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INTERVIEW WITH LOIS STOVER
AT HER HOME
IN KODIAK, ALASKA

PH: I want to talk with you about your goldmining. I have seen at least one article in the Kodiak Daily Mirror about your goldmine. It looks like very hard work but very rewarding. Let's begin by finding out how you got started in goldmining.

LS: Well, where I grew up in Takotna there is a lot of gold mining there. That is the main economy and has been for many years. After we gave our fishing permit to our son, we wanted to go back and visit Takotna. I hadn't been back there in 25 years. So I went back and had a nice visit with my school chums and while we were there a gold miner who knew my family and knew Smokey real well came and got us at Yankee Creek and took us up to Colorado Creek to see his mine. He let us use his Quonset hut there and let us prospect there on his patented land. Well, we just really appreciated this and we went up to Colorado Creek which is toward Ruby from Yankee Creek and spent a couple of days with him there and watched them mind and when we came back I just told Smokey that I just wanted an excuse to go back there every year and wouldn't it be fun if we could just play around and do a little bit of mining ourselves so I mentioned it and the idea grew and grew on him and pretty soon he thought it was his idea, and so he thought that was great so a friend of ours wanted to try the same thing so our friend Darlo Dayton and Smokey got together and got equipment from the junkyard and some that Darlo had and some he brought up from Seattle. Darlo built the sluice box. He welded aluminum and made the sluice box that was just the right size for our operation, and that's how we got started and it was so much fun we've gone back every year but we didn't mine because the equipment is pretty much broke down. It would take just too much of an investment to get it operating again so it is kind of at a rest period right now, but some day I may go back and try it again but we really did enjoy it and some years were quite profitable to us.

PH: Where is your goldmine located? Is it close to a village? Describe how to get there from Kodiak.

LS: Well, when we go up there we sometimes go as far as Anchorage the first day do some grocery shopping and then catch the plane the next day into McGrath. You can make it

all in one day. If you leave here in the morning, you fly to Anchorage and then you catch a Dash 7 from McGrath with Mark Air and then you get a bush plane from McGrath and you can fly either to the gold mine at Yankee Creek or fly into Takotna. We usually fly into Takotna because we have friends there we like to stop and visit before we go to the goldmine. That is where our equipment is and our vehicle for running back and forth. We used to have a Subaru Brat that worked our real well. But it's in pretty bad shape so now I have a Honda 250 four wheeler and it works great. I can get out to the mine in an hour on that. It is easy on the gas which is an important factor because up there gas is over two dollars a gallon. I like it. It makes lots of noise and scares the bears. I've seen several bears from my four wheeler and also a moose. You look pretty little when you're on a four wheeler looking at a big moose hoping he wants to keep going and not turn around and get angry at you. But that's how you get there.

PH: Can you tell me what process you use from start to finish to mine gold?

LS: Well, the way we do it is not the same way the big miners do it. They have a lot of heavy equipment and what material we move in one day they do in one hour. We're just a "Mickey Mouse" setup, but it's fun. We've gotten some nice nuggets with our venture. We have a hopper and then a vibrator table and then a sluice box right underneath and what happens is we take the loader and we take a scoop of pay dirt and we dump it into the hopper and then we hit it with a 3 inch hose and the water force pushes the material down a chute and it goes on to the vibrating table and vibrates all the big rocks out and the small stuff, the fines they call it, drop down into the sluice box and the water drops down with it and continues to wash it through the sluice box and most of your coarse gold drops in the first 3 or 4 ripples because it is so heavy. It just goes and gets lodged in there. In the sluice box, we have Astroturf on the bottom. We have bars going across to make the ripples. The bars are bolted in so that you can take them off when you go to do you clean up. So you have this Astroturf on the bottom of your sluice box and you have these bars bolted on each side to hold them in place and that's what holds your dirt and your gold. We wash for maybe, it's called sluices, we sluice anywhere from 4 days to a week or maybe even two weeks and then we have a clean up and that's when you have your clean up. You take your sluice box apart and you rinse everything because gold will stick to anything so you rinse all the bars going across. You roll up the Astroturf and put it into a tub and be careful not to lose anything because your gold is concentrated. If you have hit pay dirt, which you hope you have, there should be a lot of concentrated gold in the Astroturf. So you take that and put it into a tub or bucket and you take and wash out the

sluice box and wash it into a tub or bucket and after you take all this stuff down to where the water is clean, you sit and pan it all. There are other ways to separate the gold from the dirt, but panning is the fastest and easiest for me. Then you pan it and clean it. What I do, I just pan it as clean as I can and then I put it into a metal pie tin and put it on the stove, a wood stove, and let it dry. And then you dump it on a piece of paper and you blow the sand off and then your clean gold you just make a funnel with your paper and dump it into a jar and then when you're ready to sell, you just pack your jars and bring them on the plane to Anchorage and sell them to one of the refineries there.

PH: What is the greatest amount of gold you have mined in one season?

LS: Well, let's see. We got \$25,000 in one season. That's when gold was selling for around \$400 an ounce. That's the best we have ever done.

PH: Has the price of gold per ounce fluctuated very much?

LS: Well, at one time gold went up to \$800 an ounce. That was before we started mining. Since we started mining it's gone up as high as \$545 an ounce and dropped as low as \$325. It seems to hold an average of, I'd venture to guess it averages out at probably \$375 an ounce.

PH: What is the largest gold nugget you have ever found?

LS: The largest nugget we found is 2 3/4 ounces. It's flat on one side so when we dumped it in the hopper, of course you have this big mountain of dirt, you have no idea how much gold you have in it. Our son was helping us. He was washing out the sluice box giving it a final rinse and he spotted the nugget and he jumped up in the hopper and grabbed the nugget. He was waving it. It was so exciting, we all had to stop and "ooo and ahhh" over the nugget. That's the biggest one we've ever found. We found a 3/4 ounce nugget and some that are a little bit smaller and a little bit bigger. Most of our money we make with the fines, real fine gold because you sell that to the refinery and there is more of it. It takes longer to get. That's where your money is. You make money off of nugget too. In fact, one year I made more money selling nuggets than we did selling the fines. It depends on what you have to offer. It seems like every nugget that we ever have we have a buyer for without advertising. They knew we had them and they wanted them.

PH: How many other gold mines are near yours?

LS: Five in the area. They are all big compared to ours.

PH: Would it be difficult for someone to get started in mining now?

LS: Yeah, it would be because 1) you have to know which ground you can mine. 2) you don't know how much gold there is so you have to prospect so you have to make this initial investment without really knowing what you are going to be getting out of it. 3) the cost of getting the equipment there. You have to get it down to Bethel and then up the river. You have to go up the Kuskokwim River to Sterling Landing and that's pretty costly. Just getting it like from Anchorage to Bethel is going to be costly enough and to continue up the Kuskokwim River as far as Sterling is pretty expensive. Also the cost of maintenance and the cost of fuel. It's just really hard when you break down. Every day is costing you because you can only mine from the 1st of May to middle of May in some places until the first of October because the ground is too frozen the rest of the time.

PH: What would be the startup cost of someone starting?

LS: Provided you had your equipment already, you could probably get started for about \$20,000, if you had your equipment. We were fortunate enough that we had a junkyard so we could put together some equipment. We had some equipment that wasn't in the best of shape but it ran and got us by.

PH: Do you like mining better than fishing?

LS: I don't know. I really enjoy doing them both. They're hard work. I like doing both of them because there are so many things you can do at the same time like gardening. I always have a garden when I fish. I always have a garden when I mine gold. One thing about it, when you get tired of mining, you can pick berries or go do something else. But when it is fishing time and it's time to fish you have to fish. Also, gold doesn't stink like fish does. I like doing both. I don't know which I like doing best. I'm going to go back to fishing this summer. Maybe after the summer, I can answer you better.

PH: Can you describe a typical day when you are working at the mine?

LS: Well, the year that we did the best our typical day went we'd get up at 5 or 6 o'clock and have our coffee and maybe a slice of toast. We'd go out to work before it got really hot because up there you're closer to the Arctic Circle so your days are warm, hot even, 80 degrees a lot of the time and mosquitoes aren't so bad, and it isn't so hot so we work for probably two hours maybe three and then we'd come back and fix sourdough, hot cakes and have a good big

breakfast and then we'd go back to work. Then we'd work until one o'clock and take a break for lunch and rest for an hour then go back to work until it's time to fix supper. Sometimes Smokey would work in the evenings to loosen the material to wash the next day and so he would put in a longer day than we would. Although we were busy with the gardening and cooking and laundry and what-not. So all the days were filled but we still had fun. We had the miners next to us come over. We'd have poker games and play Tripoli but so many times we'd all be so tired we'd just want to go to bed at the end of the day. The only time we didn't put in a real full day was when the weather was bad. We'd still put time in but we didn't work as many hours. Our spirits would get dampened as well as our clothes.

PH: Can you describe the village of Takotna around the mine?

LS: Yeah, Takotna is twenty three miles from the mine. The last census there were thirty two people living there and that included the children. So you can pretty much envision the size of it. There's a post office and a store that sells the basic staples. She has a freezer that has two or three different kinds of meat and butter, and bread and bacon. Sometimes they run out of bread and you have to bake your own bread sometimes. She sells eggs, pretty much the basic staples. There is a bar there, the Takotna Bar run by Dave Miller and there's a family. Their job is to go up and meet the mail plane every day, Monday through Saturday. Sometimes twice a day and they have a minimum amount of road work they do. Usually they come up from McGrath, someone hired by the State comes up and takes care of the roads twice during the summer. That's about it for maintenance of the roads. Once in a while it will get really bad and they'll have to put more time in on it. They have a health nurse. She is a registered nurse but not all of them are in the villages. Sometimes they have a public police officer and sometimes they don't. They have a "washateria" where they do the laundry and they have specified days when they have to do the laundry. People get their drinking water either from the PHS building or else from a creek that's about two miles out of town. They have that water tested every year to make sure it is safe for drinking. And that water is where I get my water when I go to my cabin which is four miles from Takotna, which I had built two years ago. It's a small cabin 12' x 24', just right. I hope to go there next year and see the Iditarod racers go by. My sister lives in Takotna now so it is kind of nice to go back every year. I love to go back and pick berries and just visit with all my friends. Some of the kids, they're not kids anymore, kind of but we went to school together so it's fun to go back and visit. Both of my grandfathers are buried in Takotna. My grandfather, Twitchell had potato farms there and he raised and sold a lot of potatoes up and

down the Kuskokwim River and sometimes even as far as the Yukon. They would buy his potatoes. He also grew cabbages, turnips, and rutabagas. My childhood there was a very happy childhood. We were always busy doing something. We were from a large family. We always had everything we wanted, I felt.

PH: How has mining changed since you started?

LS: Mining has changes in the fact that you used to go out to the mining camp and you were there for months at a time. Of course now people find an excuse to come into town. If not every day, every other day so there's a lot more miners travel back and forth than there used to be I think. As far as mining methods, years ago they used to operate twenty four hours a day but now they just work eight hours a day. Sometimes longer when they're sluicing or taking the ground cover off. Stripping it's called. Strip off the top layer of ground and get down to pay dirt. They have to keep panning to see where the gold is if they're down to it yet or even if they're mining they have to continually test pan to see if they are still in the gold, or if they are out of it there is no sense in going deeper, so they continually test pan to see how they are doing as far as hitting the gold.

PH: Do the miners use any of the rivers around there as part of their transportation?

LS: Oh yes. See the Yankee Creek runs into the Anoko. The Anoko drains into the Yukon. There's a lot of people who use the rivers for recreation. Years ago they used to take their supplies up when it was frozen. They take a bulldozer and they'd pull almost like a train, a sledge. A big sledge that would have equipment on it. They could pull, even pull a wanagan which would be just a little box like thing that would have a cook stove in it and usually a couple bunks and all their cooking gear. That would take care of them while they were on this freight train. That's how they got their fuel and everything to the goldmine years ago, but now most all their fuel is either brought by barge or else it is flown in. They have big landing strips and big airplanes that can carry equipment, even bulldozers.

PH: Do any of the Athabascan Indians work in the mines?

LS: There is a lot of them that work and have worked for several years for the same person. When someone breaks in a crew, it's to their advantage to keep the same crew so they don't have to keep training people. A lot of them are either Eskimo or Athabascan. They're some that are excellent mechanics. Usually they don't have one person doing just one thing, they have to be versatile. Have to be able to switch off, they need another person to sluice, then

somebody has to be able to step right in and do it. Same with running a CAT. Have to be able to switch around and do each other's jobs.

PH: Have there ever been any mining accidents up there?

LS: No, I don't recall any mining accidents at all. So I think they've always been pretty careful.

PH: Are most of the mines individually owned rather than corporately?

LS: They are individually owned. The only big ones are like the Red Dog Mine by Ruby and the AJ Mine in Juneau. Most of them are individually or family owned. Most of them have their own airplane.

PH: Is some of the mining equipment specialized?

LS: Some of it is. Yeah, like for separating the gold. But most of them still pan separate the gold and the gold they take into the refinery will have a lot of black sand in it still. But they smelt it down and get all the impurities out.

PH: Do you think mining is going to be more difficult with the new Clinton Administration?

LS: No, I really don't know. I think everyone is sitting back waiting to see what he is going to do. With the economy being like it is, I would think he would want to keep activity going just to create jobs, but being a Democrat I know they are not too anxious to open up the wild refuge land either to miners or fishermen or loggers or any of it. I don't really know how any of it is going to go. Personally I think if it is handled right they can do both. They can conserve the land and the resources and still create jobs and let people invest in jobs here in Alaska. I just don't think it has to be one way or another. Both can be done if it's handled right.

PH: Is Anchorage the main supply center for the miners?

LS: Yes, it is. Anchorage and Fairbanks but mainly Anchorage. Most everything comes out of Anchorage to McGrath and then it is expedited from there to the smaller bushes. We have a radio that we listen to all the time. There is always messages that say "Warren Magnuson, your parts are in at Mark Air Express" or a message going out. Somebody is waiting for tires, "Your tires are in. Please come in and pick them up" or "your stuff is in, let us know how you want us to send it". People up there are always waiting for something, it seems like.

PH: Can you describe some types of mining terms, such as "tailings"?

LS: Well, Tailings are the washed material that stacks up outside your sluice box. But depending on how much material you move, it determines how big your tailings are and how many. There are old tailing piles from three years ago when the old dredges came through there and those can be re-mined and you can still get gold out of them that was missed years ago. Yankee Creek has been mined five times and there's still gold to be found there. We've been real fortunate where we've been mining we've hit real good. But now there's thirty feet of overburden above us. So that has to be moved out before we can get to the pay dirt so it's getting harder and harder to get to the material. There's tailings and then there's the sluice box. It is a metal box or a box sometimes made with railroad ties and that's what your material goes down through. The water washes down over the tailing pile set at an angle so the gravity will make the water feed down. There's a funnel like thing that comes into the sluice box for the big miners. With ours we have a hopper, but the big miners have [something] that acts like a hopper, like a big funnel. They put a clay in the bottom, leave it set for 3 days. It sets up really hard and then they bulldoze this material through this funnel like thing and then they hit it with water. The water washes down into the sluice box and you wash and wash and wash and the tailings come out down here and you have a bulldozer come from this direction and cleans the tailings out. They have to keep cleaning the tailings out because they are pushing more material in. Those that are in must come out. I'm just familiar with sluicing. There is hard rock mining where the material is smashed up. I don't know if it is then sluiced or what. I've never been around it. You use bulldozers to push the material up to the sluice box and you hit it with a heavy stream of water called a nozzle so the person holding that nozzle is called a "nozzler". There is either a drag line or a CAT that takes away the tailings. I think bulldozers are used most of the time now. In the old days they used drag lines a lot. I don't think there are too many drag lines used now to remove the tailings.

PH: Does the EPA come into inspect you? If they do, how often?

LS: They come in every year and sometimes once a year. Usually somebody will alert everyone else and let them know. They won't come right out and say it but they'll say "Put the coffee pot on" and that means "EPA is in the area, so watch out!".

PH: Are there any state or federal regulations you have to follow?

LS: Yes, that's what EPA comes and checks. I don't remember if these are federal or state. Probably state men that come to visit us. They gave us a clean bill of health because we recycled all our water. We just use the same water over and over again and we didn't pollute any of the streams or anything. They didn't consider us a true miner either. We did it more for fun than anything. it's what they call "recreational miner".

PH: What's the average season for gold mining?

LS: I'd say from 1st of May to 1st of October. After that sometimes you have to quit, even before the 1st of October, depending on when the hard freezes come.

PH: What would be an average earning during that time?

LS: It would depend on how much material you moved. The biggest one we has was \$25,000. If gold is going at \$400 an ounce, that would be about 62.5 ounces. Most of the big miners have between 400-700 ounces in each clean up. They would clean up about every six weeks. We would clean up about every week but we're such a small operation. Our sluice box is one-tenth the size of their sluice box so they would sluice 10 times longer than us. Usually their gold was 10 times more than ours too.

PH: What would you do differently if you were going to start gold mining now?

LS: Well, I'd find someone who wanted to do the same thing will to put in some hours, some money and go together with me and probably I'd have to file a claim. I don't know if it would be on state land or if I'd have to lease some land from a Native Corporation or what. I'd have to find good land to mine, good equipment, good person to work with me, someone who knew a little about mining. Equipment mechanics up there are especially valuable. Someone who would be willing to put in a whole season, which Smokey and I pretty much did it for fun, but I'd like to really try and do a real season with it and see how we make out. I'd like to see how we can do now that I have a little idea of what can be done. I see how the other miners operate. I think it would be really fun to go in there and do it the right way and just see what we could do.

PH: Are you interested in making gold jewelry?

LS: Very much so. I have about \$1000 worth of equipment that I bought and I've made some gold jewelry and done real well by it. But one thing you have to have [is] gold, if you are going to make gold jewelry. And so what I'd like to do is mine gold and just mine fast and furious during the summer months while the weather permits and then during the

winter months take and make gold jewelry. I've never had to advertise. I get enough advertisement by word-of-mouth. I could hardly keep up with my orders. It's just something that everybody wants, gold nuggets. It's a profitable business and it's fun but you have to have a steady hand and money to buy your findings and things you need to make gold jewelry.

PH: So you could turn mining into a year round operation not just in the summertime.

LS: Oh, absolutely. You could make your jewelry during the winter months of course, if I was a man I'd be doing my equipment maintenance during the winter months also but when I couldn't be mining I'd be figuring out how to make a new sluice box and things like that.

PH: Have you ever watched a large mining operation?

LS: Yes, I went up to Colorado Creek to watch Tovold Rosander when he did a big clean up and it was really exciting. We watched them take their big sluice box and clean it out from start to finish. We watched them and it was really something to see. I mean you saw a whole panful of nuggets. They are so heavy you could hardly lift them and then of course they clean up the fines afterward. Because they use sorters that separate the gold, it takes the biggest nuggets out first and then you take the smaller nuggets. You grade them by their size. Then they get down to the fines. It was really exciting to see. I'm glad I got to see it.

PH: Who owns most of the land up there?

LS: The Native Corporations own most of the land. Leif Anderson, who mines next to us, he has to lease his land from Doyon. Doyon owns a lot of the land. The Regional Corporation and the Native Corporations within Doyon won a lot of the land up there.

PH: Do you have to pay a fee to them to mine?

LS: Well, we don't have to because we're on patented land. It's Tovold's patented land. And he's been generous enough to let us work it. If you're on native land you do have to pay. I don't know if it's a permit or a fee based on acreage and how they work it. I don't know. It cost him about \$10,000 last year. You have to pay the Native Corporation for the privilege of mining their ground.

PH: Are there any areas up there that are off limits to mining?

LS: Yes, that's why you have to go to the State Division of Lands and let them know what general area you are interested in mining and find out which areas are open to you.

PH: How long does the permit process take to get a permit to mine?

LS: Well, if you know the area and have the maps it probably wouldn't take you a month. But for us it took us all winter to get the paperwork done. We had to write and get the proper maps. We had to draw out the area and everything we filed seemed like we did it wrong so we had to send it back and redo it right. So it took quite awhile.

PH: Are there any special laws dealing with miners concerning the IRS?

LS: You have to show the gold that you sell. You don't have to sell all your gold and you don't have to show your income until such a time as you sell it. You can hold gold or you can leave it in the ground and hold gold until such a time as you want to declare it. If you don't want to sell it until the price goes up, there's no law against that. But once you sell it you have to declare that as income.

PH: Can you describe any similarities between mining and fishing?

LS: Yes, the gamble. You don't know what you are going to catch in that net. Neither do you know how much gold you are going to get out of that material when you put it in. You prospect which gives you an idea but you never know when that big once is going to show up. That's what makes it exciting. When you find that gold in the boxes and see that shiny color, it just makes your heart race. Just like seeing a 1000 fish in your net. It's the same kind of feeling. It's exciting.

PH: So, in some ways, mining and fishing are like gambling in Las Vegas?

LS: Yes, they are. Well, life is a gamble no matter what you do there's always chances that you take. I think it's great for families, both fishing and mining. You work together for a common reason and work together as a family. My happiest memories that I have is when my children were growing up at the gillnet sight. They learned that there was something to life besides just watching TV. They learned to cut wood and pack water. Now they can do these things on their own and I don't have to worry about them and they can feel the satisfaction of a job well done. They feel the excitement of when things are going well. A lot of times things don't go well. You just have to keep plugging along and keep trying.

PH: So sometimes, you have to improvise at the goldmine when something breaks down?

LS: Oh absolutely, it may be a week or more before you can get a part in. It's just like at the fish site, if something breaks down, you have to do the best you can with what you've got. A lot of that stuff is "jerry-rigged". If it works, why knock it?