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INTERVIEW WITH BEN GUILD

AT KODIAK, ALASKA

DF: Experiences in Alaska: by Ben Guild, November 1992.

BG: I think that when you talk about many of the parts of your life that happened, and I'm not different from most people, I came to Alaska from somewhere else. Probably 90 percent of the people living in Alaska today are in that same position, we came from some place else.

I was born in a little town called Dover-Foxcroft, Maine and we were farm people. I was born in 1924, of course the Big Depression happened in 1928 and the whole country went to pieces economically. I remember my grandfather who owned the farm saying that it didn't pay to grow potatoes because you couldn't get more than 10 cents a barrel, for potatoes, and then you had to haul them to market. It cost you more to raise them and dig and pick them and barrel them and take them to town than you could get for them. We also raised stock, of course, but Maine is particularly potatoe country and we had a potatoe farm. We raised other vegetables of course for our own use, it's very much like Alaska in that ruraly we did alot of hunting. We ate very little store bought meat. I didn't get a store bought suit of clothes until I was 17. From the time I was a child

until the time I left home my mother made all my clothes, as she made all the other clothes in the family. As I look back, I looked forward to getting that store bought suit, but now as I recall, it was very inferior to what she made me at home. Although I'll admit one year she made me a Buster Brown suit when I was in the fourth grade and I kept trying to tell her that I couldn't fight good enough to wear that suit to school but, she made me wear it anyway and I had 50 fights before I got home and it was completely torn off me, because the kids would make fun of me and I would get right in the middle of it.

These are the type of things that bring you into Alaska. Alaska has always been a magic name for me. I first learned of Alaska as a preteen youth in reading Jack London stories and other stories of the north; and the Yukon and the gold rush and the Chilkoot Trail. It was always something on my mind. I was a chronic runaway when I was a kid, we moved to Massachusetts because there was no work in Maine at all and I really hated it, so every chance I got, I went back to Maine. I ran away 4 times before I was 14, starting when I was about 10, and when I was 14 I ran away and went to sea, and ended up in Spain in 1938. Not that that trained me for going to Alaska, but it was an experience that most people don't have. It was during the Spanish civil war and it was something that was indelible on my mind and still is for 54 years. In 1940 and 1941 I was in Maine at an NYA trade school, in Eastport; NYA being the National Youth

Administration. This was President Roosevelt's attempt at taking all of the high school dropouts and educating them in a trade. It was a trade school, and I was being trained in aviation engine mechanics. Pearl Harbor happened, of course, on the 7th of December in 1941. I tried to join the Army Air Corps but I was too young and my mother wouldn't sign for me so I forged a birth certificate and went across to Canada and joined the RCAF. There were four of us. I was in training in Hamilton, Ontario to be a sergeant pilot when they found out that I was only 17, and they run me out of Canada. But by that time I was close enough to 18 so that as soon as I attained my 18th birthday I joined the Army Air Corps, U.S.. My grandfather who owned the farm in Dover-Foxcroft, the same farm that he was born on in 1844, he died in 1942 at the age of 94. Grandma preceeded him in death by three weeks. She was 87, and upon her funeral, he went home and went to bed and died three weeks later, because there was nothing left for the man. I haven't been back to Maine since then. I still consider myself a Mainenite or maniac which ever way you look at it. But 1942 in the Army Air Corps, we made a training flight from the east coast to the west coast, I was in Greenville, South Carolina, and we flew to California and then from California to Washington and Oregon and then on up to Alaska and landed at Ladd Field in Anchorage, where the site of Fort Richardson is now. We weren't here long enough for me to put any roots down, but I had been trying to get back to

Alaska ever since. One thing or another came up and I didn't arrive here for good until 1969. Alaska is everything to me that I ever thought it was or would be. It is absolutely the end place as far as I am concerned to live. It has everything. I was talking to this young lady earlier and mentioned the fact that most people who have come to Alaska, came here because they wanted to have a life style and standard of living and a type of living that they were use to in the rural communities of the lower 48. And this is about the only place left that you can do that. Not in Anchorage, but in the environs of Anchorage like Fairbanks and other parts of Alaska including Southeastern, Kodiak and some parts of South Central. The cities are small enough so that you have a familiarity of neighbors yet large enough so that you can still attain a degree of privacy if you wish. Alaska has changed, as you know in the last 10-15 years. I'm not an old timer, because I say I've only been here since 1969. But I remember when you could walk off and leave your house unlocked and nobody bothered it. I remember in Alaska when you could go skiing, cross country skiing or dog sleding and I don't mention snowmobiles or 4 wheelers because we didn't have them or there were very very few. They weren't a nuisance back then. But if you came upon a cabin and you were cold, you went inside, you could build a fire in the stove, then you chopped wood and replenished what you used. If you used the food out of the cupboard, you took some food out of your

pack and put it back in the cupboard and you left the guy a note and said "thank you, I used your cabin, its very nice I appreciate it", and you left it the way you found it. That has changed in Alaska. I think that has changed because the people we are getting into Alaska now don't know of a way of life and a standard of living that we had in rural America. There is no rural America anymore that is to speak of. Television came in the 1950s and television has changed the world in our outlook on what the world should be and what the world really is and what we perseve society in the world to be. And so we have come to Alaska with the same ideals and when we get up here, we do our best to live the same kind of life that we lived in Topeka, or Houston or Boston, or Los Angeles, or where ever we came from and in that respect Alaska has changed drastically in the last 15-20 years.

DF: What did you do when you first came to Palmer? Is that where you first came to in Alaska?

EG: No, I first came into Alaska to Chugiak and I stayed with a friend of mine. He was a registered guide and he had come to the lower 48 and put on booking shows and I had hunted in British Columbia and the Yukon Territory in Canada before. I was teaching in Michigan State University, and I had a small business of my own on the side, and I was teaching in the public schools, and it was just convenient for me.

Actually what happened was I had a heart attack and the

doctor told me that I had two years to live and I had better get my affairs together, so I thought, if that is the case, I've always wanted to go to Alaska, and by God I'm going to Alaska. And he said if you go to Alaska, you won't live two years. And that was in 1969. And he was wrong.

But anyways, I came to Chugiak and then moved down to Peters Creek. The first five years, I did nothing but hunt and fish and photograph and write. That is what I came to Alaska for. I have three books in print they are mushroom books: The Definitive Work for Alaska Funji, The Alaska Mushroom Hunters Guide, it is I think, well known in the University. I know it is around Anchorage area and in southeastern as well. I have put in two supplemental texts, one was a book of little known species, that are apparant here in Alaska called The Alaska Phychoactive Mushroom Handbook and this delt with the 14 so-called mind reacting species of mushrooms that grow here. And the other book was almost on request by a number of young people who were homsteading as they called it , living off the bush, living in the wild, they wanted some information on how to grow your own mushrooms, so about a year after the Physochoactive book, I put out the Home Grown Mushrooms in Alaska or Anywhere Else and How to Cook Them. This was just a little how-to chat book that told these kids how, with a couple of bushels of horse manure and a plywood box or an old wash tub or whatever and fifteen dollars in spawn, to grow 200 dollars worth of mushrooms. It appealed to their sense of

economy. They have all been reasonably successful. Alaska Mushroom Hunters Guide went through three printings, it is now out of print and I'm in the process of revising and updating it, and it will go from about 101 mushrooms to about 350 to 400 mushroom species. The other two books I'm leaving them as they are and they are almost sold out and they probably won't be reprinted again.

DF: Does your interest in mushrooms come from your farming days?

BG: I think so, when I was in Massachusetts, the short time that I was telling you about, in 1931 and 1932 and 1933 when I was just an 8,9,10 year old kid while the average laboring man was getting 1 dollar a day, I found a little town called Woburn about 4 miles from Reading which is about 12 miles north of Boston, this will give you an idea about where I lived. There was a furniture factory in Woburn that failed because of the depression and it was 4 stories. So this guy in Boston bought out the old furniture building, had it stripped completely on the inside and the upper three stories he used as storage, and in the basement he put in a mushroom growing plant. I would bicycle from Woburn to Reading and pick mushrooms in this mushroom plant. You had to have miners lights and so forth because mushrooms are grown in the dark, not that they won't grow in the light because they do grow in the light, but they grow better in the dark, and other things don't grow in the dark so they help the mushrooms that way.

He paid 5 cents a 2-pound box of mushrooms. And when the mushrooms were flushing, as we called it, growing in profusion I'd earn as much as 3 - 4 dollars a day at a nickel a 2-pound box, so I was picking 50 - 60 boxes a day. A man working 10 hours a day with a pick and shovel is earning a dollar a day. So it was a really good job and I sort of got interested in the mushroom culture then; Although it layed dormant pretty much. After WWII I used the GI Bill and went to college as an engineering student. I found out I had to take a biological subject as an elective to be a well rounded engineer. I couldn't get into the general biology course because it was crowded, so I took a general microbiology course and it was just like a light turned on. I changed my major from engineering to micro biology and I graduated in microbiology in public health and went on to get my master's degree in the same field. Finally, for my own education more than anything else I went ahead and finished my doctorate in engineering biological science, Biological Engineering. And this delt primarily with corsion engineering in sulfite reducing bacteria and anirobic soils.

DF: Was the mushroom farming a lucrative business, was it a hard business to make money at?

BG: No, there is something very mysterious about mushrooms.

What does it conjure up in your mind? The little toad sitting on a mushroom the little fairies and elves in a field of mushrooms, look at all of your faity tales and

books. When they have all the little elves and fairies in the forest, what do they have growing on the ground around the trees and so forth, mushrooms. It is a very mysterious plant, but it is a vegetable just like any other vegetable. They grow where you don't want them to grow and when you try to get them to grow, they won't grow. You've got to have very optimal conditions to grow mushrooms, and Mother Nature is the only one so far that knows what these are.

DF: Did you do most of your research around Chugiak?

BG: When I came to Alaska one of the first things I noticed was a great lack of information in the biological sciences in particular, the primitive plants. And it just seemed the natural thing to do for me being interested in the funji. It took me 2 years to actually do the field work for that book and it took me another two years to get it published. It took me about a year to get the illustrations and when it was published, it was very successful. It was on the best seller list in Alaska for 2 years in 1978 and 1979. In 1979, I did the first revision, and in 1982 or 1983 I did the second revision. It sold about 25,000 copies in this state and it sold to some places outside. It is quite a popular book and I've been very gratified with it. And I'm in the process now of updating it and revising it to maybe 350 to 400 species.

DF: How did you get into bear guiding?

BG: Oh, it was just one of those things that just happened. I like to hunt and fish and a friend of mine was in need of

an assistant guide so I worked with him mostly on moose and caribou on the Alaska Peninsula. Then we came down to Kodiak for spring bear over at Zacher Bay and I was with him for 3 years.

DF: Did Kodiak look the same?

BG: Oh no, its changed alot. It's changed an awful lot. The population has increased tremendously in 20 years. Out at Spruce Cape I could have bought land for 300 dollars an acre, now its 30,000 dollars a lot; about a quarter of an acre. So that's what has happened in 20 years here.

DF: How was the life style different?

BG: Oh, we were not so hectic then. Everything was so much easier. Not lackadasial, people were still intent on making a living, but it wasn't such a cutthroat economy - no big business, we weren't computerized. Say what you will, I think the computers have done alot but they have done alot to ruin, too. There have been alot of benefits from computers but I'm just old fashioned, I'm that old dog you can't teach new tricks to, I guess.

DF: What are some of your happier moments?

BG: I've never had a sad moment in Alaska, I think it has all been good. No, I don't mean to give the impression that I'm displeased with Alaska at all. It's everything I always thought it was and I'll never leave it. It's great. There is no place like it in the world. There is still unlimited opportunity here but if I had anything against Alaska, it is that we are getting too much pressure from outside on social

reform, government rules, and we are bringing these same ideas that actually ruined the country in the lower 48, we are bringing them into Alaska and ruining Alaska the same way.

DF: The life style back then, was it rugged, like Jack London depicted?

BG: Well, it always has been. Rural Alaska, Kodiak is not rural. It really isn't. Not even out at Narrow Cape or Lands End or Chiniak. It's not rural. They have electricity, running water and inside plumbing and some of the villages still don't have running water and inside plumbing. And some of them not even electricity. This may sound strange but there are remote villages in Alaska that are not modern. That doesn't really make them any better, except, quaint I suppose. I was in Barrow in 1970, I was in Kotzebue the same year, Unalakleet, Gullivan and I went across Norton Sound in an open boat with an Eskimo in 1971 and it was 160 miles with an outboard.

DF: Was it frightening?

BG: No, I thought it was great. But the people live different. Elim is a little village there in the Bering Sea, Norton Sound. St. Lawrence Island, the people are living there much like they lived 50,75,100 years ago. There have been some improvements, but sewage has been the big problem in the villages. There is no place to put it. No place to dig it. Can't put in a sewer system per sey because you can't get the lines deep enough, besides there

is permafrost 3-4 feet below the surface or right up to the surface in many cases, so it is very difficult to modernize locations, villages like that. Modernize to the extent of what we know modernization is; Creature comforts of running water and flushing toilets, electricity, gas heat or oil heat.

DF: Do you think it was easier back then?

BG: I think "easy" is a relative term. Back then I think it was easy because that is what we had. It's like my mother evolving from a scrub board to a gasoline powered washing machine. You see, the early washing machines had a gasoline engine on them, you had to put gas in the tank, it had a pull starter, and that was what ran your washing machine. That was really an innovation cause you went from a scrub board to it. Now when the electric washing machine came out, then everyone sighed with relief cause you didn't have to put gasoline in them anymore or pull the start cord.

In the early 20's when the radio came out it was absolutely stupendous. Everybody in town would turn out because only one house in town had a radio so we would go over to their place on the weekends, and listen to the radio. Now we look at radio, well look at television it's on all day. It just sets there and blares. We don't give it a second thought. But as late as 1950, television was a wondrous thing. That was 30 years ago.

DF: Do you remember any of your old friends, did you keep in touch with anyone?

BG: At my age, most of my friends my age are gone. Some are not, but I haven't kept in touch with any of them. My mother is still alive but she lives in Maryland and she'll be 99 in March. There may be hope for me yet.

DF: What about your guiding days. How did you like that?

BG: I guided for three years. It was great. The guy I worked for was fine. But the people he had, I got out of it because I just didn't like the babysitting job. And most guides get out of it for that reason. It's lucrative, there is good money in it but, not very satisfying.

DF: What did you do after that?

BG: Well, the first 5 years I, hunted and fished and photographed and wrote, I sold about 150 magazine articles and those three books I told you about but still couldn't make a living, so I said to myself, Self, what can I do, what kind of job can I take where I will have as much time off as I need to do my writing and hunting and fishing and photography and still make a decent wage...go to work for the government. The biggest employer in Alaska was the Federal Government, or the State or the Municipality. But ultimately the government, the biggest employer in Alaska. So I traded off like most of us do, and I traded my freedom for a little temporary inconvenience, I went to work for Uncle Sam.

DF: Where was this?

BG: In Anchorage. And then for about 12-13 years, I worked at remote sites. I liked it alot, the sites were very

primitive. In the winter time you wouldn't get mail or fresh milk or vegetables for about 6 weeks. You were stuck there, you couldn't get off. Suicide rate or the marriage attrition rate was about 40 percent of the site personnel. I worked for the U.S. Air Force, started out working in carpentry and actually, I started working for the government on the Alaskan Railroad, I worked in Healy on the B&B 8 crew, and we built the section house in Healy. It was 50 degrees below zero and we were working out doors, and I worked for them for about 3 months, then I got a call from the Air Force recruiter there in Anchorage who wanted to know if I wanted to go to work for the U.S. Air Force and I said absolutely. It couldn't be worse than working in Healy. So I moved into Anchorage and the job consisted of working in carpentry at remote sites. I went to Cape Romanzof, Tin City and Cape Newingham, Kotzebue and Nome and soforth, King Salmon, Galeena. It was really great. And I got to see alot of the country that I probably wouldn't have seen. These are places in Alaska that you don't normally get to. I went to St. Paul and down in the Fribilofs on a writing assignment for a magazine one time, I went down where they were harvesting the seals and wrote an article, and then the editor wouldn't take it, because he wanted me to go down and take pictures and say how cruel it was and in my view point, it wasn't cruel at all. It was just a means to harvest a product. And so he spent a lot of money and gave me a nice vacation but he didn't make it clear to me

that this is what he wanted, a biased article on the cruelties of the seal population.

DF: Did you not think that that would diminish the population the way they were doing it?

BG: No, it was a normal harvest. In fact, I think that hunting is a proper game management tool in big game management. I think that sport hunting is a proper tool in game management. In 1971 they killed over 300 moose on the Alaskan Railroad between Willow and Fairbanks and that's been consistent almost every year, but no one makes a big deal about that.

DF: What do you think about the future of Alaska?

BG: I think it's got a great future if you keep it on an even keel and keep government politics out of it. The trouble is if you take the king's money, you do the king's bidding.

DF: What did you like back then when you first came here that is not here now?

BG: I liked the peace and quiet. The old Glen Highway from Palmer to Anchorage you seldom saw more than a few automobiles, and then only on weekends. Now it's bumper to bumper from Peters Creek, Eagle River, Chugiak all the way to Anchorage. The Glen 500 from Eagle River to Anchorage, we call it. Alaska always was an expensive place to eat and to live, expense is relative. You didn't mind paying a little more for food, you didn't mind paying a little more for transportation or gasoline because you derived the

benefits of being here in Alaska. And the benefits of being here offset the costs. It's somewhat the same right now. I enjoy Kodiak very much. It cost about 25 percent more to live here than in Anchorage but I think the benefits of being here in Kodiak are worth it. That hasn't changed.