



Mark Thissen

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: Mark Thissen and wife, Kelly Law, at Larsen Bay on June 13, 2015. Photographed by Breanna Peterson for West Side Stories. P-1000-7-231.

Oral History of Mark Thissen

AG: [...] So it's June 13, 2015, and I'm at the Larsen Bay Mercantile in Larsen Bay, Alaska. This is the West Side Stories project and this is Anjuli Grantham. To begin with, could you please introduce yourself, tell me your name and when and where were you born?

MT: Okay, I'm Mark Thissen. That's spelled T-h-i-s-s-e-n. And I was born in Minnesota, in North Mankato, Minnesota in 1957.

AG: There's all sorts of Mankato people that made it up to Kodiak.

MT: There are a ton of people. And I'm pretty sure it started right around my family.

AG: Tell me about that, please.

MT: Well I [...] got nine siblings, and my second oldest sister came up to work in floating processors.

AG: Who was that?

MT: Connie Thissen was her name at the time. [...] She was traveling with a friend and they ended up in Kodiak, working at a land plant in Kodiak and then subsequently started inviting [...] her younger brothers up, my older brothers, and they started working in the canneries. And then word kind of spread in Mankato that there was something different out there, than being in Mankato. *(laughter)*

AG: What did you hear of Kodiak?

MT: When I was younger? Just that it was ocean, island, lots of fishing, cannery work and such. And I first came up [...] right after eighth grade, so it would have been [...] right around 1971 or '72. It would have been my first summer. I stayed with my brother and that was my first summer. It was eighth grade.

AG: What did you do?

MT: Well let's see. [...] I worked in the cannery but I was only 14, so they let me go eventually because I couldn't prove I was 16. And then I went downtown and I pumped gas at the Chevron station downtown at the time, and I pumped gas for the rest of the summer.

AG: What cannery was that?

MT: It was the *Pacific Pearl*. And I was too young to work there. So I don't know if you want to put that or not.

AG: What was your first impression of Kodiak coming as a child pretty much?

MT: It was fascinating because my brother had a trailer out at TT Jackson's. It was right on the beach. Of course, Kodiak was much smaller back then. It was a beautiful little trailer right on the beach and I instantly fell in love. The ocean was right there, which I hadn't been around much. You know it was exploratory to me. It was building rafts and sailing rafts out to Near Island and Woody Island and such.



The *Pacific Pearl*. P-837-36-60.

(Brief interruption due to recording device)

MT: Yeah, so it was adventure time, and then having a job and working. So that was my first summer, and I would come up about every other summer until I graduated from high school.

AG: So when you were sixteen did you finally legally work in the cannery or what did you do?

MT: I did. I finally legally worked in the cannery that particular summer. And then I think I worked again when I was eighteen in canneries, and then I went to college for a year and a half and I came back up and [...] I took a year off to go fishing when I was twenty, but I never went back to school. I just did twenty years of fishing and other things.

AG: I'd like to get back to that, but first could you maybe tell me which canneries you worked at and what you did at those canneries as a teenager?

MT: Well, let's see. I worked at what do they call it? [...] There's a hydraulic shop and then there was another like a bunkhouse building across the street. I'm trying to think of it's—

AG: Like where Ocean Beauty is now maybe?

MT: Yeah, Ocean Beauty, but I can't remember the name of the specific cannery that it was at the time.

AG: That's fine.

MT: It was like new at the time so, but whatever that cannery was back in the late '70s [...].

AG: And what sort of work did you do?

MT: Just processing, like butchering crab to unloading boats to put herring in boxes and working in the freezers and such. Kind of a variety of stuff.

AG: And so it wasn't salmon?

MT: I did very little salmon it seemed like, but it wasn't long, and when I became twenty I started fishing so then I was working with salmon.

AG: Okay.

MT: Tendering and crabbing.

AG: So what inspired you to come back to Alaska time and time again as a young man to pursue this life?

MT: Oh just the fascination. I came from Minnesota and well, there was work opportunities. I knew I could get work, and then the other thing was just the fascination with the ocean and the beauty of Kodiak and the weather realm of life that an ocean could introduce to you living by an ocean. Just the fascination of that [...] and also the work and then you knew a lot of people. Like there was a lot of people from Mankato, so you had a lot of camaraderie just built right into being in Kodiak.

AG: Tell me about your first fishing job.

MT: My first fishing job, it was on the *Numivak*. It was a power scow, and [...] I think the very first job I had on there was tendering salmon and that led into a king crab job.

AG: What year was that?

MT: As a green horn that would have been, let's see. I think it would have been '79, 1979. My first year fishing.

AG: And you just [...] at the end of the tendering season started with king crab?

MT: With king crab yeah, and then like a lot of people I subsequently got other jobs as well.

AG: So who was on the *Numivak* with you?

MT: Let's see, the boat was run by Robin Reed and he owned the boat, and I think he partly owned it with Blake Kinnear, Sr. You might have heard that name. It's a long time industry. So Robin [...] was part owner and also was Marcus Levenson. Marcus from the *Sea Dream* which I've fished down through a dozen years or something.

AG: Oh nice. My mom, Pam, was best friends with Joanie.

MT: Oh really, oh really, okay. So yeah I grew up and knew Joanie. We were real close. I mean obviously family, Greggy, Malisa. [...] So yeah after the *Numivak*, Marcus bought the *St. Mary II* which [...] we used to dungy fish with it, halibut fish, and even crab fish. It was like a thirty-two foot boat. So I fished down there afterwards and then he subsequently bought the *Sea Dream* which I think they still have. And so fished was Marcus for at least a dozen years and Levvy, Levvy's his brother.

AG: Are they Mankato boys, too?

MT: No, they're Ann Arbor, Michigan.

AG: Okay.

MT: Mid-westerners. Farmer just like me.

AG: You came from a farming family?

MT: No, well actually yeah. My dad sold farm machinery implements, like John Deere dealer, but all my aunts and uncles were from the farm.

AG: Did you find any similarity between kind of that farming lifestyle and what you found in Kodiak?

MT: I don't know. I guess yeah. If you call like working with the land or working directly with the land then working directly with the ocean or whatever you wanna call it, yeah, there's some real similarities for sure in that kind of work.

AG: If you would, please tell me about when you made the decision to stop going to college and to start fishing year round. What prompted that decision?

MT: Well, it's funny because [...] in my heart I was always thinking biology, get a job outdoors. Would've been the perfect type of candidate to be a Fish and Game biologist or NMFS or something like that or even if I stayed in Minnesota, some kind of outdoor job. I always wanted to work outdoors 'cause I was crazy about being outdoors, but fishing just filled that better than probably a Fish and Game job would do. I don't know. So you're right there and seeing all the island and everything, and so and then I was always real athletic and liked hard work and stuff. It all fit together.

AG: What did your family think of it?

MT: I had a couple brothers up here that fished as well and they worked the canneries and eventually went fishing. So that was all fine for the family back home. [...] They were just curious I guess, about what we're all doing up here. So they eventually started coming up to visit, and I think they understood why we liked it so much.

AG: When was it that you first voyaged to the west side?

MT: The west side, let's see. Well, I'm trying to think. Probably tendering. You know we used to come out and tender for the canneries and then we'd maybe sit at Harvester Island out here without even coming into Larsen Bay, pick up fish in Uganik, places like that, go up to Malina Bay, all on the west side and Halibut Bay. I'm kinda familiar a bit with the west side on that level from tendering mostly.

AG: Who were you tendering for?

MT: Let's see. The *Numivak*. Before I run into trouble again, I think we did king crab back then tendered for the cannery and then subsequently like with the *Sea Dream* and then we were APS.

AG: So I'm curious, this question just came to me. Tendering, I always think of salmon. Was there tendering for any other fisheries?

MT: Well, just a little bit. It's mostly salmon 'cause [...] that's how the canneries would operate. Your crabbers in the winter [...] would sit dormant the rest of the summer unless they hauled fish, so they were naturals for hauling fish. What was the original question again?

AG: Tendering, was it just for salmon or did you—?

MT: Yeah. Generally, it was salmon and then there was like with the *Sea Dream* in their case, we did some tendering for herring in the spring months even out here.

AG: And so when would one decide to tender instead of fish?

MT: Well for one thing, like in my case, I would like crabbing in the winter and sometimes you'd be required to tender the summers so you can have a crab job in the fall [...]. That was a large part of it, was one job led into the other, [...] and now the boats, big boats, anyways. So that was my primary reason for doing that because if I went and got a job with a salmon boat and it wasn't affiliated with the crabber, there's a good chance I might not have a crab job lined up in the fall. So they kinda went together.

AG: Were you still fishing crab when there was the bust in the industry?

MT: [...] You mean when king crab disappeared? Yeah, I think I got in on the last five years or so of king crab and then [...] all of a sudden they didn't open it again.

AG: Could you describe what people thought of that at the time?

MT: Well, I think a lot of people, it kind of displaced them in terms of people that fished locally anyway, and then of course a lot of deckhands that would fish around Kodiak they started gravitating to fishing out west [...] in the fall [...] and boats as well. Boats from Kodiak started venturing more and more west, you know, especially as the quotas went down over the years and [...] when it subsequently disappeared. So, you know I remember going out west to fish on the *Lin J*, for example, you know, and crabbing 'cause there's nothing around Kodiak. Even the collapse of the tanner crab fishery, you know, snow crab, tanner crab that eventually collapsed, too, a few years later so there really wasn't much crab to fish.

AG: What sort of causes did people give at the time for the collapse?

MT: Well, of course there was always talk about overfishing. I know there was a lot of talk about possible diseases and there was also water temperature changes and supposedly crab were real suspect to water temperature changes, so I don't know.

AG: What was the most popular theory at the time?

MT: Yeah, you know it's funny 'cause [...] I used to know Guy Powell, you know, fairly well, and he'd usually come down to the boat when we came into town and visit and stuff and it just, in my mind, it sounded like maybe some kind of disease going through the king crab population, [...] and then I thought well, I don't know. I always thought in my mind I always thought it was over fishing, you know, just so many crab pots landing everywhere, you know, and just the crab not able to regenerate fast enough and, of course, there was predators, too. Eventually you started halibut fishing and then when you were cleaning halibut, you know, we started halibut fishing eventually after the collapse of crab and, you know, maybe got a halibut, you know, on deck and you'd always look at that or always look inside the stomach and you'd find little king crab or little tanner crab in

there, so you know predators, too [...]. As far as the most popular theory I guess I was thinking at the time was overfishing, yeah.

AG: Well it's when you see the numbers of, I mean the millions of pounds that were brought to Kodiak, it's just almost dumbfounding.

MT: Yeah I know. It's crazy 'cause like I was telling you, my second oldest sister she eventually married a king crab fisherman back in the day, you know. It's just amazing that he was in on the very roots of it, you know, where they were just going out and they'd fill up the boat in a day.

AG: Who was that?

MT: Roy Drakey was his name and he actually fished on deck with Jim Fogle. And you know Phil Fogle? His dad. And his dad [...] eventually ran boats, so this was on the original *Invincible* and [...] we called him Fogie, Jim Fogle Sr., and he was actually on deck back in those days and eventually went on to run the *Invincible* years later, and Phil was a little kid running around on the boat. So.

AG: So how did the bust of the crab industry impact your life?

MT: Well, [...] I went out west. I didn't go out west a lot. I wasn't crazy about going out west, but I did some years out there and trips out there and I also started doing more work on shore and that was like construction. So I do construction work in the winter working for a friend and even some legislative duties. I worked as a legislative aid for a couple years in Juneau.

AG: For who?

MT: Cliff Davidson back in the day. Would have been 1990s. Right after the oil spill. 1990, 1991, and I think I worked '92 with them as well.

AG: [...] Was there any sort of kind of feed back loop between fishing and politics for you? Your personal politics?

MT: Oh did it affect it? My personal politics? To a certain extent yeah.

AG: In what ways do you think?

MT: Well, just being more knowledgeable about, you know, about the political scene and [...] who were the players and what effect they had, you know, and who had the power and, you know, and things like that. You know, learning about the North Pacific Management Council and how much power they had and who, you know, all that. Yeah it brings it to the fore when you're working for somebody who deals with these, you know, different groups that they come in and everything, you know. And made you realize too because when I worked for Cliff, he was co-chair of the house resources committee and it's just fascinating, at least at that time and I'm sure it still is, how amazing Alaska politics is. How active it is because of all the resources we have, fisheries, oil, mining, and as far as resources and stuff compared to other states down south, you know, it's quite a political state really on those levels.

AG: It's true. I'm always shocked. I mean, it's interesting how political decisions impact daily life.

MT: Yeah exactly.

AG: I mean I think they do everywhere, but it's much more apparent in resource-dependending communities.

MT: Yeah, for example, I mean the big impact was when IFQs came in, Individual Fishing Quotas, and I was right there for that watching all that [...]. There was a lot of upset people and especially

deckhands that might have fished for somebody for years are all of a sudden displaced and you know. You can see the pros and cons. I mean they're there. There was definitely a lot of good things about going to IFQs instead of the derbies, you know, but on the other hand it did displace a lot of deck hands that, you know, would rely on that, and you know I was the same and I wouldn't necessarily benefit from IFQS coming in personally because if let's say you had worked for a boat and all of a sudden they could take their time fishing the same quota, pick their weather, they would need less deckhands, so just do it on their own. You couldn't blame them, you know and so, but I luckily moved on to other things by then anyway.

AG: What was it you said you were right there for that. What do you mean by that?

MT: Oh right there when the decision changed and I was actually [...] in the legislature that was [...] I think it was pushed at the time by uh—. Wally Hickel had become governor for the second round and while we were in Juneau and Clem Tillion was his fish tsar and he really pushed the IFQ thing. Yeah, I remember having a funny feeling. I remember that was in the state office and took down the elevator and they happened to be on the elevator right after that decision. I kept my mouth shut, but I was like you know [...]. Like I say, there was a lot of anger at time on the part of the fisherman.

AG: So you were an aide at the time of the decision?

MT: Yeah.

AG: Okay. And so as a result then you fielded a lot of phone calls and mail.

MT: Yeah, it was a very contentious issue because in Kodiak, Kodiak was always the fisheries. There, people liked, at that time especially, open access to fisheries. They didn't like limitations on who could fish and how much and you know I've given up the share, I mean for many people [...] There was a lot of people, I'm sure, that were in favor of IFQs and for good reasons, but like I say there was definitely an argument there that was worth having, [...] and Kodiak it had always been real independent in terms of wanting to have open access to fishes. They didn't like the idea that certain boats could go fish something all of a sudden and other boats couldn't because they weren't grandfathered in or for whatever reasons. So that was the real big vibe at the time and so that's why Kodiak was a major opposition to IFQs at that time in the fisheries, so.

AG: However, [...] since it was a decision of IPHC how much impact could the state have really had on the decision? Was there some opportunity? I'm just trying to figure this out.

MT: Oh like at from our level?

AG: Um-huh.

MT: Yeah it was definitely hard to fight, you know. I can't remember the exact mechanics of it, but it was, you know opposition didn't necessarily mean you were gonna get anywhere. There was pretty much strong holded over, you know, by a certain group of people and it became the reality.

AG: What were the major proponents [...]—

MT: Of IFQs? Well Clem Tillion. He worked for the government, Governor Hickel at the time. He was the major and very controversial figure at the time, you know, and so yeah he was the main guy pushing it for the state level.

AG: Even though there was a lot of controversy at the state level?

MT: Oh yes, absolutely, and at the local Kodiak level. There was huge protests and boats parading through. Yeah, I remember being part of that, you know, and protests through the town and stuff, so it was pretty contentious issue.

AG: Can you remember when the decision was made and your reaction and the reaction of those around you?

MT: I'm trying to think. I just remember [...] I had the feeling that yeah well a lot of people would be out of work now. It would be good for some people, especially boat owners, but it would be really tough on deckhands that had depended, like myself, on the income. Just even a few days in here halibut was a good payer, you know, even during the derby system, and so from that level it was hard for people to see. I mean like the positive side is that you got fresher fish on the market and coming out of the market not just all once, where you have, you know, some fresh comes out and a lot of it gets frozen 'cause it's caught in three days of the year. Instead it was good for the market place on that level. Safer. You could go out, pick your weather, you know, so the pros were definitely there, but that was hard to see when a lot of people, especially deckhands, would be displaced.

AG: And how did that decision impact you?

MT: Well, I had basically kinda moved on by then anyway and was doing less and less fishing so, but [...] if I would've wanted to go get a job it'd been harder to find, I know that, yeah, even though I had a lot of experience with it.

AG: Were you involved with the Exxon Valdez Oil Spill at all? Were you here?

MT: I was. It was the first time I actually spent time in Larsen Bay. [...] The boat I was on, the *Sea Dream*, at the time was hired by VECO to come out, and we actually towed a Navy skimmer out in the bay here and we'd come tie up at night in Larsen Bay. So first time ever really.

AG: Could you describe that season?

MT: Well, it was different. [...] Typically we would tender salmon and then we subsequently got hired by VECO and basically had a very similar season. I got paid about the same as I would for tendering, so it was about the same for me only you were just towing around the skimmer, Navy skimmer, and doing other functions you know during the rest of the year so. It was pretty much the same as salmon tendering.

AG: What was your impression of coming to Larsen Bay for the first time?

MT: Well, I thought it was real interesting. [...] We'd tie up at the dock at night and walk around and [...] of course they had a full cannery crew here doing whatever you know cannery crew would do without actually having fish, so I think they were doing a lot of maintenance and stuff. And I don't remember specifically a lot about what was going on here other than it was a lot of volleyball games and, you know, come in and play volleyball or just walk around, you know, the village or the cannery a little bit. Check it out. So yeah a whole new thing, but no fish.

AG: What was the Navy skimmer?

MT: Well, they were special oil skimmers that [...] you'd tow behind the boat and try to tow down maybe a line of mousse or oil on the water and [...] we'd literally tow this thing. It had a little ramp that would, you know, you'd run and you would feed it into a hole on the front of the skimmer, so it was like a little belt or a elevator belt basically, but submerged in the water that would, you know, take the mousse and kelp and you'd bag that up [...] as refuse I guess.

AG: What would happen to the bags?

MT: Oh they would get bagged up and then taken to town I guess to Kodiak.

AG: So was Larsen Bay kind of a staging ground then for west side cleanup activities or how did that operation work?

MT: I don't think they were. [...] We were a little bit independent, but there was other boats in the bay that were, you know, doing other type of clean up and stuff. And I remember a lot of it was staged up on Afognak which I think got hit the hardest, but I can't remember if—. I don't think Larsen Bay was specifically staging area, but I don't know for sure [...].

AG: Did you—

MT: I just kinda did my job and didn't pay much attention to the rest of it so.

AG: Did you interact with other of the cleanup operations at all or?

MT: A little bit [...] especially up on Afognak. Here we were kind of independent and up there I think we just staged this as a boat to haul bagged stuff back to town you know like a tender for soiled rags and rocks and what not, so yeah.

AG: Could you describe the impact of the spill physically within this area?

MT: [...] It didn't seem heavy-heavy here like it did in other places, you know, and I can't really speak to that 'cause I didn't spend a lot of time on shore, you know. Maybe a setnetter would know more about what their beaches looked like because here we were just concentrating out in the middle of the bay trying to find oil, but so I couldn't speak to that. Although I know up on some of the places we went to in Afognak there'd be pretty heavy oil on the beaches and that was a little more obvious up there to me, yeah.

AG: [...] What were you thinking at the time about what had happened? If you were to transport yourself back to your mind in 1989, what sort of thoughts and emotions did you have towards the event?

MT: Oh yeah. I remember a friend of mine came up to visit and he was actually the one that told me about it. [...] He was a writer and he flew up to be in the Pillar Mountain Classic. Writer, golfer. It's interesting now because he's a golf editor for magazines, but anyway he came up and he's the one that told me because I can't remember the exact day, but it was a little bit before Easter maybe years ago. I can't remember. Is that right?

AG: It was Good Friday.

MT: Yeah, right. Yeah so [...] he came up right about then and then he's the one who let me know. "Oh, okay." Start paying attention, but which made me think holy cow [...], but [...] at first I didn't know how it affected, you know, thought maybe it'd just stay in Prince William Sound and that we'd be at the whims of the weather. And then I did start subsequently going up to some of the meetings that they held. I think the city was holding meetings and I remember Bob Stanford from Island Air standing up and saying, "Hey, it's coming. It's coming this way," you know, and so that's when you first thought, "Oh wow, this really could affect us," you know. And then I remember walking on the beach up what's Spruce Cape beach up there? I went on a walk one day [...] with my then future wife, Kelly Law, and we're walking along and we saw some mousse on the beach and that was first we'd seen. Was just out for a little walk and you look down, "Oh. Oh okay. It's here." So [...] that's a little bit of a sinking feeling because you know this is gonna affect the fishery somehow, you know, and you start thinking about salmon [...] you think wow it [...] might not affect the salmon unless it gets in the stream, but you can't set a net, a beautiful net, in a pile of mousse and that's not gonna be okay, so yeah it was a little bit of a sinking feeling I think in terms of [...] will I have a job this

summer, you know, typically go halibut fishing, herring tendering, salmon tendering and how it affects all that so. A little scary at first.

AG: What happened then after the tender season ended which was pretty much the clean up season I guess?

MT: Yeah. What did I do that fall? I think I went traveling that fall. I think I went south yeah and then I can't remember and then I did get the [...] legislative job and then of course a lot of that was dealing with the oil spill legislation in Juneau which was a very interesting time of course.

AG: Yes definitely.

MT: Yeah a lot of people from the oil industry hanging around the legislature you know, so.

AG: Yes.

MT: Lobbyists.

AG: What sort of conflicts were there?

MT: Well, [...] I guess basically it's about the responsibility for cleanup and things like that and how to deal with an oil spill because I don't know if you read much about it yourself, but there was a lot of question of what to do, you know, in the case of an oil spill. We finally had one so it was there and [...] so it kinda became dealing with a little bit like in terms of like responsibility for who's gonna pay for the cleanup, and who's gonna do the cleanup, and a lot of those questions were being addressed. Yeah, you know, and you know a lot of people were angry, fisherman were angry. A lot of people also knew that, you know, Alaska's highly dependent, you know, especially at that time, I think the state government was funded like eighty-five percent at the time maybe from oil revenues, you know, so there's that factor in there, you know so. So it was pretty interesting times for sure. A lot of contention, yeah, and then by a lot of, you know, a lot of wise people I ask them the question how do we best handle this, how do we best handle it for the future? What if it happens again and things like that. So I think hopefully some lessons were learned you know, but I've been out of the state now for about fifteen years and so I don't know where a lot of that's at you know, but just by virtue of not being here, just coming up in the summers now.

AG: So you said that '89 was the first time that you came up to Larsen Bay. What were some subsequent reasons that you came out and came to purchase this place [Larsen's Mercantile]?

MT: Oh this, yeah [...] the mercantile came up so this is year twenty-one, my wife, Kelly Law, was running KMXT for like seven or eight years or something like that and she felt there was time to move on, do something different so and [...] Kraft's family, they had the main store in town which [...] subsequently became the AC building downtown, that was Kraft's so and that's where everybody shopped. That was the one grocer in town and so that family business had grown. Kraft's had, I think they had a liquor store down in cannery row and [...] dry cleaners, the one out by Spenards or somewhere there's like one of those, but they also had a satellite store in Chignik and one in Larsen Bay. So we ended up finding out about this one and when this went up for sale through them, we bought the rights to have the business here twenty-one years ago.

AG: Why?

MT: Just something different, you know. It was Alaska, almost like a little adventure, be seasonal, open about three months, and [...] Kelly just wanted a new challenge, so there it was.



Larsen's Mercantile. P-1000-7-223.

AG: Did you have experience in retail?

MT: I didn't have any. She did. I mean she's very accountant type. In fact, she's a CPA now and very accountant minded and grew up with it, bit of a business background. So it was a natural fit for her to come around the store, and I was still fishing at the time so I would just come up and help set up in [...] May and set up the store and then I would go fishing for two and a half months and I'd come back out and help close up, so you know, I might not see her for two and a half months, but yeah.

AG: Had you spent much time in Larsen Bay before purchasing the store?

MT: Just the time from the oil spill and a little bit of tendering herring just in the bay. And one moment I actually remember was over here tendering we were actually taking fish from herring. Guess it would have been April or something, you know, and I remember they actually had planes flying right over here, you know, where the buoys are, where you come into Larsen Bay right out in front here. There was a couple planes flying and people fishing right out there and I remember somebody said, "Wow, look at that," and we looked and a couple planes had collided

and the plane went down right into about twenty foot of water into a sandbar and the pilot subsequently died. The herring spotting accident, or whatever, and I can't even remember the year, but that, of course, a very memorable because somebody died and one of the tenders at the time, [...] I think they dove down and got the guy out of the plane, but they weren't able to resuscitate him.

AG: Wow.

MT: Yeah.

AG: What happened to the other plane?

MT: I think that guy, the other plane was alright. [...] I think it was one of those things where a couple of wings, one tipped another, it affected one plane but not the other. It was flying too close together and one didn't see the other so, but it turned into a tragic accident and, of course, with that pilot, and I can't remember the pilot's name. I didn't know him. He didn't die.

AG: What did you do when you saw the collision?

MT: Well, I was literally like taking fish in a brailer, you know, bringing them aboard, look over quick and it's like, "Oh my gosh," and I saw this plane go into the water at the last second, you know, [...] and that was like up into the wheelhouse and we realized there was boats on the scene so there was no need to go over and help. Plenty of people there, so yeah, it's kind of like just a gulp situation. Hope that everybody would be alright and they'd rescue whoever was in the plane, but they didn't or couldn't.

AG: That's tragedy.

MT: Yeah, Coast Guard involved, of course.

AG: Would you deliver the herring to town or to one of the—?

MT: Town.

AG: Okay.

MT: Yeah we were. Yeah we would go back to Kodiak.

AG: Yeah because I know that the Zachar Bay plant for awhile was a herring production plant and.

MT: Yeah, yeah.

AG: So.

MT: I do have one interesting story. You've probably heard of Parks Cannery? Back, I think it must have been like '79, I was actually on a boat called the *Belair*. Also early in my career. I might have been twenty-one, twenty-two. Actually worked there I think the last year that that cannery operated by Gary Wiggins was his name, and that's a fascinating place in itself, Park Cannery. I think it was the last year it actually operated ever, and so I actually tendered there for them and that was back in the fish ladder days and yeah we probably tendered there, I don't know, forty days or something for them doing salmon in the bay, so that was another experience for this area. And I remember going into the cannery and the little store there. in fact, there's a gal over here. Have you heard of Jennifer? She grew up there. She was Gary Wiggin's daughter so [...] she might have a wealth of information. She grew up there.

AG: At Parks?

MT: In summers, yeah, she spent some summers up there. And she's actually, it's interesting 'cause she came back last year to cook for the Kodiak Lodge where my daughter's working this year, my fifteen year old daughter, and they hired her to be a maid, and so anyway, Jennifer, I don't know, maybe she'd be interested talking to her she would know a lot of history about that cannery perhaps. Yeah and have you heard of Steel Davis?

AG: I've heard of him, but I have not met him yet.

MT: Yeah, he's actually the caretaker of that place yeah and he's a guide, local guide, so yeah.

AG: What do you remember of the cannery from that summer?

MT: Well I remember the little store. I remember the store guy going in the back and said, "You got any veggies or anything?" He said, "Yeah I got some cabbage," and went in the back and he was gone a couple minutes, came back peeling a black piece of cabbage, but it looked nice inside. It was like whatever, you know, we'll have coleslaw, but I remember that little store. And the little store still has the same stuff on the shelves to this day, you know, "cause this is what, thirty about thirty-five years later, yeah 'cause it was 1980 right around them was the last time it operated. [...] I remember taking banyas there. They had a little banya right by a little stream that came down this, you know,

the mountains are right there so the steam came down. I remember going in and taking banyas, breaks, and in just a tight little place. There wasn't a lot of places to walk, just one of those tight little canneries butted up against the mountains, you know so. Charmed to it, you know, for sure, yeah.

AG: It's a nice place.

MT: Yeah.

AG: I've walked a round before, but I'm hoping I can make it out there this summer, too.

MT: Yeah, be a good place to go, yeah. It's getting quite old now, but you could probably, if you get to know Steel, maybe he can show you around a little bit, yeah.

AG: So when you purchased the mercantile, did you change the name?

MT: Nope. Stayed Larsen Bay Mercantile. It's actually Larsen's Mercantile so that's what the sign says out front, but I think, I'm trying to think, I think that was the name, was the Larsen Bay Mercantile so we just kept that and.



Larsen's Mercantile employees in 2015. P-1000-7-232.

AG: Do you know did the Krafts' found the store or was it a cannery—?

MT: No, it was a cannery store, and I couldn't even tell you the first year that this place operated. I know there's some local guys that, you know, they might be high sixties, seventy now that were kids in here so yeah so. [...] Course we live in here now and [...] our bathroom, if you go look at our bathroom, it has a little ledger door in the front. That was the original post office in Larsen Bay is our current bathroom for our personal bathroom. So there's a lot of history here, and I couldn't

exactly tell you how the building is. [...] Nobody seems to have the historic knowledge in terms of put it down to a year. It might be something you would find out at in Bellingham in the records. Have you ever dug through there?

AG: Yeah [...]. I can not find decent Larsen Bay records at any—.

MT: It's hard. I understand, but.

AG: Yeah. APA collection is in Juneau and in Bellingham and neither have decent Larsen Bay information.

MT: Yeah, that's what I understand.

AG: Yeah, it's somewhere.

MT: Yeah.

AG: Hopefully. So what sort of reception did you have when you first came to the village and started the store?

MT: I think it was pretty good. We just, you know, just assumed this new ownership, you know, [...] and like I say, I really wasn't here the first three or four years. I was still fishing and then when [...] Kelly and I subsequently had kids that's when we retired from fishing, started spending the full summers here because one of us would have to be with the kids, you know, watching them at all times, so I kind of retired from fishing at that point. So that would have been seventeen years ago when I was forty. I got married when I was thirty-eight, had kids when I was forty, and retired from fishing when I was forty, so but that's when I started here year round [...]. It was good relationship with the locals and fisherman and, you know, you just get to know everybody and now some of these people I've known for twenty years, you know, fisherman, locals, locals' kids that are now older that were little kids in here, you know, so you kind of know everybody. Cannery workers can change, you know, some of them come back, some of them don't come back, and I think there's two people here that were here when we originally came, one being Dexter, I think it's year thirty-eight, and then Scott Ditchman came just about the time we did. I think those were the only two workers that actually are here since we were here.

AG: Who owned the cannery when you started?

MT: Kodiak Salmon Packers and that was Alan Beardsley, who might be a wealth of information as well. Do you know Alan or have you talked to him?

AG: I've spoken with him on the phone before.

MT: Yeah, he's a great guy. He was a really good plant manager. In fact, he had the store here at one time. [...] The way it must have worked, he had the store here, the cannery had sold, he literally walked across and got the cannery started, KSP. Krafts came in here to fill the void and then a few years later, we, you know, would've been about five years later or something, we came in and bought it from Krafts.

AG: What are some of the challenges of operating the store?

MT: Well, location. I mean [...] there's no roads to bring anything so if you run out of something [...] you gotta get it in so, you know, we try to get as much stuff directly from Seattle to keep our cost down. [...] we don't wanna be your typical Alaskan store where things are so expensive, you know, so we've fought hard to keep our costs lower and everything, but it is hard at that. So it's logistics, and you really have to be spot on as far as your ordering. [...] If you miss an order by two

hours it might be two weeks till you can place it again, if you know what I mean, or so you just have to be real diligent about on top of the ordering and organizing the transportation.

AG: How do you do that from Seattle?

MT: Well belly boats, a couple of belly boats in the spring that are at a reasonable rate and then after that you can get the things barged here from Seattle, but they become quite more expensive so I try to get as much as I can up front and that's nowadays. In the old days when we first started, it was great. We had a boat directly from Seattle every three weeks, which was nice, all summer long, so you could space out, you know, what you needed and [...] nowadays [...] we operate more on the crystal ball and hope we get it right.

AG: What changed? Why is there no longer that direct service?

MT: Well that company sold out. They were called Western Pioneer and [...] as a big family business, they'd been doing it for decades, decided to get out of the transportation and the shipping part of their businesses. I guess they have several businesses, Western Pioneer. And they sold their fleet of boats and an outfit out of Seattle, now called Coastal Transportation, bought the boats, but they didn't wanna come here. And then everybody in the community petitioned them to come in [...] so they come in, but nowadays they have to have a significant amount of weight [...] to make it worthwhile to come in here, so we're a bit out of their way and so we're lucky to get them twice a year. So which has changed things dramatically.

AG: Could you maybe give me a sense of what it takes to open the store at the beginning of the season?



Larsen's Mercantile. P-1000-7-234.

MT: Well, I mean it's literally boarded up, the windows, everything's turned off, store's pretty much empty, so you literally come in, open the door, turn the heat on, turn the water on, take the boards off the windows, get your coolers and freezers running, clean like crazy after a winter, and then deliver the product and start the process all over again. So the stores literally pretty much empty all winter except just a few items and so it's just starting from scratch every year kind of.

AG: And what about to leave?

MT: To leave it's very similar. [...] At the end we have a bake sale, it's mostly local people come down, and we donate a lot of leftover stuff to the school every year. And then it's winterizing again and packing things up and boarding up the windows, turning off the water, all the type of stuff [...] and then it sits here all winter pretty much empty.

AG: So what are the most popular items?

MT: Let's see. Well, obviously cigarettes, tobacco, a lot of comfort foods, ice cream. We have soft serve ice cream that's very popular. A lot of people know about it island-wide, and yeah just comfort foods and then essentials for boats and the locals and stuff like that. But yeah, tobacco's king. People need their tobacco and energy drinks.

AG: You know what's funny is that I spent a lot of time looking at old store logs from like AC like from 1900. Tobacco was king then, too.

MT: Oh yeah. I know, and it's so funny because I think it's part of the Alaskan experience. I've had people come in and say, "I haven't smoked in five years. I'll take a pack of cigarettes, please." You look like, "What?" [...] I think people might smoke here or something or just part of the hanging out type thing. [...] It's funny, but I sell a lot of tobacco.

AG: How has the relationship been over time with the cannery?

MT: Very, very good. They own the building and so we lease from them, so we're an independent entity. We're not employees and stuff, but we've always had a great relationship with [...] first with Kodiak Salmon Packers and then Icicle. It's like we're a team without actually being. I mean, we're not Icicle and they're not us, but it's been a really good relationship. And so I do whatever I can for them, they do whatever they can for me, and it's generally been really good.

AG: What sort of transitions have you seen over time in the cannery work force?

MT: Well, [...] of course they've always done canning, but we watched the freeze portion of it develop and then the fresh runs in the beginning of the season. They do fresh fish and they get sent to the mainland and flown to markets down south, and so that's been a transition. Then a lot more frozen fish fillet line. They now have a fillet line in the last five or six years and a little more value added here, less canning, but still canning. I'd say the frozen portion of it's been major transformation.

AG: How about in the workers?

MT: And a lot more workers because of it because there's more value added now. Here the work force, like Icicle that hires a lot more people than Salmon Packers used to, but Salmon Packers was growing as they went more and more into the freeze market, too. They were gradually bumping [...] their numbers up over the years. So there's a lot more workers. And the other transformation, too, is it has to be before that, and then when Icicle took over [...] what was the J-1 [visa] program was still in effect up until what, three years ago, nixed it, so they say it's on hold now. So that was a big transformation because they had, I don't know, they could more accurately tell you over there,

seemed like thirty to forty percent of the work force here was the foreign kids, college age kids that would come over and work and so that's all been Americanized now. That's a big change.

AG: [...] Was that change appreciated or not, do you think?

MT: [...] Well it was interesting when it first happened, when they announced that [...] the program was gonna be put on hold and reviewed at the time. Alaska went into an uproar because it was [...] coming up on the salmon season and they were hoping to have all these foreigners which meant they had to find a bunch of other workers quick. So all these processors from around the state, I guess, they got together and lobbied and got another year granted to the seafood industry in Alaska, well-knowing that next year would probably be put on hold it was, but for that year I think they were allowed to have the people they had lined up to come in. So there was a little bit of an uproar from their angle.

AG: I'm curious what it's like to spend so many hours over the course of a year within a contained space.

MT: Oh here?

AG: Yes.

MT: It's nice. Like for instance, last night, we have a skiff, and so we've got that in the water and we closed the shop last night and I took the two girls that we have working here from Kodiak and my daughter and our dog and we went up to the head of the bay and built a fire and just like, "Ahhh," and it was so nice last night. I think I was in my barefoot on the beach at eleven last night basking in the sun and going with the fire. and so that is nice to get out and go fishing or just to go to the post office or go for a little walk or whatever. 'Cause I'm here from April 20 and I work every day until I leave here about September 17, so I get every single day here and we're open about eleven and a half hours a day. Speaking of which, I don't know, do you know, do you have the time?

AG: I'm sure, we're talking for a long time.

MT: I guess.

AG: It's almost noon.

MT: Oh okay, so I just need to let the girls go at noon to eat.

AG: Okay, well I think we're almost done anyways.

MT: Okay.

AG: [...] I am so struck that this place is so historic.

MT: I know, yeah, it is. It's wonderful. [...] My wife, she was a Star Trek fan, and I don't know which one it was, which Star Trek, but she says it's like going back in time or what Star Trek they call it holodeck experience. You know what a halodeck is? You program in, it's like this little room and then it replicates the wild west or something and [...] in this case you replicate an old cannery that's 105 years old now or whatever the year we're in and so it's just like going into the past so it's like working in a museum kind of.

AG: Do you have some old merchandise?

MT: We probably do. I think [...] we got some stuff we bought originally, but we just leave it on the shelf because, what the heck, it's not food obviously. [...] There's an old sign, and I've always threatened to do those store hours 'cause we've always been 9:00 to 8:30 for twenty years, right?

Someday I'm gonna put that thing up and do it just for a laugh. Just for one day. Nine to ten. Eleven to twelve. That'd be fun.

AG: Revolt.

MT: Yeah. That would be a revolt.

AG: Give me my cigarettes.

MT: What the heck. Yeah. They're always open.

AG: So what do you think is the future of this place?

MT: Well, I know Icicle's for sale. You probably heard that. So you know from our stand point, obviously, we hope somebody buys it that eventually would keep it running and just keep it like it is, and that's the best we can hope for. And we'll probably keep it a few more years. I'm not sure what the game plan is but a few more. Twenty-one so far, but it's been good. Our girls have been able to grow up here since they were babies. [...] This dock out here is where they learned how to walk and ride bikes and drive the skiff and go fishing and so it means a lot to the whole family, even this guy.

AG: Is there anything that I haven't asked you about that you wanted to share?

MT: Boy, trying to think. I think I kind of hit on everything, but if I think of more you can always ask me again.

AG: Has there been any major events in the last twenty-one years aside from the sale of the cannery?

MT: Well, one year [...] the cannery [...], when Salmon Packers, [...], they didn't take fish or the cannery didn't run that summer. I mean the fishermen still fished but they coordinated. They'd get their fish, I think, taken to Alitak or tender the fish and [...] the markets were real bad then, so we didn't operate that summer.

AG: What year was that?

MT: Oh gosh. [...] Emma was a baby. So let's see. Emma's fifteen so must have been around 2000 or 2001, right in there. Another time was we had a pretty good earthquake and that's just because [...] we'd just had that 6.8. This one was seven something, epicenter right by the fifteen miles from the Karluk Lake here, and this place shook. I mean we closed the store for an hour and mopped up the floors. It was a shaker. It was [...] the first time after all these years in Alaska I really felt like vulnerable, and we had to clear out the store, and I mean this place shook for seemed like twenty to thirty seconds. It was really something, but everything was alright. Islands are pretty forgiving I think, but it was quite a rumble and it made the one the other night—. Did you feel it in Kodiak?

AG: No, I didn't feel anything.

MT: 'Cause [...] it went on quite a while here. We had some stuff fall off the shelves, but it was nothing like that one. It really wasn't. The one back then, of which is right about the same time, it might have been the next year. Might have been 2000. We were talking about that. The girls were really little. We had to run out the store. Emma was a baby fourteen years ago, something like that, but that was a shaker. That was memorable.

AG: Any memorable clients?

MT: Course! And that's part of the charm of this place is just the fishermen themselves, as you could imagine, cannery workers. [...] The part we really like is all the characters that come through here

from village elders to people like Jimmy Johnson to Jack Wick, Virginia Stanton, just a series of local people. They're just great and fisherman, as well.

AG: Anyone famous?

MT: Well, Dave Densmore, the poet, and then you got people like the top notch fishermen like Jim Toteff. He's kind of a local legend, and Jerry Gugle on the *Millennium*, and [...] Joe Lindholm, Jr. He's been here for years on the *Sea Star*. Just the amazing amount of people. And there's Dexter [Lorance]. Everybody knows Dexter.

AG: I haven't met him yet.

MT: Yeah, you gotta meet Dexter. And then some of them, you know, Alan Beardsley and Van Johnson who was the superintendent here for years and came back to visit last year. For us, just a lot of that. And then a lot of the cannery workers that we were real close to that have moved on but just great people. Just, it's really fun. I mean it's so fun to get back up here in the spring and hang out with the guys and visit over the winter. That's what I love because the stores not open yet.

AG: Has it worked well for the education of your children or do they usually just come up later when schools done?

MT: Actually, my youngest daughter I'd bring her up. About three years I brought her up and actually would enroll her in the school out here for about a month. The month of May she'd go to school out here. She loved that, but other than that they would go down south and go home in time to go to school, but this has been a great education for them and in and of itself. And they worked the store, and even at young ages they'd help out, run the cash register, whatever.

AG: Great.

MT: Clean.

AG: Well, any final thoughts before you—?

MT: No, I think I'll just leave it at that. I think we're good.

AG: Okay, well thank you so much for your time

MT: And call anytime.



Mark Thissen and Kelly Law cleaning fish. P-1000-7-229.