles. It was all just doodling. The calendars started because we didn't have any calendars and then once the calendar was made there

was some intent to maintain a diary or something like that. Weather, blah blah blah. After a while it just became an entertainment for a handful of people...I'm a chronic doodler. That's about the extent of it for the most part. It was entertaining for other people so why not. So there's quite a bit of whimsy and fantasy. I haven't looked at it in a decade."

-[43:12] Moving away from the Hobbit Hole. "You know, even the best seasons as a deck monkey you don't get a lot. You could, but with a family of four and all that goes with it. I think it was the last year, I might've gotten Fred and Greg in trouble with the Forest Service, but it was a shantytown. I'd made a fabricated structure for myself, Barb and our two daughters and the turtle to stay in when I was out fishing with Dennis and sometimes Barb would go out fishing, too. The girls would stay on the beach. Peggy and Dennis at the time also had a float house on the beach. We only did that for one year. Peggy and Dennis, when they had three kids Annie and the twins they just, it was just too much. I think Peggy probably felt like it was almost a burden on the community I've heard. Her and her squalling brats—no I'm just kidding. So they towed their float house to Elfin Cove and started living there and got a place up on the beach because Dennis would be gone for days at a time. So we did the shantytown thing for a year. I think it was the next year after that, Barb and I were coming up from Washington and I really wanted to get back up to Alaska so I got a job with the state soon after we got married I think '94, '95. After that I just went to the Hobbit Hole seasonally, for a week here a week there. Big parties. Remembrance Day. Those sorts of things."

-[45:43] Challenging part of living at Hobbit Hole for Ron. "You know, honestly I can't think of a thing. It was...Hmm. Nope. Can't think of a thing. Everything was just a hoot. Now it is anyway. So we made the switch from strictly wood to actually having oil heat. So that was fairly early on. Reeba was still there. Couple winters in a row where we had serious snow, big snow and big wind. Pretty sure I was the only one there. Greg and Reeba had gone into town...I was there alone and we had a 55 gallon drum on the beach. It'd snowed like heck. A lot of snow, like three feet of snow. I had to dig from the front door of the house down to the high tide line. It took me all day. Then we'd get up—we were using kerosene lights because we didn't have electricity—you'd stay in bed for a long time and do stuff when you got daylight. So anyway, I'd dug all the way to the beach to roll this 55 gallon drum back up. I thought screw it I'm just beat, screw it I'll do it in the morning. Well it blew that night and filled it all in. So I had to dig it out again and roll it up. But even stuff like that now seems like that was okay. We had heaps of snow and Van came deer-hunting at the time. He carved little altars of different sorts...So everything was fun. I think that's what I remember the most about it. Everything seemed to be fun. There were times when we'd get mad at each other about something, get pissy or stupid but overall it was a hoot...I honestly don't miss anything about living there. I enjoyed it thoroughly. I'm grateful to Greg and Fred that they let me hang around there as long as they did. No, not anything I can really think of that would've made it any better. Fewer slugs perhaps. That would've been okay. Fewer slugs."

-[49:38] Whether Ron ever had a vision for the Hobbit Hole. "I don't think I did from the standpoint of envisioning it as something other than what it was. I never thought it was gonna be an old folks' home for all the old hobbits. You spend enough time in a place you start to think oh we could convert the upstairs of the warehouse into bunks for all the old farts...No there was just so many extraordinary days there. The one thing that is interesting about the Hobbit Hole is that you gotta get some elevation to see stuff but at the same time you have glorious sunsets and whatnot. So I think that whole hemmed in ness of the Inian Islands and the Hobbit Hole itself almost encourages you to go out into it. Once you got the gardening done or whatever you were doing done, you went out on the water and went to Dundas Bay or Taylor Bay...That central quality of the Inian Islands gave you access to such much area that is so exceptional. That's one of the special things about it. You can go up to the top of North Island and watch clouds being made. And

watching the flow of the whole Pacific Ocean through the flow of this whole archipelago. It's like so many places in Alaska, one of a kind."

-[52:11] Life in Juneau (actually Douglas). "The thing I like about living here is I can just walk 50 feet out my door and be in the woods and walk a mile or two and be somewhere I've never been before...I like the option of staying close to home but still having the world right there if you want to look for it. I've never lived in a community with more than 30,000 people in it...I'm not at all enthralled by what big cities have to offer...I like islands, without a doubt. There's a very calming attitude about being around the water and being surrounded by it. And islands and mountains, mountains are just very special."