

John & Lorna McDermott
NPS Skagway Oral History Project
Dyea, Alaska
December 5, 2009
Interviewed by Stacey Carkhuff

Stacey Carkhuff: This is Stacey Carkhuff interviewing John and Lorna McDermott it is December 5th, 2009 at their home in Dyea, Alaska. We're going to be talking about their cabin and some other things that they've been involved with since they moved here. So let's get started, okay? So you have a cabin here in Dyea that you acquired by purchasing the land.

Lorna McDermott: Yes

Stacey Carkhuff: Can you talk about that?

Lorna McDermott: Well we purchased it from Patterson, Pat Patterson or Wesley I guess

John McDermott: Yes Wesley Patterson was his name. We went by Pat.

Lorna McDermott: He went by Pat yeah. And we originally had 7.31 acres but the river has taken a lot of it away. But the cabin was there. It was, we believe it was a toll bridge or toll house for the Kenny Toll Bridge and part of it I think at one time was a stable.

Stacey Carkhuff: For horses

Lorna McDermott: Yes, because of the way the ... it was with the logs on that north side.

John McDermott: Yeah Pat said he and Vivian had lived on it for some time.

Lorna McDermott: Yeah

John McDermott: And when he'd come out and he had actually homesteaded the property in order to get it.

Lorna McDermott: Right yeah

John McDermott: And he said at first it did look like there were stalls or stables set up in the cabin, when he got it. And it does make sense because River Road came from Dyea came all the way along and it was actually the driveway that came right in front of our cabin.

Lorna McDermott: Our cabin

John McDermott: Some place around here, we don't know exactly where, the Kenny Toll Bridge then crossed the river.

Stacey Carkhuff: So you rebuilt and remodeled the roads and everything until the river eroded it?

Lorna McDermott: Well no

John McDermott: No

Lorna McDermott: It was there until they had that um, thing with the glacier that glacier

John McDermott: Oh that terminal *** collapsed and we had

Lorna McDermott: Collapsed and

John McDermott: West Creek flooded and it took out the road so

Lorna McDermott: Yeah

Stacey Carkhuff: Okay

John McDermott: So that happened in around 2000?

Lorna McDermott: 2002

John McDermott: 2002 and 2001 I think

Lorna McDermott: 2002

John McDermott: 2002 Yeah

Stacey Carkhuff: Okay, So you've had some problems with erosion then?

John &Lorna McDermott: Yeah

Stacey Carkhuff: That makes sense. So do you know who built the cabin?

John McDermott: No

Stacey Carkhuff: And it's been here since Gold Rush era?

Lorna McDermott: Yes they figured it was built in 1897.

Stacey Carkhuff: Has it always been you thought maybe a Toll House and that became a residence. Has it ever been used for anything else?

John McDermott: Not that we know

Lorna McDermott: No, not that we know

John McDermott: Actually I'll take a look when we get done with the interview and I think that I've got some paperwork here that Doreen and maybe the park archives too, the park when we did the engineer

log jam for River erosion for [] on the cabin and our property. And so it's got some pretty good history on the cabin and its history that she was able to dig up.

Stacey Carkhuff: Okay so you said the cabin has been moved from its original location.

John McDermott: When we donated it to the park

Lorna McDermott: When we donated it to the park

Stacey Carkhuff: You talk about when you donated it to the park what it was like, what had happened?

Lorna McDermott: Well it was in danger of going down the river.

Stacey Carkhuff: Okay

Lorna McDermott: And ah, we didn't want to see that [] probably still be stuck under the bridge and we didn't want to lose a piece of history either so we donated it to the park and they moved it. And ah,

John McDermott: Yeah we just got it off our property and park property that is directly behind us and it's not in its permanent location yet. They're going to restore it and [] to determine exactly where it's going to be [] out here in the Park again.

Lorna McDermott: Yeah

Stacey Carkhuff: Well I gather that the park has a long history of restoration. And making things look how they were. Do you think that there's any chance that they could restore how it looked when it was first built?

John McDermott: Sure!

Lorna McDermott: Oh Sure. It's actually we really didn't do a whole lot to it structurally. We put the dormer up there, [] which Patterson had put up but all they have to do is just take it put the ah, rafters down and ...

John McDermott: And then the roof line would be the same

Lorna McDermott: the roof line would be the same

John McDermott: Some of the window treatment is probably going to be different than the original but yeah it could come back to look

Lorna McDermott: yeah

John McDermott: Like the original, yeah.

Lorna McDermott: Yeah, cause basically we didn't want to do [] to it that would change it all that much.

Stacey Carkhuff: Keep it like it used to be

Lorna McDermott: Yeah

John McDermott: Yeah, pretty much

Sc Well rewinding a little bit can you both tell how you came to be living in Dyea and why?

Lorna McDermott: Well we wanted to; we wanted to live out here. We managed to get a piece of property from Patterson and ah, it was just [] something that we wanted to do.

John McDermott: yeah, Dyea's a nice quiet place

Lorna McDermott: yeah

John McDermott: And ah it was a place where we could get some property,

Lorna McDermott: Yeah

John McDermott: Get some acreage, get away from it all.

Lorna McDermott: Yes there wasn't quite so much of it then as there is now (ha ha)

John McDermott: No (ha)

Stacey Carkhuff: ***

John McDermott: Well from town in the middle cruise ship season when you've got about ten thousand people in town and we come out to Dyea and there are just a handful of houses and it's really quite a change. It's

Lorna McDermott: It's real quiet back here

John McDermott: It's real quiet back here, yeah

Lorna McDermott: Yeah, basically the only tourist that we see are the ones that float down the river but then they're just quiet and we wave at them and that's just ...

Stacey Carkhuff: IT's nice to be a little removed from the mayhem of summers in Skagway.

John McDermott: Yeah it is.

Lorna McDermott: Yes it is, but thank god we have that mayhem in the summer (ha ha)

John McDermott: (ha ha) Keeps us employed

Lorna McDermott: Keeps us employed keeps us being able to live here.

[]

Stacey Carkhuff: When did you buy the land and officially move here and start building the new home.

Lorna McDermott: Well we didn't build the new home until it was completed in 2001. We moved out here in '76?

John McDermott: Yeah

Lorna McDermott: Yeah

John McDermott: We bought the property in '75

Lorna McDermott: Yeah

John McDermott: Then worked on the cabin to make it habitable and then came out in '76.

Lorna McDermott: Right, yeah, and we didn't build this until [] a thousand and it took a year to build the house.

Stacey Carkhuff: Oh, okay

Lorna McDermott: So it was done in September of 2001 which is why the number on the house is 2001 McDermott Lane. (ha ha)

Stacey Carkhuff: That's what I was going to ask you because you bought this land so you can name it after ***

Lorna McDermott: Sure!

John McDermott: Sure, we decided we would so why not.

Stacey Carkhuff: Interesting (ha) it made it a lot easier to find the place.

Lorna McDermott: That's a good thing because, I mean if you ever needed an ambulance or

John McDermott: Fire truck

Lorna McDermott: Fire truck or something like that

John McDermott: They know where to find you

Lorna McDermott: And somebody that really didn't know Dyea they wouldn't know where you were. So McDermott Lane they know where we are anyway. And we see along the road a lot of people have started putting out signs on there [] you know.

John McDermott: Yeah

Lorna McDermott: Because then people know where they are. It makes it a lot easier to find them in an emergency.

Stacey Carkhuff: Well I know people used to name their homesteads or their cabins after themselves so

John McDermott: Yeah

Stacey Carkhuff: So it's a long and historical ***

John McDermott: Yeah

Lorna McDermott: Yeah

Stacey Carkhuff: Is there anything else that you that you'd like to mention about the cabin? Any important milestones that it has experienced?

Lorna McDermott: Well kids and grandkids

John McDermott: I really can't think of any

Lorna McDermott: (shaking her head) that's about it. It was just where we lived. And we loved the cabin. I mean it was, it was pretty cramped and small but it was...

John McDermott: Yeah it was

Lorna McDermott: Yeah

John McDermott: But a lot of good memories

Lorna McDermott: Yeah, a lot of good memories

John McDermott: Living in the cabin

Lorna McDermott: Yeah

John McDermott: Yeah

Stacey Carkhuff: So why did you love it so much?

Lorna McDermott: Oh just because where it was. We were just real happy there so ... yeah

Stacey Carkhuff: So good memories living there?

Lorna McDermott: Yeah

Stacey Carkhuff: Anything that you'd like to share or just kind of private memories?

Lorna McDermott: How about the times that the pigs got in? (ha ha)

John McDermott: (ha ha)

Stacey Carkhuff: Pigs in the house?

Lorna McDermott: Yeah

John McDermott: Oh gosh yes, (ha ha) we were in town and it was in winter and somehow the door [] day and when we got back the cow had been in the house, the chickens were in the house, the goats had gotten in the house and had gone in the house and had gone upstairs

Lorna McDermott: Yeah, had gotten upstairs, the pigs had gotten in the house

John McDermott: And then there, we had some frozen we would get old out of date milk from the store to feed the pigs. And there was some thawing out on the floor of the kitchen and the pigs chomped through it there was [] sour milk

Lorna McDermott: All over the kitchen floor

John McDermott: All over the kitchen floor and it was a disaster. We opened the door and all you could do was laugh and clean it up.

Lorna McDermott: Yeah it was like ...

John McDermott: There was nothing else you could do.

Lorna McDermott: If you didn't laugh you'd have been crying, (ha ha)

Stacey Carkhuff: Then you had a farm or just a few things?

Lorna McDermott: Oh

John McDermott: We just had animals, like a little hobby thing

Lorna McDermott: We had horses and *** and

John McDermott: Some pigs and a couple goats

Lorna McDermott: Goats

John McDermott: And Chickens

Lorna McDermott: Chickens

John McDermott: And a turkey

Lorna McDermott: And a turkey and geese

Stacey Carkhuff: Where did you keep them all ***

John McDermott: There's a chicken house and a little barn. And we had fenced in the property around here for the horses.

Stacey Carkhuff: That's funny

John McDermott: Yeah (ha)

Lorna McDermott: Yeah (ha)

Stacey Carkhuff: Do a lot of people here have animals? Is that

Lorna McDermott: No not really any more

John McDermott: Not really and there hadn't really been very many when we were here but there were some, yeah

Lorna McDermott: Yeah

John McDermott: But nobody, I'll take that back. There are some horses that are out here.

Stacey Carkhuff: Yeah I saw them on the way here

Lorna McDermott: Yeah

John McDermott: Yeah but nobody else has livestock other than a few chickens

Lorna McDermott: Yeah, we've got chickens and pigeons.

John McDermott: Yeah but that's all that we've got, yeah

Stacey Carkhuff: Okay, so since you've been in this area since the '70s and you've been here since the '50s can you talk about some of changes that you've seen throughout the time that you'd gotten here to now?

Lorna McDermott: Well the one good thing is that there've been a lot of buildings saved. Ah, you know that

John McDermott: In town []

Lorna McDermott: Ah because in town most of them were falling down and empty and you know it's just so but that's, that's a real good thing.

Stacey Carkhuff: Preserving history

Lorna McDermott: Yeah, yeah, I don't know but except all the railroad closings weren't such a good thing.

Stacey Carkhuff: And it reopened

Lorna McDermott: It reopened which was a good thing [] there've been quite a few changes. Ah, there've been, there are a lot more jewelry stores than there used to be (ha ha)

John McDermott: (ha ha)

Stacey Carkhuff: Why do, why do you think that there are so many jewelry stores here.

Lorna McDermott: Because there are so many tourists here in the summer

Stacey Carkhuff: Because of the tourist?

Lorna McDermott: Yeah

John McDermott: I asked a couple of those guys one time why, why they had these jewelry stores and so many of them. And they said well there's all these people that are coming up on the cruise ships and about the only jewelry selection that they've ever seen [] little part of a bigger store, like a part of a Fred Meyer or Kmart or whatever that they have they have a little small jewelry selection. And they're able to display a larger jewelry selection that people wouldn't have seen before; show them some up-scale jewelry. Apparently it works for them or they wouldn't be in business. But it is a surprise. But getting back to the changes that we've had um, how did Dyea had been [] just a electricity made a big change

Lorna McDermott: Yes

John McDermott: For everybody out here

Stacey Carkhuff: When did that come along?

John McDermott: Oh gosh, I don't know

Lorna McDermott: It's been three years

John McDermott: I think it's been a little longer than that.

Lorna McDermott: You think so?

John McDermott: Yes, when we first built our house here we were on a generator and ah, we were on generator for several years. And then the power company came out and put lines all the way the through the Dyea residential area. And then they had the generator [] Bridge and they were able to provide us power until they tied in to the rest of the utility, so that, that's been really good for all of us. And being able to have telephone service is nice, and computer is nice. Back in the days when we were living out in the cabin there um, other folks that were living out here as well year round more year round residents than there are now and

Lorna McDermott: There was about [] sixty of us then

John McDermott: Really?

Lorna McDermott: Yeah

John McDermott: I didn't think there was that many.

Lorna McDermott: Yeah

John McDermott: But it was different because you didn't have TV, you didn't have computers, you didn't have central heat, everybody is scrambling for wood and helping each other get enough wood

together, making sure that everybody was all right and ah, in heavy storms and such in winter time. And so because making your own entertainment we visited each other and [] hearts and

Lorna McDermott: Listened to a lot of radio

John McDermott: Listened to a lot of radio for entertainment and when they had radio plays that we could pick up on CVC. So that's all changed with modern technology that's arrived. But that's good I guess

Lorna McDermott: Yes

John McDermott: In a lot of ways, so it's different but it's good.

Stacey Carkhuff: So people used to be a lot more social with each other and?

Lorna McDermott: Oh, yeah

John McDermott: Yeah because you were making your own entertainment

Stacey Carkhuff: Right

Lorna McDermott: Yeah

John McDermott: And visiting with each other all the time [] so many people living here as there were back then, too

Lorna McDermott: And a lot

Stacey Carkhuff: Sorry go ahead

Lorna McDermott: I was going to say and a lot of people travel in the winter time too so it's

John McDermott: Yeah and back then it was the railroad was open year round so there was year round economy and that made a big difference too.

Stacey Carkhuff: What kind of people do you think primarily live here in Dyea or have the historical cabins [] had it or sold it? What kind of people do you think primarily do that, long time residents, people that are into history, retired people is there a certain group?

John McDermott: No I don't think there is. It's just a mix.

Lorna McDermott: At the time that we were here was mostly um, what you'd call "hippies" (ha) but most of them were ah, I think just trying to get away from so much ah, [] like Skip ah, I think he'd, they'd worked so much in ah, Skip working up on the Slope and stuff like that he just wanted to get away from all the craziness of all the ... so this was a great place for them to come and just you know be quiet and just enjoy their lives. And so that was, that was [] thing.

Stacey Carkhuff: So Skip ***

Lorna McDermott: Yeah

John McDermott: Yeah

Lorna McDermott: Because so many of them had worked on the Slope and stuff like that so if they could find a place if they went back and worked on the Slope they could always come back and be quiet again you know for ah ...

Stacey Carkhuff: Okay, so we can change topics a little bit and talk about working with and for the White Pass Yukon Railroad for a while. You can tell me about the different jobs you had and the experiences.

John McDermott: Let's see, when did I start? I started in '72

Lorna McDermott: Yeah

John McDermott: Working for the railroad, I started as a brakeman and ah, it was year round railroad back then so first few years I was on the extra board a lot and I didn't have continuous [] but after a few years I had enough seniority that I could hold the job year round. I worked as a conductor eventually and worked as brakeman and conductor in both freight and passenger service. And ah, then the railroad closed in '82 when it did I was down in the Seattle area and didn't come back here until I sold my business down there in '93 and I went back to work on the railroad in '94 working seasonally for the railroad since then, in tourist season.

Stacey Carkhuff: What do you currently do on the railroad?

John McDermott: I'm a conductor on I've been working mostly on the Frasier Train, also on the shoulder season I'll work on a work train or in yard service.

Stacey Carkhuff: So ah, as a brakeman you obviously you run the brake but [] okay

John McDermott: You don't

Stacey Carkhuff: Oh you don't, so I guess I should ask the question what does a Brakeman do?

John McDermott: Originally the brakeman did set brakes back in the days when they had to rely on manually set brakes and the engineer would blow a signal when he needed the brake applied and the brakeman would be up on top of the cars and running along the cars setting hand brakes manually and then releasing them when needed. They don't do that anymore and now it's all set with the engine through the air brakes system so [] still *** but their really more of an assistant Conductor.

Stacey Carkhuff: Oh, okay so it's a lot safer now.

John McDermott: Oh Yeah (ha ha)

Stacey Carkhuff: Do you think that it would have been more fun being a brakeman back then when they were running around?

John McDermott: I don't think they could have paid me enough (ha ha)

Lorna McDermott: (ha ha)

Stacey Carkhuff: So I take it you've been working on the Diesel trains?

John McDermott: Yeah

Stacey Carkhuff: Did you ever have any experience working with the Steam engine or just

John McDermott: Yeah a little bit. We've got a couple steam engines that have been restored and they use them in service here [] so I've been um, worked with them a couple of times. But as conductor ah, rather than I'm not a fireman or engineer so I don't work on the engine itself.

Stacey Carkhuff: Is that work on the steam engine very similar to working on the diesel?

John McDermott: They're a lot different. Yeah

Stacey Carkhuff: Conducting them is different?

John McDermott: No conducting's the same

Stacey Carkhuff: But the train's themselves are very different

John McDermott: [] they're very different so steam engine's require a lot more maintenance and they run very differently. (sound) Oh

Stacey Carkhuff: Sorry, Okay you talked about the Frasier train can you tell me more about it and why it's special

John McDermott: That one goes from Skagway up to Frasier, BC [] miles on its run. It's a train that will make stops for hikers that would like to get on or off at Denver Glacier Trail or Laughton Glacier Trail so we'll do drop offs and pick-ups on at those two sites. And it's a one way train as opposed to the White Pass Summit Trains that are a three hours round trip. The Frasier Train is one way for everybody gets on at Skagway and gets off at Frasier. And then board a bus or motor coach to take them on another tour. And then we would reload the train and come back down on another one-way trip and everybody would get off at the station after going through customs. You have customs at both ends that you have to deal with.

Stacey Carkhuff: What do you do on the train when you go through customs?

John McDermott: Everybody shows their ID that's about it.

Stacey Carkhuff: [] not a big deal, you just...

John McDermott: Well you just in the, you're not carrying a lot of baggage, and if you were when you'd gotten off say in Frasier you're going north everything is loaded onto your motor coach and after they've cleared for entry coming into Canada on the train they get on the bus and then the bus again pulls

around to the customs station and then if they have more questions or anything they'd go through it again.

Stacey Carkhuff: Okay, so [] like working for the White Pass?

John McDermott: Oh yeah, good job

Stacey Carkhuff: So now you say you're part time seasonal work as a conductor,

John McDermott: Uh-huh

Stacey Carkhuff: Do you find out that the train has become a tourist only train? Is it a different job whereas before it was before it was a freight train?

John McDermott: Yeah it is very different from how it used to be.

Stacey Carkhuff: How so?

John McDermott: We don't carry the freight that we used to so it's ah, ... much b[] bigger trains a lot busier a lot more people are riding them. I can't remember how many people we used to have on a passenger train back in the day before freight ended but if you had a couple hundred it would be probably an average train. And now a train can have over six hundred people aboard it and there are a lot of trains at one time. So the pace has picked up [] yeah.

Stacey Carkhuff: Okay I'm going to go back in history a little bit and Lorna you might have something to say about this because you can here in the 50's. Obviously neither one of you were here during WWII or old enough to probably remember it but

Lorna McDermott: I am (ha ha)

Stacey Carkhuff: Well maybe a young, young child ***the train ***throughout WWII which was build the Alaska Highway and the interior during WWII. Do you remember any stories?

John McDermott: I wasn't here

Stacey Carkhuff: Lorna you were in the area

Lorna McDermott: Not really just that the army came in and took over, the Army took the railroad over during the war so you know it was and occasionally somebody would come back that had worked on the railroad that you know had been in the army and had worked on the railroad [] not ... I haven't heard a lot about it during WWII

John McDermott: We'll see somebody on the train ever so often that who will show us a photograph of a relative that used to work on the White Pass during the war. And once in a while I'll even meet an old timer that comes back up to see it and remembers it back then. But not very many unfortunately that part of the history of the railroad is lacking quite a little bit. But I know the railroad is pursuing a lot of leads for photographs and journals, whatever they can find for that part of the railroad history.

Stacey Carkhuff: It is very interesting history.

John McDermott: Yes it is.

Lorna McDermott: Yeah

Stacey Carkhuff: I was going to ask you if you have any funny stories or anything that may have happened when you were working for the White Pass ***?

John McDermott: Ah, I'm sure I do (ha) but my mind's a blank right now.

Stacey Carkhuff: That's okay. So Lorna maybe you can talk a little about your history like where did you move to when you came to Alaska and what have you done since you arrived?

Lorna McDermott: Well, actually we came from Canada. [] I was born in Smithers, British Columbia and we came to Juneau on my thirteenth birthday in 1949. And ah, I went to school in Juneau and in Ketchikan and then I went, I came back to Juneau then I went back to Canada for a couple of years [] back my mom and my brother and my stepfather were here in Skagway so when I came back to Alaska I came back to Skagway, I came to Skagway. And that was August 6 of 1956. Mitch's birthday (ha)

John McDermott: Oh Yeah

Lorna McDermott: And I worked on, I also worked on the railroad

Stacey Carkhuff: Oh Okay [] do?

Lorna McDermott: Well when I first went to work on the railroad I was hired when they were doing inventory in the shops stores. And then I went to work on the wharf as a secretary down there and I was there for nine and a half years and ah, then I went to work in shops and the ... I was there until the railroad closed in 1982.

Stacey Carkhuff: So you worked there a long time.

Lorna McDermott: Yeah, about fifteen and a half years I guess.

Stacey Carkhuff: And ah when you were doing inventory in the shops what were you inventorying?

Lorna McDermott: All the parts and all the things they kept in their stores.

Stacey Carkhuff: So you were ordering?

Lorna McDermott: No I was just inventorying.

Stacey Carkhuff: Was that a difficult job?

Lorna McDermott: No not really, all you were doing, you were counting things, you had little cards and you wrote down how many were there and checking to see how many were supposed to be there. But

that was just, I was only there for like two weeks while they were doing the inventory and then I went to the wharf.

Stacey Carkhuff: Okay so then you were a secretary at the wharf.

Lorna McDermott: Uh-huh

Stacey Carkhuff: Um, what did that job entail?

Lorna McDermott: Well billing, doing the ah, customs and immigrations papers for the ships [] as had container ships that came in and so you had to keep track of all the ore and asbestos that went out and all the freight that came in and then get all the papers when the ship was ready to leave you had to have all the papers ready for the customs and immigration to stamp and go through, to go through and stamp.

Stacey Carkhuff: So was that a pretty fast paced job having it all ready for the ships to leave?

Lorna McDermott: When it was getting time for the ships to leave yeah. But there was a lot of time when you're just sat there and looked out the window because it wasn't that busy.

Stacey Carkhuff: You had a nice view

Lorna McDermott: It was gorgeous! (ha)

Stacey Carkhuff: And so you worked there, you said for nine

Lorna McDermott: Yeah nine, nine and a half years yeah

Stacey Carkhuff: So you must have had a pretty good job there?

Lorna McDermott: It was a great job! I loved it! []

Stacey Carkhuff: So then you transferred over to the shop []

Lorna McDermott: Right

Stacey Carkhuff: What did you do?

Lorna McDermott: I did a lot of things. Well actually I was the shop's laborer. And ah, but they have a bidding system if you, if someone goes on vacation they put up a bid for their job so if you get tired of sweeping floors and cleaning bathrooms I've been let's see an electrician's helper, [] ah, painter's helper, ah, oh god, I forgot

John McDermott: Were you a garment helper too?

Lorna McDermott: No, I was never garment helper.

John McDermott: No, okay.

Lorna McDermott: No so I did a lot of things, ah, and I think the thing that I liked the most was the paint shop.

John McDermott: Yeah

Lorna McDermott: And ah, eventually I had qualified as a painter but then the railroad closed and that didn't make any difference.

Stacey Carkhuff: Okay some of the other people that we have interviewed ah, there were, they were older than you but some of them, the women had mentioned that they had jobs and positions that were available to them that would not have been available to them had they not been in Skagway.

Lorna McDermott: Right, yes

Stacey Carkhuff: Women have ... there are so many more specific jobs and what women were able to do them whereas if you lived in say Cleveland, Ohio you would never have had the job.

Lorna McDermott: No

Stacey Carkhuff: Do you think that this had an effect on all these jobs that you had?

Lorna McDermott: Oh sure, yeah If you couldn't do the job you know you didn't do it but if you could do the job and bid on it and stay in it until who had the steady job came back and you went back to where you were, you know where you'd been. And it's true that [] I think did probably have an easier time here doing jobs that men basically would have done at one time but they could get the better, the better paying jobs so women could do the other, you know.

John McDermott: Uh-huh

Lorna McDermott: Maybe they considered that they didn't really want to do.

Stacey Carkhuff: Sure, this is kind of a question for both of you, obviously the railroad has had a huge impact on Skagway, the whole area, what do you think some of the most important historical assets of the railroad are?

Lorna McDermott: Just the fact that it's still here.

Stacey Carkhuff: Supposedly it's the oldest railroad in Alaska, passenger railroad.

John McDermott: Yeah, you know if you take a look at other railroads around the country particularly the railroads are all struggling and they're having a heck of a time in the tourist industry. A lot of them are run by volunteers and they'd have maybe 5000 to 30,000 riders in a season and we've been upwards of over 430, 000 in a season. So it's ah, wonderful thing that we're able to keep the railroad going and ah, still protect the history [] that we've got with the steam engines being restored, the rotary snowplow being restored, and in use. Ah, actually of the 90 class engines that we've got are historic diesels as well and date back into the 1950s as well. And they're being rebuilt as more modern engines but the shell looks almost identical to what the originals were. So yeah we're very fortunate that they have that.

Lorna McDermott: When I first came here they were still using the steam engines.

Stacey Carkhuff: Wow

Lorna McDermott: Yeah ... and I think it was just after I got here that they got the first of the 90s, or just before

John McDermott: Just before, yeah

Lorna McDermott: Just before yeah, but they were still using all steam engines in the yards and as pushers and um, you know stuff like that so it was, it was really [] to be here during that time.

John McDermott: Yeah

Stacey Carkhuff: They could say that a lot of the trains lasted longer than the buildings

John McDermott: Yeah (ha)

Lorna McDermott: Yeah

Stacey Carkhuff: They were used daily

John McDermott: Yes they were

Lorna McDermott: Oh yeah, sure they were.

Stacey Carkhuff: It's really interesting

Lorna McDermott: Yeah

Stacey Carkhuff: So why do you think that, besides of the huge number of passengers that you get every summer on the White Pass, why do so many other *** railroads are failing?

John McDermott: They don't have [] the base that we've got. I mean when you've got all these cruise ships pulling up to your doorsteps you've got ridership and the um, other historical narrow gauge railroads of the past had either ah, been converted to standard gauge or just went defunct they're primarily built for resource extraction where you didn't have to put a lot of money into a railroad. You could run it up into the mountains where you can extract ore or timber or whatever the purpose was served and those railroads closed down and some of the better *** went to standard gauge and those that survived um, have done so primarily by the love of volunteers that have worked on those railroads and have kept them running.

Lorna McDermott: People

John McDermott: In rather remote areas so if you go back to Durango or Silverton or ...

Lorna McDermott: Yeah

John McDermott: the Cumbresom *** that runs out of Chama, New Mexico. They are great railroads and people love to ride them that are interested but they don't have the population base that we have when our cruise ships come to town.

Stacey Carkhuff: Right

John McDermott: Yeah

Stacey Carkhuff: So you talked about the rotary snow plow have either one of you had any experience with it when they used it or fixed it.

Lorna McDermott: He did. He does.

John McDermott: Yeah I work as a pilot on the rotary plow so

Stacey Carkhuff: OH

John McDermott: So it's amazing

Stacey Carkhuff: Tell me about it. I've seen it in person []

John McDermott: Oh Yeah alright

Stacey Carkhuff: [] How does it run?

John McDermott: Well it's ah, it doesn't have its own ah, locomotive power to propel itself so all the power of the steam boiler is being used just to turn that big wheel that is up in the front which is going to cut the snow and throw it out the shoot. It has to be pushed by a couple of engines and let's stop right there for a minute [] anyway the rotary plow doesn't have ah, the power to propel itself and all of its power is used to turn the wheel so historically it was propelled by a pair of steam engines that would shove it into the drifts. And when we had gotten rid of the steam engines and rotary was sitting up [] at Lake Bennett for years eventually it was restored and then we powered it ah, for ah, what would you call it just to celebrate our history I guess to clear some snow with the rotary like it used to be done but we had to use our 90 class diesels and that worked pretty good but ah, the last time we ran it this last year we were able to use both the '73 and [] pass ah, steam engines and it was like the old days. It was awesome. When you're sitting up, as I do, up in the cab of that rotary you're riding in the front and you're looking at, out a couple little windows to see what you're coming up to and where you are and you have all kinds of noise because the roar of that steam being generated is really loud you have the [] is being thrown out the shoot and you're standing right on top of a great big gears that are making a lot of noise. And you've got steam, you've got smoke and you've got snow blowing in and out of it. I tell people it's like being inside a fire-eating dragon. It's unbelievable and it's vibrating, it's shaking all the time. And if the snow blowing by you sometimes you can't tell if you're moving or not and then you have to open a door and maybe [] the snow and see if you're moving past it because everything is all white.

Stacey Carkhuff: ***

John McDermott: Yeah

Lorna McDermott: He does *** (ha ha)

John McDermott: Very noisy

Stacey Carkhuff: That's very interesting I haven't talked to anybody that has ever worked inside and powered it, a rotary plow. I've seen pictures of men digging. I think they were quite old.

John McDermott: They were

Stacey Carkhuff: I had heard they could only plow up to twelve

John McDermott: Right if it is deeper than that they'd have to shovel it or the engine, the bowl wheel, the blades would cut it and throw it back out.

Stacey Carkhuff: So a lot of manual labor if the snow's too deep?

John McDermott: It used to be yeah

Stacey Carkhuff: How often do you think well since you started with the railroad how often did you use the rotary plow every winter?

John McDermott: We didn't use it every winter. When I first started with the railroad it was retired, long retired and they used bulldozers instead because you don't need near the amount of crew with [] bulldozers as you do with steam locomotives and the rotary. And that's what they call the rotary fleet. So that took ten men to operate the rotary fleet.

Stacey Carkhuff: Oh

John McDermott: Yeah

Stacey Carkhuff: When did they stop using the rotary? Do you know?

John McDermott: It was about '61 or '62

Lorna McDermott: I think so

John McDermott: some place in there. That's when they stopped using it. The bulldozers can push the snow far away from the track [] when the rotary would come through it would create like a big tunnel or a ditch in the snow just wider than the train and then if you had a lot of blowing snow in a snowstorm it would drift in and fill it in right behind you and the fleet could get stuck and did get stuck for over a week one time when it was up there above White Pass, and Frasier and White Pass and couldn't go backwards and couldn't go forwards so []

Stacey Carkhuff: Do you know when that was?

John McDermott: I've got the documents upstairs; I'll give them to you.

Stacey Carkhuff: What did the people, do you know what people inside the train did, freak out or just

John McDermott: There was nobody in the train.

Stacey Carkhuff: Oh ***

John McDermott: No the rotary fleet ran on its own.

Stacey Carkhuff: Oh okay so there was no

John McDermott: No

Lorna McDermott: No

John McDermott: So generally back in those days a rotary fleet would be stationed at Glacier Station and [] and it would take off ahead of the train and it would go plow out and the other train would follow it and it would go up and over the pass. Um, and you tried to keep, generally tried to keep a short distance between them so there's not enough time for a drift to occur between them to keep them to get them stuck

Stacey Carkhuff: So I guess that was going to be a question of if the train was hauling people behind the rotary

John McDermott: No

Stacey Carkhuff: But that's not the best idea

Lorna McDermott: No (ha)

John McDermott: Actually the way the rotary works is you buck into a drift and it will start to bog down and you have to stop and back it up and then you have to hit it again, buck some more snow out and back up and hit again so. You couldn't even do the backup maneuver if you had a train of cars behind you

Stacey Carkhuff: Oh okay. So did you have to go to training or anything or was it learn on the job?

John McDermott: [] It was all learning from Alvin Gordon who was rotary pilot here for years on the railroad. And he's been retired for quite a while but he's taken me under his wing and been teaching me how to be a pilot. It's been great!

Lorna McDermott: He's was a rotary pilot when I first came in '56.

John McDermott: Yeah, yeah

Stacey Carkhuff: Did you have any experiences with the rotary?

Lorna McDermott: No

Stacey Carkhuff: But you knew Alvin or know Alvin?

Lorna McDermott: Oh yeah I've known Alvin for years.

Stacey Carkhuff: He's on the list. I'll be interviewing him too.

John McDermott: Yeah

Stacey Carkhuff: So all this rotary talk is so interesting I could talk about it forever

John McDermott & Lorna McDermott: (ha ha)

Stacey Carkhuff: I don't know anything about it and a lot of the people who might be listening to these tapes or watching these tapes might *** know about them or be like me and not know anything about what they are so this is interesting how they work this works and the fact that this is sitting right here in Skagway you can see they are huge!

John McDermott: Yeah, they are

Lorna McDermott: Yeah

Stacey Carkhuff: Do you know how much that thing weighs? [] hundreds of tons?

John McDermott: Hundreds ninety or a hundred tons, I don't recall, I should know but I don't recall.

Stacey Carkhuff: But so cool

John McDermott: Yeah

Lorna McDermott: Yeah

Stacey Carkhuff: So and then you mentioned a little bit earlier the "90 class Diesels" did you used I don't know the classes or anything means. If you would could you give me a little bit of history on the different kinds of classes?

John McDermott: [] they weigh about eighty tons and have about what just, just about 900 horse power and they're also called the shovel nose diesel because of the shape of the engine. They were made by GE. Its real popular design, they, GE made a similar design for export []. Some in meter gauge, standard gauge and here on our narrow gauge so it bucks snow pretty with that rounded shovel nose on it. The snow doesn't tend to trap it like it would on the square boxy shape of engine.

Stacey Carkhuff: And they are diesel?

John McDermott: They're diesel, diesel electric yeah.

Stacey Carkhuff: Did you have anything to say about them?

Lorna McDermott: No I just it's just a different shape than the 101. [] it's got the big boxy nose on them, where as these are nice and streamline looking.

Stacey Carkhuff: So do you think that they change the appearance of the train to make it more useable for the purposes? Like you said buck snow or whatever else might be on the tracks do you think they recreated the face of it to make it work better?

John McDermott: I don't know? It was GE that came up with the design like I was saying [] it was a GE design. But it works really well because I remember back when we were running freight being a brakeman on the head end and we'd be up on top of White Pass between White Pass and Frasier and all of a sudden you'd see a huge drift across the track way higher than the engine. The engineer would pull back on the throttle [] and you would disappear and you couldn't see anything but white in front of the windows and on the sides and pretty soon you'd pop out of it and you'd see another drift and you'd hit it again.

Stacey Carkhuff: Oh my gosh!

John McDermott: And it worked, it worked great! So

Stacey Carkhuff: So did you ever have any derailments or anything when you were doing that?

John McDermott: Oh a few times

Stacey Carkhuff: Oh that's a whole 'nother topic, derailments. I know how they can happen but how do you put it back on the track?

John McDermott: There's various ways it depends on [] far but in general you use ... what they call a frog it's a shaped piece of cast iron and you set the frog, a pair of them up against the rail and generally they're spiked into the ties and the engines' wheels will climb up it and then drop off of it and onto the rail. Hopefully it happens [] reset them time after time in order to get back on the rail, yeah.

Stacey Carkhuff: I imagine that would be pretty treacherous especially if there are people in the train or in the winter deep snow if you have to dig it all out before you put the frogs down?

John McDermott: Oh yeah, yeah (ha ha)

Stacey Carkhuff: Have you ever been on the train when it derailed?

John McDermott: Yeah sure

Stacey Carkhuff: What was that like?

John McDermott: You know it's not that big a deal really because we go slow [] railroad is twenty-five

Stacey Carkhuff: Oh

John McDermott: It's not that fast and so you feel bump, bump, bump and then the train will stop.

Lorna McDermott: A Bullet train they're not (ha ha)

John McDermott: No

Stacey Carkhuff: So they just kind of walk off sideways they don't flip?

John McDermott: No I mean it has happened in the past once in a while I guess but I've never seen it.

Stacey Carkhuff: Okay

John McDermott: Yeah, yeah

Stacey Carkhuff: Even with the sharp turns and everything through the pass?

John McDermott: No, no they generally [] is down in the trucks on the lowest parts so your center of gravity is really low. So it's not like they're really tippy. You'll see the cars are really high but it's mostly air space that's up above, so your center of gravity is low.

Stacey Carkhuff: Oh

John McDermott: Yeah

Stacey Carkhuff: So you mentioned that the trains were used to haul ore from all the different mines in the Yukon and I heard from a few people that they [] *** the railroad *** is that factual or do people just go around telling rumors?

John McDermott: I've haven't heard anything about it not that I would know but everybody's hoping always that there'd be a big mine open up and we'd be running freight year-round again. But I don't know. I haven't heard anything to hang my hat on, yeah.

SECOND DISK

Stacey Carkhuff: So Lorna you were a commercial cook

Lorna McDermott: A Chef, yes

Stacey Carkhuff: A Chef so what was that like where did you work?

Lorna McDermott: Well I've been in and out of cooking most of my life. But I went to Cordon Bleu in London and got my Chef's credentials which are on the wall over the kitchen.

John McDermott: And

Lorna McDermott: And

Stacey Carkhuff: And you're lucky

John McDermott: I am and that's why I'm fighting my weight (Ha)

Lorna McDermott: and I graduated and got my Grande Diplome and I had my own restaurant at the Inn. Skagway Inn and that was until they sold the Inn and the people that bought the Inn wanted the restaurant so, they wanted the restaurant too.

Stacey Carkhuff: So what was the restaurant called?

Lorna McDermott: Lorna's

Stacey Carkhuff: Oh, okay. What kind of food did you cook there?

Lorna McDermott: Kind of upscale, good food whatever was fresh, the menu changed daily in some aspects. It was ...

John McDermott: You did a lot of seafood

Lorna McDermott: I did a lot of seafood, fresh salmon and halibut and...

John McDermott: Rockfish

Lorna McDermott: Rockfish and the we did a lot of crab, Dungeness I used to get Dungeness out of Sitka oh I did King Crab sometimes but mostly I did Dungeness cause it was ...

Stacey Carkhuff: Readily available Alaska seafood, Oh I bet the tourist loved that.

Lorna McDermott: Oh they did

Stacey Carkhuff: So it sounds like you had quite a lucrative career in the Chef business. What got you interested in that?

Lorna McDermott: Oh I've always been interested in cooking. It's just one of those things that I grew up doing. My Mother and Grandmother were excellent cooks.

John McDermott: And they cooked for White Pass.

Lorna McDermott: And they cooked for White Pass, yes actually the women of our family we have had five generations of women who have worked for White Pass.

Stacey Carkhuff: That's impressive, five generations and were they all chefs or did they just do odd jobs?

Lorna McDermott: No my Grandmother she cooked at White Pass, my Mother cooked at Glacier and then cooked for the White Pass hospital, I worked on the Wharf and then in the shops, My daughter, our daughter Shannon, is a was a still is a long shoreman and our granddaughter Savannah, she works in the

John McDermott: In the gift shop

Lorna McDermott: In the gift shop for White Pass

John McDermott: And Jamie

Lorna McDermott: And Jamie works the, is the secretary for the superintendent

John McDermott: The president

Lorna McDermott: Or the president, yeah, and ah

Stacey Carkhuff: The president of White Pass?

Lorna McDermott: Yes

Stacey Carkhuff: Who is that?

Lorna McDermott: Gary

John McDermott: Danielson

Lorna McDermott: Danielson

Stacey Carkhuff: Well that's interesting, the women in your family have taken quite a liking to the Yukon White Pass Railroad.

Lorna McDermott: Yes (ha)

Stacey Carkhuff: That's interesting. I wanted to ask you about your experience in London at the Cordon Bleu Chef School.

Lorna McDermott: Okay

Stacey Carkhuff: Were you living in Canada at the time or were you in Alaska?

Lorna McDermott: No actually the first year that I went we were living in Kent Washington. I went over and I lived in Hampstead and would go to school, take the tube to school and I went to school five days a week.

Stacey Carkhuff: Wow

Lorna McDermott: And ah, because I did three days of culinary and two days of patisserie and it was a great experience. I love London and so you do it three months at a time. And going back, I went back, I had different there were a lot of them that would stay for the full nine months and by the time they were done they absolutely hated each other (ha ha) [] But every time I had a new set of students to meet. And that was really wonderful. And I stayed at the same place every time I went back. And ah, the people that I stayed with they were just like my parents, they were awesome. But ah, I learned an awful lot and I decided when I went over there and I started like I knew absolutely nothing about cooking because there were so many of the young people that had come over and maybe they had fried hamburgers at McDonald's or something and the instructor would tell them, the Chef would tell them and they'd "I know, I know"

Stacey Carkhuff: Oh

Lorna McDermott: You know that type of thing and then they'd find out they didn't know. But the best thing to do in a situation like that is do exactly what they tell you to do and don't give them any lip, (ha ha)

Stacey Carkhuff: So did you take that train of thought with you when you started your restaurant in Skagway?

Lorna McDermott: Uh-huh

Stacey Carkhuff: So successful and you hired people and it worked well

Lorna McDermott: Oh yes it worked well.

Stacey Carkhuff: And how long did you have the restaurant?

Lorna McDermott: Four years

Stacey Carkhuff: Four years and it was sold along with the Inn.

Lorna McDermott: Right

Stacey Carkhuff: Was there anywhere else that you worked as a Chef that you wanted to mention?

Lorna McDermott: No

John McDermott: Construction camps

Lorna McDermott: Yeah, construction camps to work and set up construction to work and cook in construction camps. I cooked in the Arctic and actually we had a big construction skin on the old Ore terminal that they've since torn down and built a smaller one. But it's just, it's just an awesome thing to do and you make real good money too!

Stacey Carkhuff: Good! I wanted to ask you, you said your Grandma and your Mother worked for the White Pass well particularly your Grandma [] or two generations ago I should say, did she have any stories or tell you stories of what it was like working there?

Lorna McDermott: Not really, I've got some of her diaries but they don't extend to that part of, we've got pictures of her that we've had restored of her at White Pass.

Stacey Carkhuff: Oh cool.

Lorna McDermott: I know one thing whenever they came in for a meal she made them go wash up and []

Stacey Carkhuff: (ha ha) They were probably really dirty

John & Lorna McDermott: (ha ha) Yes

Stacey Carkhuff: Interesting, well that's very interesting.

Lorna McDermott: And she worked there two, I think that it was two seasons

John McDermott: Yeah two seasons

Stacey Carkhuff: That was probably two seasons enough I imagine it was very hard work.

Lorna McDermott: Well it was a lot of snow up there. And this was the old White Pass Section house and there was sometimes snow up to the roof.

Stacey Carkhuff: How did they get food and supplies up there?

Lorna McDermott: They came up on the train

Stacey Carkhuff: Up on the train, so if you forgot the eggs too bad.

Lorna McDermott: (ha) That's it you don't get any eggs because they forgot to send them.

Stacey Carkhuff: So she did that for two seasons, interesting. I'd like to look at those pictures if I could after the interview.

Lorna McDermott: Yeah

John McDermott: Yeah

Stacey Carkhuff: So to just kind of ask the last official question to ask you about your work with the Skagway Historical District Commission, what you did and what your position were and what the commission was for?

John McDermott: Okay, the Park had just gotten established and we were encouraged to start a Historic District Commission to set up standards for construction any new construction or any ah, remodeling so that it would all fall within parameters that would establish that would make everything look right for a period of time within the new historic district and we really didn't know what we were doing to start off with. I was the first Chairman so we tried to establish some guidelines and to try to say what period of time are we looking at, what's to determine if a certain façade looks right, or signage looks right or window treatment looks right. We were very fortunate to have had Park Architect Dave Snow who sat with us on the commission and he helped develop guidelines and shepherd us through our first formative years of the commission. And it was a real success, thanks to Dave. But I do remember after having gone through a couple of issues of a few building permits that would come up for review and everything had gone just fine and there was no problem until finally the Westmark wanted build a new building that would be fronting Broadway oh

Lorna McDermott: Where the Bonanza is

John McDermott: They call it the Bonanza now but

Lorna McDermott: But it was the Sourdough

John McDermott: Was it the Sourdough?

Lorna McDermott: Yeah

John McDermott: Yeah, anyway it wasn't their window treatment wasn't right and it just didn't seem to fit in and so we were not going to give them a permit until the design was changed and there were a lot of people that sat in the audience and they were really mad at us because we were holding up this project and it was going to bring all sorts of money and people into the community and so we gritted our teeth and tried to work with it and got Dave Snow to work with these folks and help them redesign their project. And they came up with their design and built it and it looked great and afterwards they thanked the commission so much because they really loved the way it looked and it had saved them money over the original one (ha ha) that they were going to do. So we said whoa boy we really lucked out on that one. But after that I think that it was pretty well accepted by the community that you know that we were not there to be the bad guys just try to make them work, yeah.

Stacey Carkhuff: So um, obviously the appearance of

Lorna McDermott: Just go ahead and talk (she leaves)

Stacey Carkhuff: The appearance of the building being older looking quality to is important to the commission so is that something that you strived for make sure the buildings all match, kind of like a building code?

John McDermott: Pretty much, yeah ah, not that they matched but they matched a time frame of the era in which they should belong, yeah and that any new construction wouldn't be looking really modern but would fit back into that time frame of the Gold Rush, yeah.

Stacey Carkhuff: Okay

Notations:

[] indicates gap in replay

*** indicates the recording was garbled