



Mark and Sheila Beardsley

Transcript of an Oral History
Conducted by
Anjuli Grantham
at
Larsen Bay, Alaska
On June 13, 2015
(With subsequent corrections and additions)

Kodiak Historical Society

About West Side Stories

This oral history is part of the West Side Stories project of the Kodiak Historical Society. West Side Stories is a public humanities and art project that intended to document the history of the west side of Kodiak Island through oral history, photography, and art. The oral histories chart the personal stories of individuals with a longtime connection to the west side of Kodiak Island, defined for the scope of this project as the area buffeted by the Shelikof Strait that stretches from Kupreanof Strait south to the village of Karluk. The project endeavored to create historical primary source material for a region that lacks substantive documentation and engage west side individuals in the creation of that material.

The original audio recording of this interview is available by contacting the Kodiak Historical Society. Additional associated content is available at the Kodiak Historical Society/ Baranov Museum, including photographs of interview subjects and west side places taken during the summer of 2015, archival collections related to the west side, and journals and art projects created by west side residents in 2015.

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Note on Transcription

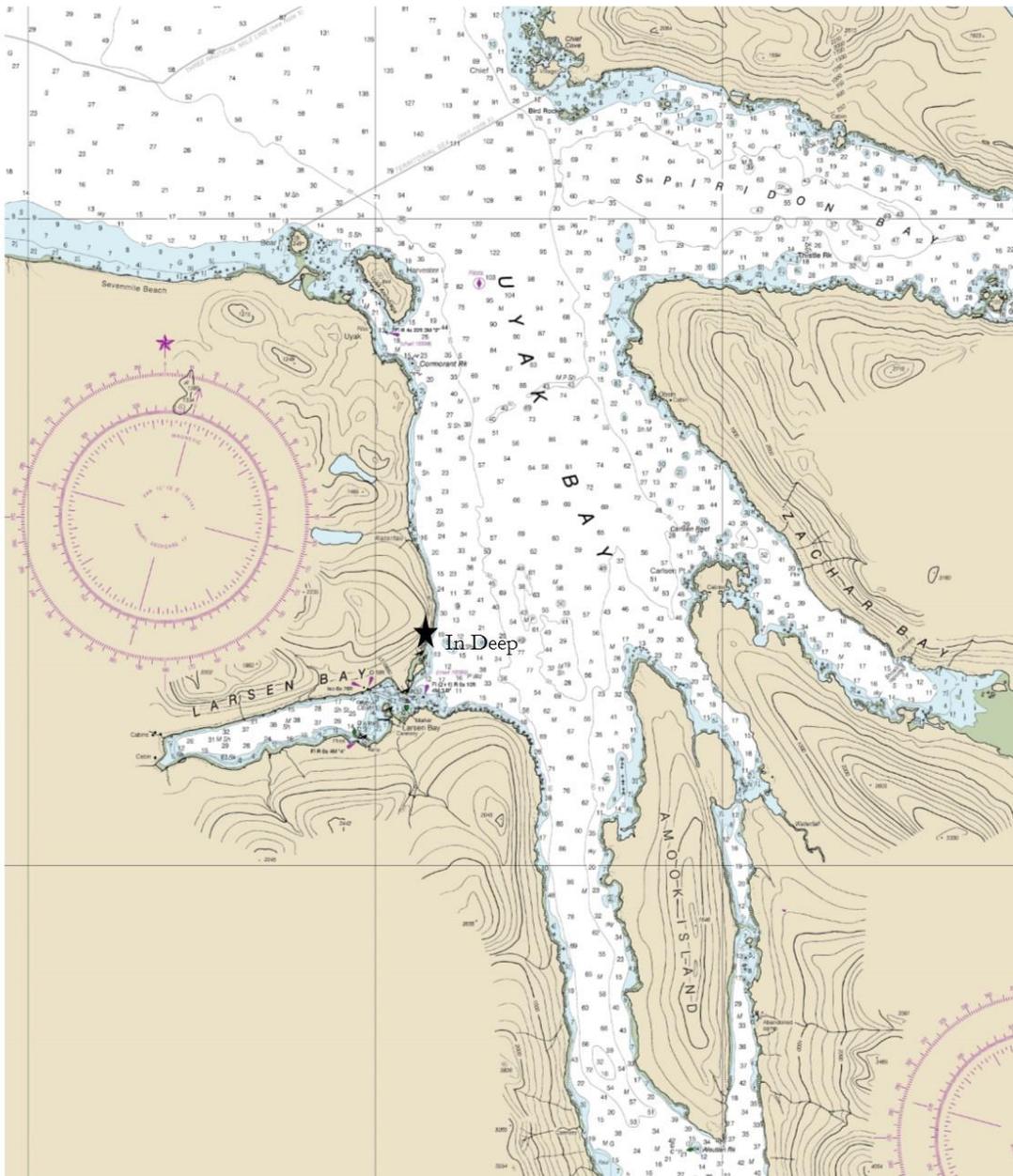
After the initial transcription was completed, a second transcriber performed an audit/edit by listening to the oral history recording and verifying the transcription. The following transcript is nearly a word-for-word transcription of the oral history interview. Editing is intended to make the interview easier to understand. Bracketed words indicate they were added after the interview. The use of [...] indicates that something that was spoken does not appear in the transcription. Often, these are false starts. In some cases, it is information that the interview subject retracted later. The original audio file is available for listening.

Citation

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Cover photo: Sheila and Mark Beardsley, photographed at their Larsen Bay home called "In Deep" in July of 2015. Photography by Breanna Peterson for West Side Stories, P-1000-7-245.



Location of Mark and Sheila Beardsley's set net site.



Mark and Sheila Beardsley in their Larsen Bay home, July 2015, P-1000-7-240.

Oral History of Mark and Sheila Beardsley

AG: So it is June 13 of 2015, and I am here with Mark and Sheila Beardsley and we're in Larsen Bay. This is Anjuli Grantham, and this recording is being done as part of the West Side Stories project. And I haven't really formally interviewed two people at once before, so this will be interesting. Maybe we could start with both of you introducing yourselves and saying where you're from and when you were born.

MB: Alright. Mark Beardsley. I was born in Hood River, Oregon and started coming up to Kodiak back in 1974, I believe, to visit relatives. Started fishing here in 1980 out here in Uyak Bay, and so I guess that puts us up to date at thirty-seven years, I guess so. That's me.

SB: And I'm Sheila Beardsley, also born in Hood River, Oregon and met Mark in high school. And his uncle owned the cannery out here and so starting in high school I got a job at the cannery and started out here. My first summer was the Exxon Valdez Oil spill in 1989. And then worked my way through college working at the cannery until Mark and I ended up buying a permit. I've been fishing out here for twenty—. This is my twenty-first year.

AG: Great. When did you purchase the permit?



The Beardsley set net site, In Deep, in the summer of 2015.
Formerly called Deadman's Point and Bruin Haven, P-1000-7-19.

MB: [...] The most recent permit we purchased was in [...] the winter of '94, so yeah. Recently in the past, I guess seven, eight years, probably purchased the original permit from our relatives, so yeah.

AG: So in 1974, what brought you to Kodiak to begin with, Mark?

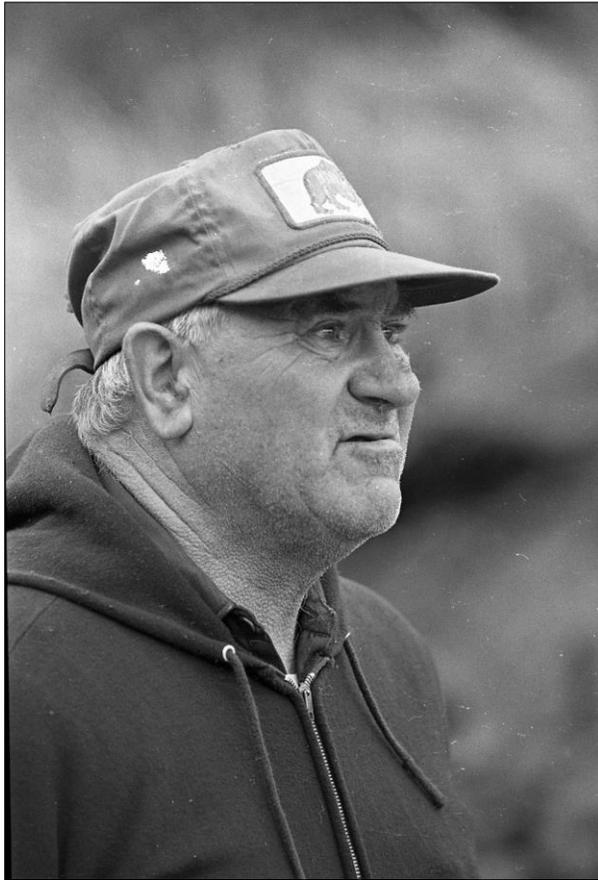
MB: That would be Alan and Sharon Beardsley and my cousins. They were in Kodiak. Some folks may remember Mark-it Foods. That was kind of the original I guess, [but] not what brought them here. I believe my uncle was on a NOAA project that originally brought him to the island in '72. So we're just coming up to visit in the summertime for a couple weeks and sport fish and kinda really enjoyed the place, and so my dad and I mainly kept coming back to visit every summer. So that's what brought us up here.

AG: And what inspired you to begin fishing?

MB: Well, my uncle and my father, I think, believe they bought into the original permit from Eddie Paakkanen back in 1980. Kind of was an adventure for my cousin and I and also kind of a way to pay your college, give us a job. Enjoyed it, kept doing, so that's how it started.

AG: What was your first impression of Larsen Bay?

MB: Very remote but very friendly people. Knew all the locals seemed like pretty instantly. Victor Carlson kind of was our main connection, and he was the winter watchman at the cannery here in Larsen Bay originally when we first arrived, so he was kind of our main connection. And growing up as a little kid out here I always looked for Victor for anything we needed it seemed like that first year.



Eddie Paakkanen, former owner of Deadman's Point,
P-779-14-15.

AG: What was at the site?

MB: What was at the site? A lot of remnants of Eddie's history. A lot of folks may know Eddie Paakkanen, and the name of the site was Deadman's Point. I still to this day can't determine what the true name behind Deadman's Point, the origination was, but I've asked a few old timers here in town. I'm trying to figure that out so maybe this will help turn that into a discovery. I don't know, but the main thing at the site, we renamed it to Bruin Haven. The first summer there my aunt probably thought we were all gonna be mauled by a bear during the summer. Every night we had visitors. Eddie fed the bears dog food. They were his pets. Every night we would have multiples, anywhere from two up to thirteen a night and they're kind of his pets we discovered. The first couple years were a little intense but that was Eddie. So it was interesting history.

AG: So he was still living there when you started fishing?

MB: Yeah, he lived there year-round actually at the site. [...] We pull up on the beach. I think before we purchased [it], the year we visited or before my uncle and my dad purchased it. But he

[Eddie] had a three legged dog, little poodle I remember running around. You know, it was kind of his pet, but anyway that's how I remember Eddie, is his dog and his bears, all his pets. But anyway it was an interesting treasure trove of collection of old things that [...] none of it worked, half of it didn't work.

SB: We're still digging through some Eddie stuff.

MB: Yeah, so.

AG: Any objects that stand out in your memory from that treasure trove?

SB: How about that saw we have out here?

MB: What saw?

SB: The old chainsaw.

MB: Oh yeah, there's maybe one of the first gas powered chainsaws. I'm trying to get it to run. I've got it here in my warehouse. I know there's many numerous hand tools that can be sixty years old or something that he had. So I've kinda got a small collection of things I'm trying to take care of [or], restore.

AG: What was Eddie's story?

MB: I don't know a lot about Eddie's history and that. I'm sure my uncle, if there's anyway you could get in touch with him, he would probably know. I would also guess possibly [...] Duncan and the Fields family might be able to fill you in a lot about Eddie, too. Him and his sister, Dora Aga, grew up down on, I believe it was down on Alf Island by Park's cannery [...]. I've heard stories he'd row up to his site and fish in the summertime here, but in a row boat. I don't know there's a truth to that or not.

AG: So was it Eddie Paakkanen that kind of pioneered that fishing spot as far as you know?

MB: That is correct. Yeah. It was Eddie Paakkanen's spot.

SB: And his sister right next.

MB: Dora was just inside of him towards Larsen Bay from Eddie's site.

AG: What did Dora call her spot? Do you know?

MB: I do not know.

AG: And what stories have you heard about?

SB: No, I think their handles were always like a number.

MB: Yeah. CB.

SB: CB number. That's why the cannery still called like "two-six." You know, still called two CB numbers. Yeah.

MB: Memories of Dora, the only one I remember mainly that sticks out of my head is her chasing critters down with her .44 magnum and hollering and chasing with a skiff. Pretty impressive for an eleven year old watching somebody get out on a skiff, chasing things down, hollering at them.

SB: Shooting. Maybe that's what Deadman's Point's about. [...]

AG: Have you heard specific possibilities about this name Deadman's Point?

MB: No, I have not.

SB: I thought we had heard something about, you know, when they used to do the flare starts, which used to be a gun start.

MB: Yeah.

AG: What is this?

SB: [...] How would they start fishing [then]?

MB: Oh it would just be a flare opener.

SB: Flare opener.

MB: So people waiting around to fish till the flare goes off. I don't know if there's any truth to that.

SB: Fight over it. I don't know.

MB: So.

SB: Pretty sure somebody washed up there though.

MB: That's what we're thinking, but who knows.

AG: I think that [...] honestly there's so many people that have died out here, you know, I mean it's just drownings and murders in the end. [...]

MB: But he was so close to his bears he'd actually painted a white stripe down one of them so no hunters would shoot his bear, but that bear had broken into the neighboring cabin down the beach and I guess somebody ended up shooting it and that was like his pet. [...] That's a big thing about Eddie, I remember, is just all his bears and they were looking for him that first year and second year we were there, just coming around every night almost looking for their owner or their caretaker.

AG: I see. So when is that he moved off of the site?

MB: Well, it's in '80 when we purchased it.

AG: Okay.



XtraTufs outside of Beardsley's home, P-1000-7-247.

MB: Yeah, so and then he.

SB: Moved in here.

MB: I think he moved in here. He lived on his boat for awhile and I'm not sure what happened. They found him on his boat, I believe, with a heart attack so yeah, but so soon thereafter he passed. So within a couple years, I think.

AG: So was your Uncle Alan already a setnetter at that point?

MB: We all started that first here.

AG: Why?

MB: In 1980. I am not sure unless it was a connection with some friends he had in town, either the Fields or could've been Jim Yatsik that was yeah, a good friend of theirs, neighboring friend. It could've been through Sharon. She was a teacher. A lot of teachers were involved in the fishery maybe in the summertime and that was the draw.

SB: And he was going to several places with the Mark-it Foods.

MB: Right [...] So he had some village stores and maybe he was familiar with the area and there was a draw here too for that. I don't know.

AG: But prior to this, your family wasn't experienced in fishing.

MB: No. Well Alan had trolled off the Oregon Coast. [...] He and my dad had a small troller off the Oregon Coast and then did some salmon trolling down there, but other than that, no. This was kind of the start.

AG: And how old were you?

MB: Eleven.

AG: Do you recall, beyond the bears, how was that learning curve? Did you have someone out there to kind of teach you, kind of show you the ropes of what it meant to be a setnetter?

MB: No, I think we relied on neighboring setnetters to kind of give us clues and tips on what we should or shouldn't be doing, and I think we just kind of learned as we went and conversations with, you know, neighboring setnetters throughout the summer and probably within the first five, six years. Even to this day, you know, you always kind of talking traditions or what you do for fishing and you may learn new things every year, one little thing, maybe a modification to your system. So it's good.

AG: Yeah.

MB: Interesting.

AG: It is just because usually someone will start [setnetting] because they were crew some season or they had some sort of previous connection?

SB: Yeah.

MB: And ours wasn't [that].

AG: Yeah.

SB: Just went for it.

MB: Yeah, but my hunch is it was connections probably Alan had. It would be my guess with friends in Kodiak that had talked about what was going on out here and thought that might be interesting, so try it. And then he jumped into the whole cannery mode a few years after that so then my cousin and I just kind of ran it for my uncle and my dad and we just kind of did our thing.

AG: So did you go out every summer starting in '80?

MB: Yeah.

AG: And what was your job as a boy?

MB: Well at that age, we weren't doing a whole lot of work. We just helped wherever, but I don't know. Anywhere from learning how to mend nets, to get them [salmon] out of the net, so we weren't doing too much at that age. But when [...] my cousin and I turned, I think it was fifteen, and he was four months older than I, Brian Beardsley, the two of us here fifteen and sixteen, I think that's when they kinda turned it over to us and said, "Here. Run it." So we started doing it on our own with some obviously supervision and direction with adults around, we pretty much ran it from then on, so yeah.

AG: So [...]were your parents out there at that point or would they just come and check on you?

MB: Well, I think the first year that Alan had the cannery we still lived out at the site with my dad. It was the three of us. And the second year after Alan had the cannery we moved into town instead of living in Larsen Bay. We commuted out. It was a lot easier. So we'd check in obviously three times a day between picks, so we were just living at the cannery [White House] then.

AG: I see, so it's not like you were out there all the time as a fifteen year old.

MB: No.

AG: That would have been probably almost like a dream for a fifteen year old.

MB: Yeah, that's what it was that first year. Then the second year we just moved in here [to Larsen Bay] and lived at the cannery which made it a lot easier for everybody instead of being kind of strung out, but it worked out.



Larsen Bay cannery in July, 2015, P-1000-7-699.

AG: What was it like to kind of grow up out here in the summers?

MB: It was good. There was trade offs I think coming from the lower 48. You hear about friends doing different things, but here was just more of an adventure. Being on the water everyday was a desire, so I enjoyed it. Got in my blood I guess. I don't know. Kind of hard to give up, but it's like camping all summer, kind of like it.

AG: And how was the transitions back to normal life and school?

MB: [...] It was pretty smooth really. Lots of stories for folks.

[Brief interruption when someone comes into the room]

MB: But yeah, lots of people had questions when I returned, what my summer was like, stuff like that.

[Very brief interruption]

AG: [...] Your uncle bought the cannery in '86, huh? So what changed at that point in Larsen Bay for your family and the operation?

MB: Well, I guess meals became simpler because we started eating at the mess hall. So that simplified, I guess, our operation. Brian and I would coordinate our timing with the mess hall meals. It seemed like we transitioned into that mode, but it seemed to work out. Simplified it I guess for us, so yeah, other than a little commute to our gear. That answer your question?

AG: And was there any kind of changes that you saw that transpired from when you first started going out in 1980 until let's say '89, which was a big marker year in Alaska's history?



Mark and crew in the picking skiff, July 2015, P-1000-7-20.

MB: Were there any changes in '80 and '89?

AG: Yeah. And maybe gear or people?

SB: Prices.

MB: I guess I don't remember it. There could be. I guess I don't remember a big change. I guess I remember more change after that in regards to quality of the fish, taking care of things better, I think, in the '90s.

AG: [...] How was it in the '80s?

MB: Yeah there was obviously no ice involved, refrigeration. We would just burlap you know over the top of our fish and wait for a tender to show up and you know quality fish probably wasn't there compared to anywhere near what it is today. So yeah. You know now we're slushing all our fish right when they come out of the water and we're delivering three times a day, so it's, you know, it's pretty solid quality fish now. Night and day compared to what it used to be in the '80s.

SB: Your skiffs were totally different.

MB: Yeah.

SB: Went from wooden to aluminum. That was a big deal.

AG: When was that?

MB: Transitioned to aluminum skiffs? Probably in the late '80s, I would say. So that transition happened so. There's a lot of things that started happening in that timeline from people converting

to, you know, just over the side with a wooden skiff using picking bars, using rollers, aluminum [skiffs], [pressure washers help], streamlining operations, so.

AG: When did you start using the roller?

MB: Oh boy, probably say early '90s.

AG: Oh okay.

MB: So yeah. So we're a little slow to make the jump, but trying to drag our feet a little bit.

SB: Until I came along. I was like, why are we double handling fish? Why are we not using a roller? You see other people go by.

AG: You brought the innovations, huh?

SB: I did. Okay guys, let's work smarter, not harder.

[...]

AG: Okay, okay. So tell me about when you first came up, Sheila.

SB: So in the cannery or like when I started in the cannery?

AG: If that was the first time.

SB: That was the first time yeah. So I had a job at the cannery and like Mark said, he'd lived in the white house next to the cannery, so [I] saw him there on a regular basis, but worked my summers up here. And I remember to get up here I had to raise enough money to pay for my airplane ticket 'cause my parents didn't really want me to come. Well, my mom didn't really want me to come up so I roofed. [...] I did a roofing job for one month after high school, got out, and it was [...] two twelve-plex apartment buildings that were two stories, and not a nail gun, but just hammer and nail in summer in Oregon, and made enough money to buy my airplane ticket up here and went to work in the cannery. And when I landed here, I went to work that night and worked through the night and the sun came, you know, didn't go down that much anyway, first of July I think. I was like, "Oh my gosh, what have I got myself into?" [...] I don't know, after a while I ended up really liking it and it was fun in a way. Like a lot of the cannery workers at that time were from colleges so we were from Oregon State and there's a big group from Michigan and another group from Idaho and we were all the same age and it was fun and Mark's cousins were here and worked there and.

AG: What was the first year that you were here again?

SB: '89.

MB: Exxon year.

SB: Yeah so.

MB: So Bristol Bay.

SB: There was no fishing out here. These guys were all shut down [west side fishermen], but we did some custom canning finally. And other than that [...] we had the thing called the dipper at the time which was, was rust bucket thing with-

MB: Freezing operation.

SB: Yeah it was a freezing operation where we actually dipped the fish and they would try to like freeze them quickly in cases to keep them as fresh as they could.

[End of interview]