

Buckwheat Donahue
NPS Skagway Oral History Project
Skagway, Alaska
December 7, 2009
Interviewed by Stacey Carkhuff

Stacey Carkhuff: This is Stacey Carkhuff interviewing Buckwheat Donahue in Skagway, Alaska it's December 7th, 2009, and this is for the Skagway Oral History Project. So I'll start with where you were born and how came to Skagway.

Buckwheat Donahue: Okay, I was born in Perry, Oklahoma. And at the age of six months, I moved to Colorado and that is basically where I was raised. And I lived there until I was thirty-two when I moved up here. That would have been 1983. And I've been here ever since. I'm the Tourism Director for the city of Skagway now. And a long time ago before I became the Tourism Director I started a company called Packer Expeditions and the gear shop here called the Mountain Shop. And I was also a bartender at the Red Onion and well I've done lots of other things too.

Stacey Carkhuff: Uh-huh and why did you originally move here?

Buckwheat Donahue: I came up to Alaska on holiday and after I was on the ferry out of Seattle and we stopped in St. Petersburg, Wrangle and Sitka. And Sitka I got off the ferry and met some people that I liked and I drank way too much. And when I got on the ferry to come to Juneau I passed out and slept through Juneau and I woke up just outside of Skagway. And I fell in love with the town, and decided I would move from Denver, Colorado to a town of about 450 people. And I did about a year later.

Stacey Carkhuff: So that would have been about 1983?

Buckwheat Donahue: Uh-huh

Stacey Carkhuff: So what was the town like in 1983 when you got here?

Buckwheat Donahue: Well the population of Skagway in 1983 was about 450 people because the railroad shut down the year before. And um, the place was very deserted it was very, very quiet and I just loved that about the town. And still do. And the people, the land all the familiar reasons, but you know I grew up and my generation and actually several generations our parents were found of saying this to their kids, You know this is America if you want you can grow up to be president. And that was a complimentary thing, right, back in those days. And um, but the thing is that the people in Alaska I felt like they had the confidence, if they wanted to be president and decided to be president they'd go out and do it. And I liked that kind of confidence. And I like being around people that just say []. And that's what this place is filled with right you know, all over the state. And um so I kept meeting people like that. And there didn't seem to be as many barriers to jump through. There didn't seem to be as many social clicks. At least not here in Skagway, right? And you are as good as your word. And by golly there's nothing wrong with that and then to have the land that is so physically attractive you know it's the best of all the worlds, of all the possible worlds, because Skagway like many places in Alaska ...it's the kind of

place that you can walk up or hike up and stand on top of mountain peak and then every directions there's uninterrupted wilderness, right? And it just goes on and on and on. And even though you know there's towns and villages out there, they're of so little consequence that they don't matter out there. They don't bug you, right you know? So I like that openness right you know, that touch of wilderness that is, is inherent in our recent history and it's going to be inherent in our future too, right. It's not going to change, right. Being far removed from ah most of the reality of the rest of the world is a good thing. That's why I moved here.

Stacey Carkhuff: Uh-huh, it's a good reason to move here.

Buckwheat Donahue: Yeah. I bought a grave here. I'm staying (ha ha)

Stacey Carkhuff: If you have a grave here, huh? You sound pretty set. (ha) So um, you said that you're the Tourism Director. Does that love of the wilderness and this particular town did that drive you to become the Tourism Director? And was there one previous to you arriving here?

Buckwheat Donahue: Yes there was. I've only been the Tourism Director here since 1999, January of '99. And um so I've had this job for eleven years now. And prior to that I owned Packer Expeditions which is now Fitting Company [] that was sold on board cruise ships and then did multi-day trips over the Chilkoot, and down river and the likes to White Horse and the Yukon Territory. Anything for a buck basically, and so then prior to that I was a bartender at the Red Onion. You know and I pitched my ideas for a hiking company and a cruise line called Princess. It really surprised me because two weeks after I pitched the idea they called me and said okay. And the next summer I was in business and hiring people. But because of medical reasons I had to sell my outfitting company and the gear shop. And um ... and I needed to be able to get medical insurance and the only way to do that after you're declared uninsurable is to [] or be a gazillionaire.

Stacey Carkhuff: Right

Buckwheat Donahue: And so I chose the former.

Stacey Carkhuff: So previous to the health issue, how many times did you hike the Chilkoot Trail?

Buckwheat Donahue: Oh not that often, I know some people that who have done it hundreds of times. I've hiked it in total ... let's see the first summer that I was up here, maybe three times just for the grins [] ... and another four, five times with clients, right so you know between ten and fifteen times.

Stacey Carkhuff: That's quite a few times, I'd say. Lots of miles of hard terrain.

Buckwheat Donahue: Yeah, well yeah, I mean it in a way I guess it could be considered hard terrain but the first thirteen miles of it aren't that difficult. [] Um and that first seven miles and then the three miles over, over the scales and the golden stairs and stuff like that, that's an arduous hike for sure because just the elevation gain in that short three miles and then once you get to the summit it's basically downhill, with a few up hills all the way up to Bennett station. Yeah if they would just take out mile []

16.0 it would be a really easy hike. (ha) but you know things just don't work out that way. So yeah, I've hiked it a few times. I enjoy getting out there.

Stacey Carkhuff: Yeah, so I know the Park Service has done put toward a lot of funding and rebuilding trails and making them safer and rebuilding them, what do you think the historical significance of doing that is?

Buckwheat Donahue: Well I think it's great, because it gives access to more people to go out and to explore and learn about our region and our town's history. Um, the... I mean you can still on occasion find junk that was left over or discarded along the way. And, and the history of the gold rush especially in the winter of '97 and '98 is very, very colorful. I mean somebody one of these days might write a book about it and I hope they do and [] you know. It is one of those classic examples of fiction is stranger than anything reality I mean than truth, you know... Because there is so many wonderful stories and characters that are all about the trail, that were keys to developing the area that we've come to still know and love. So you bet, I mean Park Service has made a huge difference in their efforts not just in trail [] but here in Skagway. And I mean you know when you don't have to cross a river that's waist deep or higher it's kind of a luxury, you know.

Stacey Carkhuff: Yes

Buckwheat Donahue: And you know and they've made all those improvements and it's not just the log across the river any more, right? It's been good, it's been good and we're not overrun, the trail it not overrun with tourist. In fact I [] the last few years they have been experiencing a downturn in hikers, right. But there's still a couple thousand people a year that go over the trail. And um, it's working out well, it's working out well. They haven't, I don't think they've really destroyed the resources. Mother Nature's still the big challenge there, right. The, so that's actually a good thing.

Stacey Carkhuff: Yeah I agree

Buckwheat Donahue: Yeah, you bet baby (ha-ha) []

Stacey Carkhuff: On the subject of tourist. What do you think are the biggest changes in tourism are? If you know anything about historical to when you arrived, to now...

Buckwheat Donahue: Well, during the gold rush there are actually tourist coming up and there were also cruise lines coming up. The White Star line which was the Titanic line, they were sending ships up back you know 19[] '99. And ah once the train was completed they started running tourist trains and things like that. So it became an even more popular destination. There was a gentleman by the name of George Rapuzzi that um, he was, he was very, very known throughout the western United States and western Canada. Mae West even you know went on one of his tours, right, and ah [] um and then of course you know up until the depression it was steady but the railroad was still primarily hauling freight and ore out of the Yukon. Ah, and then shipped out of Skagway because we have very good port here, a good natural harbor. And um, but ah and then during WWII tourism just about vanished. But Skagway was still an important part of the war effort [] especially in the east, against the Japanese and then

supplying the Russians with lend lease material. And then after WWII slowly but surely tourism, with the completion of the Alaskan Highway more cruise ships started coming up. And up until 1983 that's when we started keeping data, [] 1983 we had forty-three thousand cruisers into Skagway. And almost double that in highway visitors, or what we call today independent visitors, non cruisers. And it's developed, Skagway's developed ... let me see how do I say this... in the last twenty-five, twenty-six years we've gone from forty-three thousand cruisers to the end of 2009 ...we had, I just happen to have the data right here, seven hundred and seventy-nine thousand cruisers come in to Skagway, which is actually down about fifty thousand people from two summers ago [] right.

Stacey Carkhuff: Define what a cruiser is.

Buckwheat Donahue: Somebody that comes and visits Skagway and gets off the boat.

Stacey Carkhuff: Oh okay

Buckwheat Donahue: That's what a cruiser is, right, and independent travelers is everyone that's not cruise. Whereas we had um, seventy-two thousand people on the highway in 1983 and another [] came in on the Alaska Marine Highway System. Those numbers now are less than what they were in 1983 because cruising is so much more affordable and it doesn't take as much time, right. If you're coming over the highway and coming into Skagway, let's say you're coming from Chicago. It's going to take you know a week [] you know every day at least five or six hundred miles just to get here, right. And the gas is real expensive and just the time commitment these days. People just don't have the time. In 1988 the average visitor to Skagway or the entire state of Alaska spent almost sixteen days, right in Alaska. Now the average visitor's time is 6.5 days.

Stacey Carkhuff: Oh

Buckwheat Donahue: And they just don't have the time. And the only way that they can see a glimpse or get a glimpse of Alaska is to take a cruise, and their making it very affordable to do so, right. So we've gone through an awful lot of changes. Another example, when I first moved here everybody in town complained about, "Oh my gosh, can you believe it, there's another t-shirt shop, there's another gift [] going in downtown!" Right and everyone would make jokes about it. But then in 1992 when Holland America came to Skagway with them they brought um, a lot of um ... merchants from the Caribbean jewelry store. And that changed the dynamics downtown overnight. Um, all of a sudden, all of these big [] were in Skagway and they were bringing people that were not from the state and will never be a part of the state and um, and they rubbed out all the local business people right. There's only, um, I think there's only six businesses left in downtown Skagway that are actually owned by locals. Right, all the rest are folks from outside and as distasteful as that is to [] most of ah, the year-rounder's here um, there's a market for it, right. Because you know the reason we have twenty-five jewelers in Skagway is because there is a market for it. People are spending an awful lot of money and we collect about a third of all the sales tax revenue is due to jewelry store sales even though the people that they are talking to don't speak Alaskan, right, you know and even though they wear coats and ties and stuff like that and that's alien concept to the year rounder's here. To us get dressed up, like having a shirt like this one with a collar which by the way you can't find in Skagway. You have to go to Juneau or Whitehorse to buy a shirt

with a collar. But ah, um, so yeah we've gone through some changes, we've gone through some changes. Fiscally it's beneficial and um, [] we, we like making money here in Skagway but it's still ... the jewelry stores ... haven't been readily accepted by um, by very many of the locals, right. So that's probably the biggest negative that ah, is represented in our town of people, what people complain about the most. But then again [] it brings in a hell of a lot of money, you know.

Stacey Carkhuff: It does. I was wondering about Holland America, isn't that a Dutch-American company? Where would they, do, do the Dutch have Caribbean Islands that they would get this idea to sell Caribbean Jewelry to tourist? Where did that come from?

Buckwheat Donahue: Oh I don't know, um, most of them that, that I mean I had dealings with them right you know and I get along with them okay. Um, it's ah, [] it's based out of... I mean Holland America, when I say Holland America and the advent of the jewelry store wasn't because of Holland America. I mean they didn't say we're coming to Alaska we want you to come with us. They just made the announcement that they were coming up. And then all of the stores in the Caribbean and in Mexico that make their money off of cruisers down there went [] America's coming into Skagway. We need to be there, too.

Stacey Carkhuff: Oh, okay

Buckwheat Donahue: Right and so those guys came up. It wasn't Holland America. None of the cruise lines own any of the jewelry stores.

Stacey Carkhuff: Okay, I know a lot of tour companies own hotels and things like that, okay

Buckwheat Donahue: Yeah Princess and Holland own, yeah, Princess hotels and Westmark hotels respectively, but they don't own the jewelry stores. Right, yeah

Stacey Carkhuff: I just got confused with the, clarification. What are some of the good things that come from tourism in Skagway?

Buckwheat Donahue: Well, Buckwheat Ski Classic gets money from the cruise lines, right. And because of that success we are able to raise revenue um, not just because of the cruise line but because of other things. We can buy snowmobiles to set skiing tracks, and um, the kids get their skis and their boots for free. Um, we have people here in town that instruct. We have enough money now to send kids occasionally up to other competitions in the Yukon Territory and occasionally over to Anchorage, right and stuff like that. And just to broaden their own knowledge of things outside of Skagway. So that's a benefit, a few years ago Royal Caribbean Cruise lines gave us fifty thousand dollars to build a climbing wall in our recreational center here in town, right. And that was a very nice gift. And um, and they make contributions, financial contributions to the Skagway Arts Council. We have scholarships every year you know for graduating high school senior from Skagway. And um, those kinds of things and then of course there's the employment. A lot of people have jobs because of it. And about 90% of all revenue in Skagway is based on tourism. And with the 80% of all that revenue due to cruisers they have very positive financial impact on us. And there's a lot of people, myself included, are making good, decent

livings right because of that. And um, so those are some of the positive impacts. Other areas of positive impact a few years ago we needed new fire truck and the cruise lines got together and chipped in a hundred thousand dollars to help us buy it. Um, when we needed new x-ray machine at the clinic, right they got together, they bought it for us, right. So when we needed money, we just, we are just now finishing an um ... couple million dollar renovation on the sea walk downtown. And the cruise ships docks into town and we needed some extra funding because the city wasn't able to afford all those improvements and even though it primarily helps out cruisers they chipped in a quarter of a million dollars, right. And so there's been some benefits, right, like that. And um, which we're very appreciative of. Because when the cruise ships leave every [] I mean when they leave every fall and come back in the spring all that time in-between we get to walk, we have this beautiful sea walk all to ourselves, right. And you can fish. You can put your crab pots off of it down on the docks you know there's nothing like eating fresh crab or fresh shrimp, right you know. It's a habit you can get used to. Yeah.

Stacey Carkhuff: Yes. Well the first thing you mentioned was the Buckwheat Ski Classic.

Buckwheat Donahue: Yeah

Stacey Carkhuff: So ah, you can talk about that if you'd like. What is it and why was it created and how successful is it?

Buckwheat Donahue: (ha-ha)

Stacey Carkhuff: It's kind of humorous I guess ...

Buckwheat Donahue: Well I still can't believe that you'd ask me questions about this, for oral history I mean. Cause see I equate oral history things with the really important stuff. But anyway, um, a long, long time ago twenty-four years ago the road we didn't have a road between Skagway and Whitehorse. And they finished the road and they opened it up and ah, um, year round. And so all of a sudden we had access to Whitehorse. And in the beginning we said that we were starting the race because they had to cross the border kind-of-thing, hello Canada we're from American and Alaska and stuff like that you know. And that was the rhetoric that imparted it everybody. But the truth of the matter is we were really looking for a way to get attractive women into Skagway in the winter. And ah, and ... in back in those days skiing ... well, we just went over to the library and started thumbing through magazines there to come up with ideas. And we fell in love with these girls in Lycra and um ... we thought you know that we'd like to bring cross-country skiing women into town and that's really the catalyst for this event starting. And um, the reason it's called Buckwheat isn't because I wanted to call it Buckwheat. I wanted to call it anything but Buckwheat, but the Eternal Order of Eagles who's been the official sponsor of the event since its inception, at an Eagle's meeting nobody thought that it would work. And so the, the club actually voted and they said if you're really going to try and make this work we don't want our name out there on the front. We want your name out there on the front. And so, and I didn't know if I could make it happen because I couldn't ski you know and um, and then it's just one of those things where it push came to shove, some guys up in Whitehorse heard about it and then they wrote a newspaper story [] they wrote a newspaper story about it and it all of a sudden my name was in the newspaper and I was quoted correctly even though it was just an overheard conversation. But then because of those stories I

had to do something, right. And so we had it the first year was in ah, 1987 and we had fourteen people show up. Fourteen people finished [] and the water was frozen it was pretty cold that day. They had to break trail over fifty-eight kilometers. Now it's only fifty kilometers. We had eight people from Skagway, six people from Whitehorse and none of the people from Skagway finished in the top three. And it was the only year that we had more Alaskans; it was the only year that we had more Alaskans than Canadians.

Stacey Carkhuff: Well Whitehorse is known for its amazing cross-country ski club.

Buckwheat Donahue: Oh yeah, oh yeah they're hot! Oh they're hot.

Stacey Carkhuff: The women?

Buckwheat Donahue: The women... oh I mean, they're not only very fast skiers but they're hot that way too! (ha-ha) And you know the truth of the matter is that we got so busy, right because we were hoping, we were hoping that maybe in four or five years we could have like a hundred people show up every year. And ah, um, in just ... snowballed you know. And we thought that would be a pretty good crowd to have, right. And we did we were successful that way but it never occurred to us that we'd get too busy to talk to all these hot women, right you know. And that's sort of been the way it is. Because there is a lot of, of fit women and men that come to this event. And I think the third year the event came up with this little line. It's [] It's the east for the lazy, the infirmed and the few who are fast, right because most people it's like regions, the Skagwaygan's and the Whitehorse people, and the Juneau people they bring their families up and for most of them it's the only time of the year that they put on their skis, right. And we have some guys that are internationally known ice sculptors and if you enter the event and get out to the main aid station, which if you really nice to me, I'll give you the maintenance map and, and all [] the twenty-five or fifty k of the race and you can get to the Aid's station but by just skiing four kilometers, right. But we have some ice carvers out there that have won international awards um, that go out and one year they built Minas Tirith from the Lord of the Rings out there, built the Canadian Peace Arch ah, you know all sorts of things. One year they made a Sphinx, and that kids and a lot of turned down adults did too because they were drinking some beer. But they could go up from behind this sphinx head and then slide down, right because it was a big ... we're talking about a lot of things there structures that are twenty, thirty feet high.

Stacey Carkhuff: Wow

Buckwheat Donahue: And one year they made a great big salmon and in the same way you could come up from the tail fin of the salmon right you know and or you could go inside because we'd use it as a quinzee or a shelter, something like that, you know for bad weather. And so those kinds of things are happening. And this year we're starting another event the weekend before, right where we're going to do kite-skiing and that kind of stuff and just try to open up the outdoor stuff again. And have back to back weekends where we can get more people to come to Skagway because Skagway in the winter []. So yeah and then, now the only reason that it doesn't get any bigger than it is, is because of our hotel space and we don't have very many ... we don't have very many hotel rooms. And we always fill up. And then we also place people in houses and stuff like that. None of our RV campgrounds are open in the winter

so there's no place for people to hook-up and stuff like that. Um, and so we have maybe, last year we had a little over three hundred people show up.

Stacey Carkhuff: That's a lot of people

Buckwheat Donahue: For us, it's an awful lot of people and you know let's see last year we had people from Washington State, B.C., the Yukon and Alaska of course primarily Juneau, Haines, Skagway, Whitehorse, a few from Dawson City, A guy named Remington from Fairbanks comes down every year. And we get a couple fast skiers from Anchorage.

Stacey Carkhuff: So in addition to being a nation building between Canada and the United States it's also spring/winter tourism in Skagway.

Buckwheat Donahue: Right now it's all we have []. And it's also like the end of the year party, end of the winter party for us, and because the first week in April the seasonals come back. And so that happens down south in Juneau and Haines and all those other places too. And um, everybody starts gearing up and it becomes a [] a different mindset if you will, it's different with seasonal employees and their impact and ah, because they're completely different from year-rounders. But it's good it sort of brings the change but it is the end of the year. It's sort of like okay we've got the Buckwheat coming this weekend and that means it's the end of winter, right for us. But of course if you're from Anchorage or Whitehorse they only have five weeks of winter.

Stacey Carkhuff: And Fairbanks it's three months

Buckwheat Donahue: Yeah

Stacey Carkhuff: And so the Buckwheat is an interesting thing. Well, why don't we move onto the Dawson to Dyea race and how it spawned the Yukon River Quest?

Buckwheat Donahue: Okay, well um, 1897 and 1898 those were the two big years for prospectors journeying to the Yukon Territory [] gold metal. And most of them came through Skagway or Dyea to get there. And a good friend of mine, Jeff Brady, we'd always talked about starting an event or wouldn't it be cool if we had ... something that started in Dyea and ended in Dawson and stuff like that. And so five years before the centennial of our Gold Rush we're talking about it and we went up and approached the Yukon Centennial Commission. And we said this is our idea, right, and we'll need some help. And they went, they really liked the idea and so they let us organize it and ... already had a pretty good working relationship with Parks Canada because of the ski race, the part of the ski race happens in their area, in their territory. And so, they were accommodating, US National Parks they were very accommodating and easy to work with and we put together a pretty good plan and about a year before June of 1897 we made our public announcements, we got some good support again from um, the cruise lines gave us money and the local railroad, the White Pass and Yukon route, they gave us money they even provided us with a free train [] Bennett so we could take the news down to the Bennett Station. That's the end of the Chilkoot Trail. And we required that, that we, that they had to carry a commensurable amount of, of, of gear with them because the Mounties back in '87 and '88 required two thousand pounds of gear, um,

to get into Canada. So all these people were making all these numerous trips, back and forth, back and forth from the Trail head out in Dyea two thousand pounds of gear, that's a lot, let's just say, that there's just two people, one guy carries one hundred pounds up they drop it off. One guy has to stay with it because they don't want it stolen. The other guy brings another hundred pounds back. And they just switch off and forth, back and forth, back and forth, back and forth they just do that time and time again. So we thought that it would neat if [] if other people did it, right, and it would be a good way to commemorate and remember the, the one hundred year anniversary of the Gold Rush, right. And um, and plus Jeff and I we're both history buffs and in 1993 was the one hundred year anniversary of the first mail being delivered from Skagway, which was called Moore's Ville then, um to Dawson City by a [] Moore. And to commemorate that Jeff and I hiked the trail, right, and then paddled the lakes and the rivers to Dawson City and we delivered from Skagway a declaration by our City Government making Dawson City our Sister Community. And then when we got to Dawson City we were met by their Mayor and their town council. And we had the little ceremonial exchange, right, and [] on the way back we had friends of ours drive up in trucks and bring us back to Skagway (ha). But so, you know, we're sort of into the history aspect of things here. And um, so in, in '97 and '98 Jeff and I organized you know a four hundred and um, almost five hundred event. And um, um actually you throw in the lakes and there's another hundred miles paddling in the lakes. And you know people did it in four days, four days and ah. And now there is something called the River Quest and it just runs from Whitehorse down to Dawson City which is about 465 river miles. And there are hundreds of participants in this event now. It's the longest paddling race in the world. There's only one set of class two rapids that you have to go through that's a five finger rapids. And ah the rest of it is class one on the Yukon River and then there is about thirty-five miles on Lake LeBarge. So but you can make good time especially if you've trained. And that's going to be in its eleventh year this year. The Dyea to Dawson race was the catalyst to that event. That's why it started []. And Jeff's very involved with it, right, and you can ... it's a good thing.

Stacey Carkhuff: So did you enjoy doing the big paddle trip?

Buckwheat Donahue: Oh yeah we had a ...

Stacey Carkhuff: Do you have funny stories or things memorable events during those five hundred miles of paddling?

Buckwheat Donahue: Oh, sure, um, the, ah, the first fourteen teams were limited to [] and the first fourteen teams made it Carcross which is short for Caribou Crossing and southern Yukon Territory. And they just barely made it into Carcross and the rest of the teams, the other thirty-six teams had to wait at Bennett because of a big storm, right. And the waves on Bennett just, just were huge; they were like three or four feet. And when you only have [] clearance from the water to gunnels on a boat that's big water. And we almost lost a pair. There was a team, actually it was one of the few Skagway teams, Larry Gohen's group Cindy Adams actually saved the lives of two people because, because of the wind. These guys they were amateurs, now we know this in hind sight that they shouldn't have been out there. But um, they went through um, Marsh Lake or from Nars Lake getting into Tagish Lake and there's just this little it's less than a mile long, that connects the two lakes, right. And when they got out onto Tagish Lake that big windstorm was happening, right. And these guys for whatever reason decided to readjust

the weight in their canoe. And during this big wind when you had three to five foot waves coming at you broadside, right. And so they take off their spray skirt*** to readjust the weight in their boat and of course a wave comes in and they're in the water. And if Larry and Cindy hadn't been following behind them it would have been, it would have been curtains. I mean they saved them. I mean they had disrobe, they had to get naked, press their bodies against theirs to warm [] hypothermic, right. It was ...well they're just fortunate, not only that but Larry and Cindy are our white water rescue instructors for the region, right. So they knew exactly what to do. They saved their boat. They saved the people that were in the boat. Yu know we were just lucky, right. I mean those two guys from Juneau were lucky. And the ones that organized the event were lucky too. And um, you know [] that's probably the biggest thing, right, that happened. And then when we were in a place called Carmacks. I was, that first year, I was with the lead team the fastest team, the fastest team of people and Jeff stayed with the slow. Then for the second year, in '98 we reversed our roles. And the um, it hadn't occurred [] paddling on the river for twenty-four, thirty hours like by the time I'd gotten to Carmacks or by the time those faster teams arrived, that they would be hallucinating, right. And they were pulling off the river and crazy things were going on. I mean people were going, hey listen we you know they couldn't help but...you know those chaise lounge chairs ...there were just ...too many of them. It swept right through them. And then they got in an argument because one team, this one guy thought they were Adirondack chairs or something. I don't know what an Adirondack chair or something peculiar to ...

Stacey Carkhuff: Chairs that are kind of angled like an "L" shape.

Buckwheat Donahue: Oh and they have a (motions with hand)

Stacey Carkhuff: They're usually really ***

Buckwheat Donahue: Like a hammock in ... okay so... those kind of chairs. They got in an argument over whether it was chaise lounge chairs or Adirondack chairs, they were paddling through right, you know. And I'm just like okay listen, how many fingers do I have (holding up fingers)? (ha-ha) I mean you might want to plan on spending more than three hours here, because we had a mandatory three hour break there, right you know. But they still had like 350 miles to go. They just finished a hundred miles on the river or maybe actually more than that, and thirty-five miles on the barge, right. And um, so yeah that was kind of weird you know talking. It wasn't just that I mean people said they saw people that they hadn't seen in thirty years that had been dead for thirty years. People got off their boats talking to their mother who had been dead you know twenty years and stuff like that. And ah, and some of them even complimented old friends that had passed for getting them through tough, tough parts of the water. And then I'd go okay tough parts of the water? Because it's dead calm, right you know. And they were imaging storms that weren't there, right you know. But to listen to these guys tell their stories you'd think they'd been through hell even though we knew we hadn't. But mentally they had been, they were going through hell because they were pushing their bodies to the limit and most of the people that were in both of those events '97 and the '98 did not, like I did not, I didn't have experience, I've never had to paddle twenty-four hours I didn't have to do that. But they were quite convincing, right. I believed them and I knew they were serious they thought that was exactly what had happened to them. And every once in a while I run into some of those guys from back then, and I say, "Do you remember when you

said...?" and they say, "Yeah and I still believe my mother was there." Right, you know, I mean ten, eleven years later, (ha)

Stacey Carkhuff: So did they ever finish the race?

Buckwheat Donahue: Yeah, yeah they did, I mean some people stayed a little bit longer. We pulled some people out they were just too sick to go on. And yeah it took less than then four days what took some guys a hundred years earlier, you know, a year to do.

Stacey Carkhuff: No maps and no previous knowledge...

Buckwheat Donahue: Yeah, oh yeah

Stacey Carkhuff: That's wild. Well um, why don't we talk about the Heartbeat Trail? Why did you walk across North America?

Buckwheat Donahue: Okay, well in October 1st, of 2003 I was medevaced from Juneau to Seattle, Washington because of three of episodes of congestive heart failure, and a small heart attack. And when I got out of the hospital about three weeks later, I still wanted to live in Skagway even though they didn't have any cardiac [] but I learned through my experiences ah, just to get to ah, Seattle that if we had more equipment and more training our clinic could do just as much as any hospital in Juneau could because in Juneau there aren't any cardiologist either. There is no cardiologist in the Southeast. And so, and I used to be an EMT and on Search & Rescue and stuff like that. And everybody put [] right. And, and when I was in the ER room in Juneau um, some of the guys that were working on me had the same amount of training that I had, you know years before and um, and they handled it very well, I mean they were EMT2s and EMT3s and paramedics, right and they're working under the supervision of doctors and nurse practitioners and stuff like that in there. [] different than just being an EMT right? But still that's where I learned that um, that through the internet and stuff like that people with training can an awful lot for you. And they were accessing cardiologist in Seattle, right, stabilizing me and stuff like that. And so when I got back I wanted to, I didn't know how, I just sort of, it was like, you know we need to do this. And plus Skagway is getting ready to start building a new clinic and things like that. And so, then the doctors um, down there in Seattle and Juneau it wasn't a rosy picture that they were projecting for me. And ah, so I started walking and losing weight and stuff like that. And um, [] race in 2004, March 2004 I decided I'd walk from Skagway to Whitehorse, right. And I did that. And when I got to Whitehorse I felt great! And it was just wonderful. And I wanted to keep going but of course had to come back to work, right you know. And ah, and so when I accumulated enough time to four months later I took two weeks off and I walked from Whitehorse to Dawson[] about six months later because it was in December when I did that. And before, before I left Whitehorse for Dawson I began thinking about maybe I can you know raise money for something like that. Maybe I could do walk across America. And then while I was walking up there towards Dawson City you have way too much time to think about things, right. And um, I was thinking oh what the [] the heck with walking across America that's just three thousand miles, let's walk from ah, from, Florida to the Yukon and then put in on the Yukon river and go to the Bering Sea and end up in Nome, right (ha) you know. I don't know it just ... then I just started working on it. Then it was yeah okay this is what I want to do. And then about a year and [] over the first of 2005 on

the two-year anniversary of me being medevaced to Seattle I left Miami Beach, Florida and headed north. And ah, I didn't raise as much money as I hoped. But I did raise eighty thousand dollars and ah it all went to the clinic. And ah I didn't pay for all the donations that were made it went straight to the clinic. I paid for all of my expenses out of pocket. And [] um, ended up being a little over seven thousand miles in all.

Stacey Carkhuff: Wow

Buckwheat Donahue: And I did it in ten months, twenty-four days, three and a half hours. And ah, that included a little ceremonial walk from Whitehorse back to Skagway. I flew from Nome to Whitehorse and it just seemed like I was just going a billion miles an hour, you know, I mean cause you're flying over the Yukon river from Nome to Fairbanks and you're just going my god it's [] it takes weeks to do this and that was with the current in my boat. If I'd have been on foot it would have been three or four months, you know. And then, um, but, yeah we've raised money and one of the most gratifying things is ah um, when I was on my walk, when I was in Minnesota I got a phone call from one of the people that volunteered to manage things while I was gone you know because I would do little [] stuff like that along the way, right you know. Talked to people that had a heart and diabetic problems and you know, you hear about a lot of people doing that and um, and so they were sending money in, some people would send money in you know. And ah, and a lot of people paid before I even left, right I mean and that turned out to be very good because there's some machine called a white blood cell analyzer [] something like that, that I guess is critical in diagnosing things and um, and their machine burned up or something and it's not that they're that expensive but they're pretty expensive. I think they're like ten thousand bucks or something and it wasn't in the clinic's budget for this year and they heard that I had that much money in my account and they knew that the money was going to them anyway, right so they called up and said hey we need this and that was like [] hey great and so I called Mike cut 'em a check, right. And so he did and within three days they had it up here and it may, may um, it saved a life possibly just possibly just that expenditure because there's a guy named Mike Healy here in town and Tanner and they're brothers and they own some business here and stuff like that and [] and they didn't know what the problem was and they thought at the clinic that he was having, that he needed an appendectomy and as it turned out this machine got here that same day that they were determining that and then they put the white blood cell thing in there and they were wrong in their diagnosis. Because of this he didn't have to pay the twenty-five thousand dollars for medevac from here to Juneau, right, you know. And ...and saved him a lot of money and saved him a lot of grief and none [] and ah, so that makes you feel pretty good, right. And they're buying new x-ray stuff and ah, um, and some heart monitoring equipment for the new clinic that is just opening up in a couple months. So um, that was, that was the reason because I faced all sorts of adversity and realized that I could still live in a small town and get pretty good medical care. All we needed was the money [] and because the city is very generous with paying for training, for training and um, so yeah, and so it's worked out.

Stacey Carkhuff: Okay, do you think you'll do any more fundraising adventures in the future?

Buckwheat Donahue: Well you know what I'd like to um, I've gained twenty-five pounds[] kind of lag in the summer but ah, when I retire in another year and a half um, I wouldn't mind I'd kind of like to walk

from Homer to Halifax. And um, I mean I don't know if I would physically be able to do that. But it would be, I think it would be fun, right. [] And now I know better what to expect, right, you know. And I wouldn't solo it like I did on this walk and paddle. That was a big mistake. So you know set up things you know be a little bit more organized instead of just ... okay here we go ...(ha ha). And ah, I mean it all worked out just fine, right

Stacey Carkhuff: Right

Buckwheat Donahue: You know. But it would be [] go with you. And um, you know cause you don't always end up at a place where there's a motel.

Stacey Carkhuff: Exactly

Buckwheat Donahue: You know and so, yeah I wouldn't mind doing it again but now it's, now it's mainly just a more traditional approach to fundraising you know, getting on the phone and begging for money, you know.

Stacey Carkhuff: Uh-huh

Buckwheat Donahue: So I don't know if that []

Stacey Carkhuff: I think it could be pretty interesting, instead of going north you'd be going east.

Buckwheat Donahue: Yeah, with the wind at your back

Stacey Carkhuff: Yes!

Notations:

[] indicates gap in replay

*** indicates the recording was garbled