INTERVIEW OF MARK VAIL
INTERVIEWER IS KAREN BREWSTER
SEPTEMBER 4, 2016
IN MC CARTHY, ALASKA
PART 1

KAREN BREWSTER: Today is September 4, 2016 and I am here in McCarthy with Mark Vail talking about his experiences out here in the Wrangell's. Thank you, Mark, for coming into town

MARK VAIL: No problem.

KAREN BREWSTER: I know you are what nine miles out the McCarthy Road?

MARK VAIL: Yeah, nine miles out and a mile in the woods.

KAREN BREWSTER: That is great. So just to get us started talking a little about your background growing up before you came to Alaska.

MARK VAIL: Okay. I grew up in the Pocono Mountains of Pennsylvania just outside the Delaware Water Gap National Park where my family homesteaded in the 1720's and so I grew up in an area where I was richly steeped in the history of the place and left there for new adventure and went in the Air Force in 1976 after I graduated from high school in '75. Actually I went in '75 and made my way to Anchorage through the Air Force as a cook. And from there I eventually made my way here through a series of, you know, exploring Alaska which is huge and takes a while to figure out the place. So one day a friend said, hey, do you want to go dipnetting. And I am like what's dipnetting? And he said oh, you get this long handled net and you stick it in a muddy river and pull fish out. And I am like where do you do that? And he said Chitina and I am like where the hell is Chitina? And he said, oh, it's you know out past Glennallen. And so I was game and we drove out to Chitina and there were three of us sharing a dipnet and taking turns. Every time I got the net nothing happened until my last turn and I caught a 37 pound king salmon.

KAREN BREWSTER: Wow!

MARK VAIL: White meat king and took it back to Anchorage and fed everyone in my squadron in the barracks, you know. We had a pavilion out back so I had a big barbecue and fed all my chums in the Air Force. And but that day was a beautiful sky blue day sitting on the west bank of the Chitina dipping and when I caught that king I thought oh, my goodness you could eat salmon from this river and live over there. That is what I want to do. So I proceeded to pursue that goal since 1977.

KAREN BREWSTER: And how long were you in the Air Force?

MARK VAIL: Just one hitch, three years three months twenty-six day, twenty-four hours. Not that I was counting. But I was fortunate in the fact that when I landed in Alaska they asked me how long did I want to say, two or three years. And I am look at all those mountains. I want to stay three years if I have that option. And like, yep, and at the end of three years I still had six months of service time and I got an assignment to Minot, North Dakota and I didn't want to go to Minot. You know, all my friends were like, why not Minot as they walked by me in the hallways. And I wrote a letter to Air Force explaining I wasn't going to re-enlist and that the time allotted in those six months, the transition time, the indoctrination time at the new base and the out processing time would give me

three months of active duty there and that it was uneconomical for the Air Force to pursue that goal and I had everyone in my chain of command which was like nine people sign the letter and it went to Air Force and they approved an early out. So I was given a six month early out. Meanwhile I told them that I would serve my six months there. They were like oh, no. you're free to go. So I, you know, got out of the Air Force. I went back to Pennsylvania for six weeks, looked at the job market, looked at the opportunities, looked at where I grew up and said, mom, dad, I left $127 in the bank and a broken down truck in Alaska. I am going back. And they had come to visit a couple times so they nodded their heads and said we understand, you know.

KAREN BREWSTER: It sounds like you came from sort of a rural lifestyle anyway.

MARK VAIL: Yeah, you know, it is only 90 miles outside of New York City and Philadelphia, but my grandparents had a farm, 60 acre farm, that wasn't active when I was growing up, but was active, you know, from the 1800's and had passed down generationally in the family. So I grew up with that knowledge and a basic understanding of rural economy. My dad worked in a factory, but we grew gardens and harvested food and hunted and fished. So I, you know, already had that background, you know, a lot of backcountry or hiking experience and camping and canoeing. My first wilderness experience was in high school. I was in the camping and canoeing club and our advisor used to let us borrow his truck and steal apples from derelict apple orchards which were all over the place to take to the cider mill and make cider and sell cider by the gallon to raise money to go on camping and canoeing trips. And at the end of our year we had leftover money in the club's account and he had a friend in another school district leading a canoeing trip to Maine. And he said anyone who has signed up for that trip could use a share of that money to help offset the cost of going on the trip. So three of us in the club got to split like $450 towards this trip. And we did 10 days on the Allagash River in Maine. So that was my first experience of natural quiet, seeing moose, the big north woods and I was enthralled, you know, so when I landed in Alaska -- actually in the Air Force my first assignment was to Louisiana and I swapped assignments with a classmate to get to Alaska.

KAREN BREWSTER: So how old were you on that Maine trip.

MARK VAIL: I was probably 17 and when I arrived in Alaska I was 18, so a year later.

KAREN BREWSTER: So how did you get -- I assume you were stationed at Elmendorf then?

MARK VAIL: Right.

KAREN BREWSTER: So how did you make your way from there to out the McCarthy Road once you were out of the Air Force? What's that story?

MARK VAIL: So during my time in the Air Force I explored the road system in Alaska. You know, went to the Kenai, saw that it was already overcrowded, fishing wise anyhow, you know. Went up the Parks Highway, did Denali, went to Fairbanks found it was stifling hot in the summertime and no mountains. And the first time I went out the Glenn Highway and broke over the top of Tahneta Pass and had traveled a hundred miles nearly from Palmer with very little indication of development, it was like wow, look at this space and, you know, having gone dipnetting in '77 and, you know, seeing the Copper Basin and realized that there was, you know, access into the not yet Park through the old railroad road, albeit I never made it out before it was a Park. I never made it into this road. I had come as far as the Kuskulana Bridge on summer solstice of 1980. I was

working in Anchorage at a restaurant and friends and I had four days off and we drove north to Circle Hot Springs to see the solstice sun and got rained out and mosquited out. And I am like we should go down the Richardson to Chitina. It is always sunny in Chitina. And they are like where it Chitina? It is like come on let's go, you know. We packed up all our wet gear and threw it back of the Subaru and drove to Paxson in the middle of the night and pulled over at the campground at Paxson Lake and laid out everything out on picnic tables and slept till the sun was mid high in the sky and then drove down to Chitina. And it was sunny and 82 degrees on the big thermometer at the store. And I said let's go out the McCarthy Road cause I had never had anyone willing to drive out the road because in the 70's the road was freshly opened in '72 and it was still just the rough railroad grade with lots of railroad spikes and subject to washouts on the old culverts and stuff.

KAREN BREWSTER: The bridge over the Copper was there already?

MARK VAIL: Yeah, that was built in '72 which opened the access in by vehicle, but like the Milepost recommended not coming down the road unless you had four extra tires and extra time because the road was subject to washout in heavy rains. And so I didn't own my own vehicle. I rode a bicycle so now I was with friends who had a rig and we drove in past Chitina to the Kuskulana Bridge. I said well let's at least go to the Kuskulana. It is only 17 miles and we drove across the Kuskulana Bridge and there was a huge black thunderhead over -- coming out of the Kuskulana and while we were there it opened up and thundered and lightening to nickel and dime size hail. And we were like, ah, the bridges are subject to washout in heavy rain. It is like maybe we shouldn't go any further. So we got our pictures on the bridge when it was just the railroad ties and two planks for each tire and just a guardrail that was like six inches off the edge of the deck and you could stop and look straight through the holes in the bridge at the river below. We drove across and back, took pictures and went back to Chitina and finished our four day vacation there and drove back into Anchorage and went back to work. So now I really intrigued to see what was further out the road. And in the early 80's the state succumbed to public pressure finally after the pipeline to open more land for settlement.

KAREN BREWSTER: The homesteading?

MARK VAIL: Yeah, they had five different programs in the early 80's. There was, you know, subdivisions and homesites and remote parcels and, you know, they had discounts for residency and discount for military, for veterans, so you could accrue up to 50 percent discount off the price of acquiring land and in '81 land had been selected out here, but the federal government and the state were at odds because that land even though it had been selected before the Park titles hadn't been exchanged. So they announced the sale and then they pulled the sale on the subdivision at Fireweed Mountain. And then in '83 it was all settled out and they re-announced it in the spring, early spring, late winter and that was my golden opportunity. It is like state land. You could buy it with five percent down on a 20 year contract with just annual payments and it was surveyed already, although it was just surveyed into the wilderness. They did pick a spot that was surveyed in 1921, so there were monuments on the mile marker on the township corners. So they relocated old township corners and platted a subdivision off those corners. So this would have been '83 and it was a lottery and I bought 18 tickets in the lottery. And you were only allowed to win one subdivision lot and one homesite lot. And the homesite lot was a once in a

lifetime. The subdivision lots you could buy once every eight years. So other people, you know, could fill in in between times. So I bought eight tickets on homesites which were all the homesites available and those you had to build a permanent habitable dwelling and live on for five months a year for the first five years. But that changed over the years because of interests like schoolteachers couldn't be gone for five months so they eventually morphed it into three months a year for 10 years. And then they morphed it into well, if you build a permanent habitable dwelling, you could buy it at market value instead of getting the discount price of putting in time. So I went to the drawing in Glennallen School gymnasium and there was probably 200 people there for a number of different subdivisions that were on the block that day. There is one in Copper Center. There was one in Glennallen, Moose Creek Subdivision. I think Kenny Lake had one, Rogue River, not Rogue River, but Hylton (phonetic) View in Valdez and Fireweed Mountain. And they said that Fireweed Mountain had one of the highest per lot interest. You know people had bought more tickets there and they drew out of a big barrel like they put in on each lot they would put all the tickets in and they drew from the lowest interest to highest interest. So if you won a lot, you had to acknowledge your receipt because once you took a lot you were discounted if you got drawn again.

KAREN BREWSTER: Sounds like a big bingo game.

MARK VAIL: It was, you know, and there were people doing cartwheels across the gymnasium floor if they won, you know. So there was a lot of excitement amongst the people who were, you know, going for Fireweed and they went through -- there is 41 lots. They drew the 41 lots and I didn't get called. I didn't get called. I didn't get called and they were down to the last lot which was a homesite and it had 13 tickets on it. And they started pulling tickets out. That person had already won. That person had already won. That person is not here. It got down to three tickets and I knew one of those tickets was mine, so I had a 33 percent chance of winning. And they pulled the ticket and this little old man stood up, Harold Michael, and we became best friends, but I didn't win that day in the lottery and I was sorely disappointed. My dad was visiting from the states, so we went from Glennallen to Chitina and I went dipnetting and got 14 fish and turned around and drove back to Anchorage by way of the Denali Highway because my dad was here on vacation so he could see more of the state and went home and processed the fish.

And thought what am I going to do I got so close, you know. But it turned out that three lots didn't go, one or two lots didn't go and two or three people came out immediately after the lottery, looked at the land they had chosen and were disappointed and reneged on the contract. So those five lots went back on the block over-the-counter in July. So the first sale was June 4th and on July 24th or something or July 18th something like that they had over-the-counter sale. So I went to the over-the-counter sale trying again to get a lot at Fireweed. Well, mind you I had never been out here, pass the Kuskulana Bridge. So I was buying sight unseen, although they had aerial photos and superimposed subdivision map on, you know, the aerial photo. And I got there and there were 80 people there and again it was this process where subdivisions that had sold all spring long had odd lots that were all up for grabs that day around the state. And it turned out that out of the 82 people that were there at eight o'clock in the morning they let us in, we each got to draw a number out of the hat while they closed the doors because you had to be there at the door opening to get in the first round. So we went back out after we drew our numbers and

people were milling about chatting about what properties they were interested in. And it turned out that most of those people were there for two lakefront lots on Big Lake outside of Wasilla, but there were a few people there interested in Fireweed. So when we were drawing numbers, I reached in took my number and got like number 46 or something. I said oh, man that is halfway down the list. The lady next to me reached in and pulled out two tickets and the moderator goes you can only have one. She dropped one back in. She goes, but I have Power of Attorney for my husband. He says oh, you can have two then. So she reaches in and pulls a second one and slid them apart. She had number 1 and number 2. I'm like they were in there when I drew and I got 43. So she takes number 2 and hands it to the next woman in line. Here I won't need this. I'm like why wasn't I on that side of her.

So anyhow at that point, you know, we had to take a break while they set up the paperwork trail and filed through one by one, you know, claiming our prize if we got there. And while we were doing that I encountered some people who were there looking at Fireweed property and I had chosen the lot I had wanted on the aerials. And when they got to -- oh, when they did number 1 and number 2 the woman number 1 took the first lot at Big Lake, woman number 2 took the second lot at Big Lake and 40 people sighed in disgust because they weren't going to get one of those lots. And the woman with number 15 goes here I won't need this and so I had ticket number 15. So I gave my number 46 to someone else and we all, you know, shortened up the line and they were up to number 13 so I got up there to get in line and the girl with number 14 was doing a proxy, how to, you know, paperwork to do it for someone else and she chose the lot that I wanted and I was like oh, no.

So I real quickly dashed back to the photographs and chose a lot that looked like it had big trees on it. And three days later, well, I got the lot.

KAREN BREWSTER: So you got the lot.

MARK VAIL: And three days later there was a music festival in Chitina. So I talked a friend into I would buy gas, I would show him how to dipnet if he would haul me and my bicycle from Anchorage to Chitina. So we came, it poured rain all the way from Anchorage to Chitina, just dumped rain and we got to Chitina. We set up in the campground on the east bank of the Copper so across the bridge. Put a tent up, put a big tarp over it, went to bed, got up in the morning. Had to crawl out from under the tarp there was so much water pooled up in the tarp. But when I got out from under the tarp there wasn't a cloud in the sky and it was like, oh, my goodness I can't believe the weather can change that quickly from pouring rain for 300 miles to no clouds. And we proceeded to go to the music festival that morning or at noon, listened to the music all day. Sunday morning I took him down dipnetting and after he caught a couple fish and learned how to catch them, I got on my bicycle and rode the McCarthy Road for the first time on a sunny day. It was the third weekend in July and I passed two cars and one of those was at the Kuskulana and they had driven to the bridge and not gone across. They had turned around saying we're not driving across that. And I came around the corner on my bicycle and they are like, oh, my goodness this guy is riding his bike across. So they went around the corner to the overlook to take pictures of me riding my bike across. And I rode my bike across the Kuskulana on the two planks.

KAREN BREWSTER: And being able to see the scenery?

MARK VAIL: Right, yeah, yeah and proceeded to ride the rest of the way in to Fireweed.
KAREN BREWSTER: Which is like 45 miles?
MARK VAIL: Fifty-one miles in from the bridge and got to the bridge or got to Fireweed and the state had put a little survey marker on a tree there that said state land and I camped right next to the road for a week. When I set up my camp, I realized that I had forgotten to bring my map. I had left it in my friend's car in Chitina, but I had it memorized in my head. And one of the neighboring lots was a right triangle and it was on the section line. I knew if I could go down the section line and find the right triangle, I could backtrack one lot from that and find mine, which I did, proceeded to do. And the corner that led me to my property was on top of a high ridge and my property line went due northeast straight downhill. So I realized I had bought a north facing lot with no sunshine and was starting to get really disappointed on my choices. But I was there, I started hiking around the corners trying to put the four corners of my five acre lot together and realized that I had the biggest trees that I had seen in the mile long hike in there. And found that I had a ridge that ran right down the middle of my five acres and that there was a pond a hundred and fifty yards away, a beaver pond, and the creek drainage. So things started looking up. I spent I think nine days there on that bicycle trip, but I was running out of food. So I got on my bicycle and rode back out to Valdez and took the ferry home back to Anchorage with this mental map of where I lived. And again it was a sunny day, so I got to see the entire scope of the valley, all the big mountains. There was some interesting things like back then it was just a single lane road from the Gilahina Inn. It hadn't ever been brushed and the trees arched over the road and made a canopy. So you are riding down this tunnel that is wet with water cause there was poor drainage on the road then. You felt like you were going through murk wood, you know.
KAREN BREWSTER: Yeah, I can't imagine biking a road with a -- I mean it is still was pretty much old railroad tie kind of -- it wasn't very well developed was it? This was '83 you said?
MARK VAIL: Yeah, so it was a gravel base. The railroad ties had mostly been removed, but there was still railroad spikes and huge potholes and --
KAREN BREWSTER: It must have been a rough bike ride?
MARK VAIL: Yeah, well, it was interesting because it took me six hours to go the 50 miles.
KAREN BREWSTER: That's pretty fast.
MARK VAIL: And a car did it in four hours.
KAREN BREWSTER: Yeah. And those were, you know, didn't have the fancy big tire mountain bikes.
MARK VAIL: No, no, well, now I did have a mountain bike. It was right at the -- I had bought one of the first mountain bikes for sale in Anchorage.
KAREN BREWSTER: Yeah, I guess '83 would have been, yeah.
MARK VAIL: Well, I had spent the winter working on the North Slope on a cat train, cooking on a cat train, so I had money in my pocket and time off and I would come to town one week and a friend said, hey, check out these new bikes, you know. And I went down to Gary King's Sporting Goods and -- on Northern Lights and they only had one, so I bought it, you know, and rode -- that was my bike I rode out here and unfortunately that one got stolen like two years later.
KAREN BREWSTER: So when did you come back and start your homestead?

MARK VAIL: So ’83 I did the nine day stint. In ’84, I came back in May and I didn’t have a vehicle, but I had bought a sailboat because when I didn’t win the property in the first lottery, I had a pocket full of money and, you know, a dream to do these different things like have a cabin here and a raft to float to the coast and a sailboat in Prince William Sound and developing this dream life. Well, I bought a sailboat from a friend and then I got the property so I let a friend use my sailboat and we took it to Haines so he could live aboard the sailboat and he gave me his truck. So we did this swap and it was an old truck and it blew up in Copper Center cause it didn’t have any gauges on it and that is how old it was. And the radiator you know freezed -- seized up and yeah, anyhow I got in here and got back out in ’84, but I spent the whole summer.

I came in May and started working on getting a trail into my property. And my neighbor Harold who had won the lot on the last drawing was 72 years old then and he was starting to do the same thing and he lived in Valdez. So we buddied up because we were the two -- there was three or four of us at the very beginning that proceeded in ’84. Like in ’83 most people came in and looked at their lots and then in ’85 there was five of us I think that spent a fair amount of time working towards getting into our properties. So cutting trails and, you know, Harold was the most eager and he was retired and had the most money to put towards his project which helped everyone in the first eight lots. So we cut a road in and it was wetlands, you know, some wetlands so we had to corduroy, but he drug a trailer in and I camped at the road head, you know, and started cutting the section line trail in to my place because I had to go a mile and a half. It was just a survey line, cut two feet wide, and I needed to make it wide enough for a three-wheeler because that was what was available to haul stuff with back then.

So I spent the summer of ’84 and then ’85 I needed cash so I worked in ’85 and didn’t come out. And then in ’86 I again came out for the entire summer. Came out in May and left in October and had my trail built by then -- by the end of the summer I had a decent four-wheeler trail or three-wheeler trail. I had hauled in supplies to my property, a set of tools, digging tools and built a little cache to store some supplies, wall tent, that kind of thing and then spent the winter of ’86 working the North Slope again.

KAREN BREWSTER: As a cook?

MARK VAIL: Cooking on the cat train -- on a cat train and experiencing the arctic. And then in ’87, January of ’87 I did a contract on a catcher processor in the Aleutians and went out as a processor on a scallop boat, a factory trawler, a factory scalloper that was -- had a freezer plant. So we caught, processed and produced a product that was ready for sale on the market when we landed for six months. And a month and a half of -- on the processing deck, the cook quit to move to another job and I told the captain I wanted the cook’s job which paid regardless of the catch. And so as a crewman you got crew share which was one share of the products, you know, that you delivered. As the cook, you got paid a basic wage or crew share whichever higher. And it was always just a little bit under the pay rate as crew share so the cook paid $150 a day. So I took that, did that for five months or four and a half more months and had met my commitment.

And then got done it was June 1st and flew back to Anchorage from Dutch Harbor and immediately proceeded to drive to Glennallen and Jim Barnes had just started Homestead Supply and I ordered up a lumber list to have delivered and it just so happened to be that Jack Wilson, who had a homestead at 45 Mile had a bulldozer he wanted backhauled so

we split the delivery cost and in early July of '87 I had a lumber pile delivered to Crystal Creek which I then shuttled the next 10 miles to my trailhead. And then borrowed a trailer and a three-wheeler from two different people and hired a young kid that grew up out here to help me haul in the materials for two weeks and spent the rest of the summer building a little stick frame cabin and once the cabin was closed in I didn't want to leave. So I spent the next two years here solid time just going to Chitina to get supplies and to Anchorage once a year to check in on friends and you know deal with business there. But then by 1989, February '89 I had to -- I was two years in arrears on my land payment, so I had to go get work. So I left here in February to go to Valdez to shovel snow. I figured Valdez you can always get a job shoveling snow. It didn't snow in Valdez that winter from February to April 18th or something.

KAREN BREWSTER: Then we had an oil spill.

MARK VAIL: So I was working in Valdez because there was no snow I took a job cooking at the Totem Inn. Worked for Mike Williams and after 10 days I was given the job of being the head of the kitchen at night and on March 26th it was a Thursday night. It was ladies dart night. It was the busiest week of the -- busiest night of the week and I served 40 dinners. Went home, staying with my friend Harold and in the morning when I got up he goes what no one thought would happen has happened, Mark. And I am what are you talking about? He goes a tanker is on the rocks out in the sound. And I go, oh, my goodness. So I went to back to town even though it was my days off and went into work and asked for a raise. I said I need a raise. I think things are going to happen here. And I stayed on at the hotel or you know.

KAREN BREWSTER: The Totem.

MARK VAIL: Totem Inn cooking for six weeks, but I applied for a cook's job on the cleanup. Well, all the contractors were hiring their cooks out of Anchorage off the street and no one ever called me even though I had a huge background in remote cooking by that time for large groups, you know, up to 400 in the Air Force. So didn't get a job, didn't get a call, and after six weeks of not getting due compensation for the work I was doing I tendered my resignation at the restaurant and gave them two weeks' notice. And at the end of two weeks I went back over to Job Service and asked to change my application from cook to oil spill worker. And that day they had a veterans callout and my application time line was such that my application went to the top of the pile and I went to work the next day on the oil spill and spent five months in Prince William Sound and made enough money to pay off my property and to remove myself as much as possible from buying oil for power.

So I bought solar panels with my money. Paid off my property and proceeded to get some more materials to expand my home and do some finish work and stuff and then came back out here with a vengeance to live here and spent the entire decade of the 90's without leaving the valley beyond Chitina, except for two occasions. One when my mother died and one when friends came to go dipnetting and we didn't have a way to store their fish so we drove back to Glennallen and made a deal at The Hub to put fish in their freezer while my friends came back out here for five days and they picked their fish up when they went home to Anchorage. But, yeah, so I started with just a small 16 x 16 stick frame cabin which then I enlarged, you know, after I made a little more capital. I proceeded to just develop a lifestyle living off the land as much as possible. One of my

challenges going in was to see how far I could remove myself from the economy. So how cheaply could I live and over the first 20 years my income averaged $3,000 a year. By the early 90's I started acquiring dogs and had a dog team for 20 years. My Permanent Fund Dividend check would guarantee a ton of dog food for the winter for the dogs and I went to Chitina every summer and caught salmon, canned salmon. I dug a garden by hand, chopping a circle with a mattock and every year I would add a ring around that circle to now I have a garden that is 40 feet in diameter and I grow most of my own produce and proceed to pickle, can, pickle relish, jam, dry goods and learned over the years what mushrooms were -- wild mushrooms were available and where the berry patches are by finding bear poop. Going, oh, there must be a berry patch near here and doing some, you know, a lot of hiking around the countryside, learning the landscape and where different resources were available. I found that diamond willow was a known entity in the Copper Basin.

I'd lived in '83 I had a signed a partnership agreement with some friends who bought Gunsight Lodge. So this was the same summer I acquired my property. I became a 10 percent partner in Gunsight Lodge. My deal was that if I worked for a year I would accrue that 10 percent and not be obligated beyond that first year. Well, about eight months in it became apparent that 10 percent of zero is still zero. So I backed out of the partnership and just proceeded to move towards McCarthy with my life. But that entailed building enough grubstake to buy a house which took several summers, you know, or several winters cause I worked seasonally on the North Slope cooking on cat trains or in Deadhorse.

KAREN BREWSTER: Now, the living off the land and learning about the area and resources, were there other people living out here that you were able to learn from or you are all self-taught?

MARK VAIL: To a large degree I was self-taught, but I did, you know, get as much knowledge as I could from the old-timers. I used to go down and visit Cliff Collins at Long Lake who homesteaded there in the early 60's and had one of the better gardens in the valley because of his microclimate, six feet of topsoil and a huge lake that moderated the temperature well into September so he had a 20 day longer season than I did, five miles up the road. And Jo King, who also lived at Long Lake, had a garden plot that when I realized I couldn't grow potatoes where I lived because of the frosts back then. I would get a frost every month of the year. I had summers where my longest frost free period was 26 days which you can't grow potatoes at that rate. So I went down and I'd met the old-timers that lived here -- Jo King. Harley of course had been killed in the massacre in '83, but the Collins Family, Jack Wilson at Crystal Creek, Hank Hoffer at Long Lake and these people had all at Long Lake had all had big gardens. So I learned what they could and couldn't grow and one summer Jo wasn't going to grow a garden so I went down and asked if I could put in a couple rows of potatoes. And she said, yeah, you can do that. You can use my rototiller. You can use my gas. You just have to till the whole garden bed to keep it in cultivation. So I spent an afternoon and tilled this huge garden space only wanting to use four rows for potatoes. And I was just rolling the rototiller out of the garden space and here comes Jo from her cabin and she has got a bushel basket full of seeds, going well, now that it is tilled, you might as well plant these which I was naïve enough to do. And this was in the early 90's so I had been here a couple years. The

garden grew so much I didn't know what to do with all the produce. I had 200 pounds of turnips just for me and there was no one else in the country that needed, you know, needed. I shared out what I could. Jo was like oh, you could put it in the root cellar. Well, it went in the root cellar, but I still couldn't consume it so in the spring there is stuff starting to molder and she got on me like why aren't you eating this? It is like Jo, I am one person, you know, I just wanted to grow some potatoes. But yeah I had -- I learned that, you know, if you dedicate your time and you have a good space to grow in which fortunately I was down valley enough to be out of this glacial gravel that McCarthy is based on that I had six inches of topsoil and then silt sand underneath it. So I have a good gardening spot and then my neighbor Harold has an even better gardening spot for soil, but not so for frost. So his garden is in the frost pocket and eventually I acquired that garden after Harold passed away. So I have two big gardens and in the early 90's -- well, I -- during the 90's I rode my bicycle back and forth to town. So I'd do round trips 20 some miles to get my mail once a week and, you know, meet --

KAREN BREWSTER: So like to town you mean McCarthy?

MARK VAIL: McCarthy, right, because I live 10 miles out so yeah, going to the city is Anchorage.

KAREN BREWSTER: Or town could be Chitina?

MARK VAIL: Right, right and I did do twice annual trips to Chitina. Mrs. Ivey in Chitina at the time had the Chitina Cache Store and she lived in Chitina for 30 years and she was a little angel. She would have in stock those necessities that a homesteader further out would need at the appropriate time. One time a friend and I drove in in the spring as soon as the road opened and he needed plastic to cover his greenhouse and I needed potting soil to start seedlings. And we thought we'd have to go all the way to Glennallen. We drove to Chitina and went in Mrs. Ivey's store and there was a ramp down to the cash register and leaning against the counter at the cash register was a bale of potting soil and a roll of Visqueen. We're like Mrs. Ivey how can -- this is like a little miracle. How can you do this? And she goes well I know what people need this time of year and, you know, she'd drive a truck into Anchorage and, you know, shop at Costco and mark it up three percent. And I couldn't drive to Anchorage for three percent so I did all my shopping in Chitina. And in those years people drove from Valdez to Chitina to shop, you know. She had one shopping cart, you know.

KAREN BREWSTER: You talk about gardening, but what about hunting and trapping. Did you do any of that?

MARK VAIL: So in the early years just after I built my cabin, friends came out and we decided we were going to go moose hunting and I didn't know the life cycle of a moose at that point, but I learned quickly that come the rut they head for the hills and we -- another neighbor out here saw me on the road one day. I was hiking on the road and I had my rifle. And he goes you looking for moose? And he goes they're out there and he points to a certain place and I am like really? He goes, oh, yeah, there are three big bulls up there right now. He had flown over them. So my friends came out and we proceeded to hike up there and bag a bull. It was five days getting -- packing it out from the mountain which I learned was not the most efficient way to get a moose. But I learned a lot about their rut cycle that fall by observing them from afar and seeing their movements. And then each year I accrued that knowledge. I keep a journal, a daily journal and it is only on a

calendar so the journal entries are one square inch, but all those years when I biked, I would always notate bear tracks on the road, moose crossing the road, anything I saw naturalist wise. I would catalog it, you know. And years I would dedicate my observations to specific things like the flowering sequence of wildflowers. So every day I would note what was the new flowers and keep a list and for many years and I still do this the passerine birds. I notate the arrival of the spring migration by bird.

KAREN BREWSTER: That is awesome.

MARK VAIL: And so I, because I live in the quiet I have really acute hearing and I can hear planes take off from McCarthy, you know, and I know all the local planes by sound when they come around the corner in the Crystalline's. Oh, here comes Paul Claus or here comes the neighbor or here comes the mail plane, you know.

KAREN BREWSTER: So you know bird calls very well I am sure.

MARK VAIL: Yeah, I've learned all my bird calls. In fact, in 2013 I observed -- I heard -- I was working in the garden, heard a call I had never heard before. Looked up, saw a bird that flitted away quickly, but I got enough, you know, notion to realize it was not a regular bird. And another friend showed up and he was a birder and I am like Danny, there is a warbler here. You got to help me identify it. We proceeded to track it down and it was a Cape May Warbler. And I got a picture of it and posted it to Facebook to another friend who is a birder. He is like, oh, my God, is it there now? And I proceeded to document the first breeding Cape May Warblers in the state.

KAREN BREWSTER: Wow! Cool.

MARK VAIL: And I spent six weeks sitting and observing and dealing with the birdwatchers who came from afar, like 20 different people drove from Anchorage, from Fairbanks, to come and see this bird doing its natural thing because it was the first time. It had been seen I think eight times in the state during fall migrations where they end up in odd places and the first birder besides myself that came from Anchorage was doing an Alaskan Big Year.

KAREN BREWSTER: Oh, right.

MARK VAIL: And he emailed me as soon as I posted it. It is like if I leave Anchorage right now can I see it tonight? I am like I don't know, but I can put you in close proximity. He was gone by 5:30 the next morning and posted that he had seen the male and the female and at that point I realized I had a breeding pair. So then I dedicated my observations to documenting that until the babies fledged.

KAREN BREWSTER: Well, yeah, I know you have a great connection with birds and the wildlife in your area, right?

MARK VAIL: Uh-huh. Yeah. So yeah, you know, over those years just observing and documenting I have seen -- learned, you know, the way of life of like when I spent the entire decade of the 90's, my objective there was to spend the time to observe the hare cycle which is a 10 year cycle on average. And so many different species behaviors cascade out of that cycle of hares. Lynx, even bears, are affected by the rabbit cycle because when the rabbits are up one of their favorite foods are the tips of berry bushes. So when the rabbit cycle is up, the berry crops are down and the bears have to hunt farther and wider to get the food supply because the berry crops are down. I mean they mow down blueberry bushes when they are high, you know. And just over the time -- over that decade in keeping that observation going, you know, I learned a lot about the --

how the natural resource cycles work. And I also observed climate and, you know, weather which then, you know, morphs into climate and just observing the glaciers disappearing quickly. This year alone, 2016, was my longest garden, frost free gardening season. I didn't have a frost till September 3rd. And my -- I -- on average I have a hard frost in the first two weeks of August. So we are talking about a two week extension, full month extension in and, you know, in that and it is like my potatoes still haven't frosted.

KAREN BREWSTER: And now what about the animals? There have been changes in the annual populations since the 90's?

MARK VAIL: You know, yes. There has been a definitely decrease in grizzly bears and that is from interactions with man, more development, more people who have either fear, lack of respect or not enough knowledge on bears that they end up either shooting bears just because they are there or they condition bears that then become problem bears and have to be shot in defense of life and property and to some degree hunting. Although the hunting is not generally a major factor, it is more defense of life and property killing. But the bear cycle -- in the 90's I could go to Long Lake during the salmon spawning season and it was not unusual to see eight or nine grizzly bears in the zone, you know, taking turns feeding on fish. Now you can go to Long Lake and unless you are really lucky you are not going to see a grizzly bear there, you know. And that is a direct result of development, more people in the country, more casual interactions with bears and people not knowing how to, you know, behave responsibly in their camping and homesites. And, you know, I mean there is a, you know, and it is area wide.

KAREN BREWSTER: And more people on the roads?

MARK VAIL: Right and that is an observation that I noted probably a decade ago. In the 80's when it was just a single lane road and only got graded once a year, I would see bear tracks on the road. Well, now, you can't see bear tracks on the road. There is, you know, a hundred cars a day and that is obliterated, but you don't see bear tracks not because there is not bears, but they have learned to avoid walking down the road. They don't walk on the road. There used to be bears that would walk six miles down the side of the road to get to a berry patch, you know, or pea vine patch and now they just don't do that. And moose are the same way, you know. There is places along the road where I know you can go ten yards in and see a parallel trail where the big game is moving parallel to the road. Because the traffic is out there they just don't use the road like it -- it was a trail, you know, when they opened it in the 70's the wildlife had been using it for 40 years since the end of the railroad and now that shift has pushed them back, you know, away from the corridor, you know, from the immediate view on the corridor.

KAREN BREWSTER: Well, I mean it is really neat how you kept track and how connected you are with the place you live. I don't know that very many people are like that anymore in this day and age.

MARK VAIL: Right, right. And I am thankful now that I have kept records because occasionally like I did a subsistence survey about a couple springs ago with Department of Fish & Game and it is a continuing study that started in the 80's and I was not going to be here. I was working in Anchorage that winter for a couple of months. So I arranged to do the survey in Anchorage and the fellow who was taking down my responses for the gal who was doing the interview at the end of the interview he asked me a specific question. He was a herpetologist and he wanted to know about wood frogs.

And I said, oh, you know, I have got data on wood frogs because I know not every year but some years I have noted in my journal when wood frogs start singing in the spring. And I said I can mine that data out of my journals because it is a small window and I went to -- I said when I go home I will do that and I will email it to you so I did. I came home and went through 25 years of journals at the end of April the beginning of May for two weeks looking for frog calls. You know where I had noted it in the -- and I found like eight references to the first time I heard frogs in the spring. And some of them came with temperature data and stuff. So I forwarded all that, but when I was looking at this two week window I kept finding wolf paw prints on my journal. So to indicate animals it is like if it is a bear I draw a paw print with --

KAREN BREWSTER: Instead of writing it out, you just --

MARK VAIL: Right, a G or a B if it is a grizzly or a brown bear or you know black bear I mean. Or and I will draw a cub for each instance. So if it is a sow with two cubs it will be a big and two little. So I can observe that without having to read words. It is a lot easier to find it. So in that two week window there were wolf tracks and it became apparent that the wolves come out of the mountains to hunt beavers at ice out. So when the ice is just opening from the ponds, the beavers are coming out on land for the first time in seven months and the wolves are there to try to trap them on land. And I had the data but never mined it --

KAREN BREWSTER: In that way.

MARK VAIL: In that way and here I was looking for frog information and found this whole set of wolf data that I had collected without realizing. So I know that someone in the future will be able to look at my journals and garner a lot of information.

KAREN BREWSTER: Like you say it is really valuable. It is being a naturalist.

MARK VAIL: Right.

KAREN BREWSTER: Is what you really have done.

MARK VAIL: Right. Exactly. So and that was just the natural course of events for me. It is like living in the woods. So my house is still a mile in the woods. So I remember talking one time on a panel discussion and some young people who were here for the summer were like well how do we do what you do, you know? How do we nowadays go and do that? And I am like well, it is a big world and a lot of what I do I practiced in the city. I grew a garden. I learned how to can fish when I lived in Anchorage. I observed birds, you know. I did a lot of that stuff before I ever moved to the wilderness, but I walked the last mile and that changes your lifestyle. When you walk from your car the last mile home, you slow down, you have time to observe. It is a repetitive action so you have a long timeline of doing the same thing repetitively and the same thing with the decade where I didn't drive a car here. I biked to town. It was like I was doing a 10 mile transect once a week and observing natural history. I was recording when and where the bears crossed, when and where the bears pooped berries on the road, you know. And I accrued a great amount of knowledge just by being steady at it in one place and, you know, over that time period all my systems improved. You know both my power systems improved because technology improved. Communications that is a good question whether that improved or not. I don't write letters anymore because I have the Internet, you know. But I still don't carry a cell phone, you know, because I don't want to be that attached to it. So I check my emails every morning.

KAREN BREWSTER: Speaking of technology, I need to change the tape before we run out.
MARK VAIL: All right. Great.
KAREN BREWSTER: In the middle of a sentence.
MARK VAIL: Great.

End Part 1