

Oral History – Dick Kivi
Kenai NWR, Alaska
Interviewer: Diana Thomas
Interview Date 03-17-04
Tape 1

DT: This is Diana Thomas.

DK: This is Dick Kivi. Testing 1-2-3-4. Now all I gotta do is get my brain to work.

DT: Today's date is March 17th. This is Diana Thomas conducting oral history interview with Dick Kivi. Dick's position at the refuge... wildlife refuge at Kenai is...

DK: Heavy equipment operator.

DT: Okay. So we're gonna talk to Dick here.

DK: (Inaudible) I was born in Ironwood, Michigan on May 2, 1942.

DT: And, what about? So were... was that a rural area?

DK: We lived in what they call a township. It was about five miles out of town.

DT: Okay. And what was the name of the town again?

DK: Ironwood, Michigan.

DT: Oh, Ironwood. Yeah, I've been there.

DK: You've been there. I've been there too.

DT: And what were your parents like?

DK: They were hard working. Both of them were Finnish and that is where all of my family lives... lived. My dad, he worked in the logging industry and in the mining industry. He was an iron ore miner. He worked down in the ground about, sometimes they were down close to a mile.

DT: Is that right?

DK: Mining ore, iron ore. And then they just shut everything down. He went to work at a trailer shop for a while and then he retired.

DT: When did they shut the mine down?

DK: Oh, that was in probably in the mid 60's. Right around in there. Right around in the mid 60's.

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DT: And then where did he go to work?

DK: Building house trailers. They had a plant in Michigan, Ironwood there. And, then they just... finally they closed that down and he retired.

DT: How old was he then when he retired?

DK: Probably about 65. Yeah, about 65 when he retired. Then about 15 years ago, we moved him up here and he lived up here until he passed away about three, oh about four years ago. He was 84, a week before their anniversary, their 62nd wedding anniversary.

DT: Oh.

DK: But, he lived a good life.

DT: And what was his name?

DK: Sulo, and my mother's name is Vienna. She is still here. She is 85. She lives in Kenai. I stop to see her every morning on my way to work. I stop and have coffee with her.

DT: Was she a homemaker?

DK: Yes. Well, she worked a little bit, not very much. She worked in a... in a senior housing taking care of senior citizens. Now she is living in senior housing.

DT: Full circle, huh?

DK: Yeah. Last year when she was 84 she had open heart surgery and now she is doing fine. She is going to be going... she's gonna take a trip in May. She's going back east where my sister is in Virginia.

DT: And so how many... You were? How many children in the family altogether?

DK: There were six and there are only four of us left. My oldest sister she...she died about 20 years ago. And then my brother, second youngest brother, he died... he died about four or five years ago. And the rest of them are still... I got one sister in Virginia and two brothers that live out in the Nikiski area. The oldest one, he's retired, from Tesoro. The youngest one, he's... I don't know, he's working for himself. I'm starting to think about retiring from here.

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DT: So would you say that your family was pretty close knit when you were younger?

DK: Pretty close, yeah. We've always been pretty close.

DT: Did you live near extended family in Ironwood also, like other relatives?

DK: Oh yeah. We had so many relatives...

DT: Big family?

DK: Big, yeah. It was a big family. My dad he had 11 sisters and two brothers. I would say that's a big family. And my mother, she had I think there was about six or seven. That's a big family. They always have big families back then.

DT: Did you live on a farm?

DK: Nope.

DT: Or did you live in town, or?

DK: No. We lived about five miles from town, but my... most of my aunts and uncles and my grandfather they had farms. We used to work there all of the time.

DT: When you were growing up?

DK: When I was growing up I was a farmer. Then when I graduated from high school, I come... come here to Alaska three days after I graduated in 1960.

DT: 1960?

DK: Three days after graduation, I was on an airplane heading for Alaska. I have been here ever since.

DT: What were you? What were your interests in when you were younger?

DK: Hunting, fishing, and playing football.

DT: At high school?

DK: In high school, yeah. Well, not in high school. Grade school, I played football. High school I didn't. I was working. I never could find the time to do it. I was always working on a farm.

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DT: For your relatives?

DK: No.

DT: For pay?

DK: For pay.

DT: What kind of farm work did you do?

DK: Making hay, milking cows, typical farm work. (Undecipherable).

DT: Outside all of the time?

DK: Outside all of the time, long hours. And then when I came up here, I started working first off on the Alaska Railroad for three years. Then when I quit there, I was a crane operator. I then I came down to the Kenai Peninsula and worked a little bit of construction and worked for the city of Kenai. Most of it was working with equipment, and then in 1970 I got the job here as a tree crusher operator.

DT: Okay. What was? What other stuff? Did you have any special teachers in high school or anything that kind of struck affinity with?

DK: The only teacher I really liked in high school was my welding teacher.

DT: What was he or she like?

DK: He was... he was super. He was elderly. He was a senior citizen and he was elderly. And that was his interest, teaching kids, and he taught me a lot. He was a good teacher, the only one I really liked in school.

DT: Really?

DK: Yeah. Most of them kind of pushed me too much.

DT: What kind of school did you go to?

DK: It was... Well, it was 10th through 12th with... they had a junior college at that school. So I guess you could say I went through college (inaudible). That's what I tell everybody.

DT: So did you? What? Who taught you to hunt?

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DK: My dad. Yeah, we were always...

DT: And your other brothers?

DK: Yeah, well, I got one... one brother that's older, but we always used to hunt together, all of us boys. It was just the way it worked out.

DT: Yeah. Was it for subsistence, food, or more just for getting together and recreational or?

DK: A little bit of all of it.

DT: What did you hunt?

DK: Down in Michigan we hunted rabbits, grouse, and deer. And then when up here, we went after moose, caribou, grouse, rabbits, and whatever. We used to always... I don't know. It just worked out we always hunted just us boys.

DT: And fishing too, then?

DK: Oh, I forgot the fishing. Didn't... didn't do too much fishing as a kid. Just when I got up here, I started. I got into halibut fishing mainly. That's my favorite.

DT: So was your relationship with your dad fairly close?

DK: Yeah, it was. It was. We seemed to get closer after they got up here. Well, we were older and...

DT: Older and mature?

DK: And then we finally got them to live where we were at.

DT: Sure.

DK: We told them instead of them being down there and us up here, we would get them up here where if they needed help, we could help them and they didn't... and they didn't have to do all of that traveling.

DT: Yeah, exactly.

DK: And they really enjoyed it. We got to do a lot of stuff that we never got to do before.

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DT: So were you really close with your brothers and sisters too or?

DK: Mainly my brothers, because my sisters were back on the east coast. About the only time that we get together is if they come up here now or we talk on the phone, but I think I was closer with my brothers than with my sisters.

DT: Even were you were younger you mean, too?

DK: Yeah.

DT: Because the guys did things together?

DK: Yeah.

DT: So your families all lived in the same area of Ironwood?

DK: Yes, Ironwood and Hurley, Wisconsin. We were right on the border there between the two towns and that's where my grandparents and great grandparents were.

DT: So a lot of family activities?

DK: Oh there was... there was a lot. But we were mostly, when my grandfather was alive, we were always over there working for him.

DT: Did they have a dairy farm or just a regular...?

DK: Well, they had... Yeah, it was a dairy farm. A lot of it was just for their personal use. And one uncle, he had a bunch of cows and they would usually sell the milk, but a lot of it would (undecipherable).

DT: Big farms back then?

DK: Yeah, pretty good size.

DT: What kinds of hobbies did you have as a kid? It sounds like you were working quite a bit.

DK: Well, we were mostly working.

DT: Did you like to read, or?

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DK: Not that much. It seems like every time I start reading something I fall asleep. Must be boring material.

DT: Did you like school?

DK: No.

DT: No?

DK: I would rather be outside doing something.

DT: So you were happiest whether it was hunting.

DK: Oh, yeah.

DT: Or doing something outdoors?

DK: Yeah, as long as you were outdoors it was fine. Sittin' in a classroom, even today I get... I get bored sittin' in a classroom.

DT: Yeah. You're not the only one. So you worked for the same employer in high school? I mean the same farm, family?

DK: Pretty much. Well, it was different families. I used... I never did have trouble getting a job on a farm because I worked for one guy and I got to know how to drive a tractor. Well, I learned that at my grandfather's. And then we borrowed another guy's tractor and then I got a job with him because I had experience on it.

DT: Sure, so one thing...

DK: So one thing led to another and I just... I was never out of work. Then I came up here and went to work on the railroad as a...

DT: What did you do on the railroad?

DK: Well, I started out as a carpenter's helper. We worked on bridges. Bridges and buildings, and it didn't take long before I ended up a crane operator.

DT: Did you get on-the-job training for that or did they just say go for it?

DK: No. I just, in my spare time I'd get on it and just check all of the controls out and all that and one day the boss said, "That's your job." It was interesting.

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DT: So you were just naturally drawn to wanting to play with or work on those kinds of...

DK: I just liked the heavy equipment.

DT: Do you think your farm work was kind of leading into that?

DK: I think so. We had a lot of equipment, different types of equipment.

DT: Yeah. So how long did you work for the railroad?

DK: Three years.

DT: And that was out of Anchorage?

DK: That's where we based out of, but we lived on a... in the railroad cars and they'd move us anywhere from Seward to Fairbanks, wherever there was a job.

DT: You lived in the railroad car. Could you explain that a little more?

DK: Well they... each car had five rooms in it. There are five people in each car. Then we had a kitchen car and a bath car. We would set up camp on a siding right close to where we were working and when we got that job done, we would just load everything up, they'd hook on and move to the next one.

DT: So you were there seven days a week?

DK: Yep.

DT: Continual?

DK: Yep. And weekends. We didn't work weekends, so if you were out in the middle of nowhere you found something to do, so. We would go out hunting birds or walking around. I always found something to do.

DT: Was that fun?

DK: Oh yeah, really interesting. Yeah, I got to be the crane operator and I rolled one over on its side.

DT: How'd that happen?

DK: Picking up a culvert, a big culvert. 65 foot long. It just went over.

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DT: Were you hurt at all, or? How'd that happen?

DK: I bruised my hip and then I was in Fairbanks for a week getting treatments and come back out. The operator that they had replace me, he came out and he says, "Get on that crane." I says, "No, I'm going to wait for a while." He said, "No. You get on it right now or you'll never get on a piece of equipment again." So I got on it and it was scary. I knew nothing was going to happen, but it just... it just felt like it was going over. He's the one that... If it wouldn't have been for him, I probably wouldn't be here.

DT: Right, just like getting up on a horse. Same kind of idea, right?

DK: If you fall off, get back on.

DT: Face your fear.

DK: But now I, I pretty much run about anything we got here.

DT: You had all of that time in the hospital to think about it, huh?

DK: I wasn't in the hospital.

DT: Oh, just recuperating?

DK: Yeah. They had me staying in this motel and once a day I would go and get treatments. I got some dirty looks while I was doing it. My face was all scarred up. Limping. I got some funny looks from them cops.

DT: So it must have been a pretty serious accident?

DK: Yeah. I landed on the rail with my hip and then my face in the gravel.

DT: Ow.

DK: That's when I jumped out of it.

DT: And you must have been what, only 18 or 19?

DK: About 19.

DT: It took a lot of courage to go back up on that after you were recuperated?

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DK: Yeah. Oh yeah, but I'm glad I did. Yeah, when I quit that, then I came down here and worked construction and worked on a platforms building... building them.

DT: In Kenai, or?

DK: Out in Cook Inlet.

DT: Cook Inlet?

DK: Yeah.

DT: So that would have been '63 or so?

DK: Well, it was in '64, right around there. Right after the earthquake is when I really started. I worked in construction then.

DT: 1964? After '65?

DK: After the earthquake.

DT: Where were you during the earthquake?

DK: I was in about a 20-foot camp trailer out in Nikiski. That was interesting.

DT: Yeah. Can you tell us what happened?

DK: I had just lit the Coleman lantern and had it hanging and it started to shake and I said, "Oh, we've got another shaker." It didn't stop, so I grabbed the lantern because I didn't want it to fall and we shook. Nothing... It didn't damage anything, though, it didn't break anything.

DT: How long did it shake?

DK: It seemed like forever.

DT: I know, they always do, but that one I'm sure must have lasted a long time.

DK: It lasted quite a while. I don't think there was any damage done in Kenai.

DT: It's pretty far away from most of the damage.

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DK: Well, they say we're on bedrock. So we're in good shape, but Anchorage got it. Right after that is when I was... Not long after that I started working for the city of Kenai as an equipment operator.

DT: For the City itself?

DK: Yep.

DT: What kind of equipment? All different kinds?

DK: All different types. They used a crane, backhoe, dozer pulling a scraper, grader, a little of everything.

DT: Permit road maintenance or building?

DK: Road maintenance and building. We built some of the roads in Kenai; Willow Street, the one that goes to the airport. Building that one, it was 50 below.

DT: Oh my god.

DK: Well we tried building it, but no equipment. It was too cold. It would freeze down about 6 inches in a half hour, so we just said, "To heck with it. That's enough. It's too hard on us."

DT: Bad idea.

DK: It's too hard on the operators and the equipment.

DT: What did Kenai look like back then?

DK: Nice.

DT: Pretty small town?

DK: Real small. The area where like the old Carr's Mall used to be was trees. The whole thing was trees. There was nothing from there this way. (Undecipherable). There was nothing.

DT: So where did you go shopping and stuff? What... what was there?

DK: There was there. Northern Commercial was there. And they had a little hardware store. There wasn't much.

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DT: Anything along the bluff? Or was that all?

DK: There was a... there was a restaurant along the bluff, which is gone, and a bunch of houses. They're getting close to being (undecipherable).

DT: And did you live in Kenai then?

DK: No, I still lived in Nikiski. I lived there ever since I moved down from the railroad. We used to own a place on the lake and I sold it and bought this, where I'm at now. I've been there for 34 or 35 years, in the same spot.

DT: Did you build your own home or was it?

DK: It was a prefab.

DT: Prefab.

DK: All they did was just bring it in and I had to do all the rest; insulate, wire, the plumbing, sheet rocking. I've been in there about 30 years. 32 years, and I'm still not finished with it.

DT: Yeah, that's what people say about when build your own.

DK: I've got the basement to finish yet. Let the next guy do it.

DT: So how did you like working for the City of Kenai? Was it a pretty good outfit?

DK: It was okay. It wasn't bad. There was a lot of politics.

DT: Isn't there always?

DK: Because it... Well, a lot of it was because I didn't live in the city.

DT: Oh right... really?

DK: Yeah. They favored the other guy, a couple of others, because they lived in the city and I didn't. I had been there longer than they had. So finally one day I come in and I said, "I'm done."

DT: Did they give preferential treatment to those other people?

DK: Oh yeah.

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DT: How so? I mean, what did they do?

DK: Well, the foreman went on leave, on vacation, and they had one of the other guys acting foreman. He had been there less than a year. I had been there over a year. They made him acting foreman because he lived in the city.

DT: So that must have ticked you off?

DK: It did, it did. It wasn't long after that I just come in one morning and I said, "I want my final pay at 4:30. I'm done." And they had it.

DT: Did you have another job lined up or you just wanted out?

DK: No. I just... Well, I was... I was going to take a trip and get out of here for a while. I didn't stay gone very long and I was back.

DT: You just went to the lower 48?

DK: I went back to Michigan and then I couldn't take it, so I had to turn around and come back.

DT: Were you toying with the idea of going... finding a job down there or you knew you were just looking?

DK: I did have a job for a little while and then I just said the hell with it. I couldn't take it no more.

DT: Down in Michigan you mean?

DK: Yeah, I had to get back up here. That's what they say, once you've lived in Alaska you can't live no place else.

DT: You're sure proof of that, huh?

DK: I'm proof of that, because I remember I just couldn't take it. Too much of a rat race.

DT: Did you go back to your old town? I mean, right in the same region?

DK: Yep.

DT: So how long did you stay down there, just a few months?

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DK: Yeah, I think it... maybe... maybe six months at the most. I just says, nah.

DT: So that would have been. What year are we talking about that you came back then?

DK: Oh, that was in '68. Yeah, somewhere right around '68. It might have been earlier. It might have been '66 or 7. Yeah, about '67. Because it wasn't long after I got back that I ended up I got a divorce. I was married.

DT: When did you get married? Right out of high school?

DK: '60... Right after I got out... about '64. Yeah, it would have been '64 I got married.

DT: So right, you got married after the Alaska Railroad?

DK: Yeah.

DT: Okay, that job?

DK: Yeah. And then I... we had two kids, a boy and a girl, and then we got a divorce and then in about '72 or '73, I got married a second time.

DT: Okay.

DK: She had two kids. So that gives me...

DT: So you've got four altogether?

DK: Four there, and then we adopted one.

DT: Okay. So how did you meet this... was your wife in '72?

DK: She was friends with my brother and sister-in-law. We met. We met and she left and went back to Nevada. We kept in touch with each other and one day I called her up and told her to come back up, we're getting' married.

DT: So was it a pretty long courtship, or how?

DK: Maybe a year, maybe less. We're still together. We got...

(End of side one.)

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DT: 17th, and this is Diana Thomas conducting an oral history interview with Dick Kivi at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. And he is the head equipment operator here at the refuge. We were just talking about his second wife and their children. Dick, tell me where did you got married.

DK: I got married in Kenai in front of the Justice of the Peace or Magistrate. That was about 32 years ago. 31, 32 years ago.

DT: Did you have a big reception afterward?

DK: Nope. Nope.

DT: Just small?

DK: Just small. Just a few family and that's it. We just... we didn't want nothin' big. And, it's been lasting.

DT: Must have worked okay?

DK: Yeah.

DT: Did you go for a honeymoon?

DK: No.

DT: No?

DK: No. We'll have to do that one day.

DT: And you said that you had two children from a previous marriage and she had two?

DK: Yeah. And she had two and we had one that died when she was 7 days old and we adopted one when she was right... the day, well a little while after she was born, and then we inherited one.

DT: How do you inherit one? From a family member?

DK: No, just a friend of my daughter, youngest daughter. She was having problems in school. Kids were feeding her diet pills and my daughter seen it and she turned her in. And she got mad at my daughter and they sent her to Anchorage to get dried out and cleaned out and up there they convinced her that my daughter was the only one that cared. That's why she turned her in. So, she started calling my

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daughter and then one day I came home from work and they said, "Meet your new daughter." I said, "Okay." She still calls us mom and dad and she ain't no relate... no relative... no relation at all. We just inherited her.

DT: And how old was she then, or?

DK: Well, she was probably about 17.

DT: The same age as your daughter?

DK: Same age as my youngest daughter. And they still, they still get along good. She keeps in contact with us. She's got a little girl. I haven't seen her. I think I've seen her once. But, she lives in Anchorage.

DT: And your other children? Where are they now?

DK: They're all in Nevada. Well, three of them are in Nevada. I got one, the girl from my side is... she's in Anchorage working at Providence Hospital. She's a respiratory therapist, and the oldest boy, I think he's in Eureka, way up north, working. I haven't heard from him for quite a few years. He don't keep in touch with me. He's afraid of me. We've had a few problems and he's afraid of me. I just let it go. One day, he might wake up.

DT: That's your son from your first marriage?

DK: Yeah. Yeah, my son.

DT: And the other ones live in Nevada?

DK: They all live... they all moved out to Nevada. One... two of them are working, one of them is still not.

DT: So, how many grandkids do you have?

DK: I actually have three. One is 22 years old and the other two are 4.

DT: Wow, quite a spread there.

DK: Yeah.

DT: And you get to see much of them, or?

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DK: One of them, the one from the youngest daughter, her boy. Whenever I go down to Nevada, I see him. He used to live at the house for a while before they went to Nevada. Him and his mother stayed at the house. He's a character.

DT: He keeps you young, right?

DK: Yeah.

DT: Chasing the kids.

DK: Yeah. When he was 2 years old, he was running the (inaudible). He enjoyed that for a 2-year-old.

DT: I'll bet. So tell me, what year did you come down or... After you left the City of Kenai you said you went down to California, I mean Michigan, for awhile and then came back.

DK: Yep. Came back and worked with long shoring and...

DT: Who did you long shore for?

DK: Out on the docks out in Nikiski area. I worked a little construction and then I heard that Fish and Wildlife was looking for an operator for the land clearing machines called tree crushers. I put my application in and I got the job.

DT: And that was 1970?

DK: 1970.

DT: Okay.

DK: And I've been here ever since.

DT: So...

DK: It worked into a full-time job.

DT: Were you part-time to begin with?

DK: Yep, temporary.

DT: Just summers, or was it?

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DK: No.

DT: No? Year round?

DK: Seemed to work year round. They'd lay us off on Friday and hire us back Monday. When our... when our appointment ended, they were running those tree crushers and they wanted to keep them going as long as they could, so.

DT: Was that? That was a special project originally, right (undecipherable)?

DK: Special project. Yeah.

DT: Can you explain a little bit more about it?

DK: Well, they had a... In '69 they had a big fire in the Swanson River area. They call it the Swanson River fire. It was a '69 burn, and most of it, well I'd say 90% of it was on the refuge and Senator Stevens got an appropriation to get these three land-clearing machines for the refuge to knock over all of the dead trees. They hoped to get different species of trees growing, which will act as (undecipherable). They got the machines and they sent ten of us down to school. They had big plans of running them around the clock. Come to find out it didn't work. You couldn't run them at night because you couldn't see what the ground looked like, the terrain, and could get into pretty hairy situations, so we just ran them during the day. They were interesting. They were...

DT: This was the already burned stuff?

DK: Yeah, this is after the... after the burn.

DT: After the fires. Yes.

DK: And there were... the machines were 14 feet high, 16 feet wide, and 38 feet 10 inches long and they weighed 40 ton.

DT: Wow. How did you get them around?

DK: Put them (undecipherable) or drove them. We used to, in the oil fields and the Swanson Lake Road, we would just start driving down the road and just chew up the road and then reshape it when we got done. But, they were a lot of fun to run.

DT: What did they actually do to the trees?

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DK: They just run over the top of them and they broke them up, and the bigger trees, they more or less just took big chunks out of them and... so water would get in there and they'd rot faster, but it was a dirty job, real dirty, particularly after that fire. You got all that black soot. I used to go to work with clean clothes on and come home at night black. Black. Black.

DT: Did you work long shifts too? Did you work?

DK: Most of the time we only worked... well, when we first started we were working only eight hours a day, but then later on we got to working 10 hours a day. When we did Swan Lake Road or the moose pens, we spent five days a week out there and worked 10 hours a day, come in for the weekend, and then we moved to Mystery Creek Road to do some there and they bought a trailer for us to live in and we'd do the same thing; go there Monday morning and we'd come back Friday evening, work 10 hours a day, three of us. We got along real good and we got a lot of work done.

DT: That's pretty enjoyable work for you?

DK: Oh yeah.

DT: Yeah. So what do they look like, a giant bulldozer-type thing?

DK: Looks like a giant tricycle running backward, with two wheels up front and then a single wheel in the back; big drum. 6-foot drum with cutters on it that broke the trees up, and you just drive over the top of them. They had an electric motor in each wheel and a big generator, two big generators on them, and they were all electric.

DT: And slow for the things like that? Was that kind of hairy, or?

DK: It could be. For an inexperienced operator, it could be. But, we got... we could put them just about any place we wanted. We got to know the machines and we knew what we could do with them, and...

DT: Did you have to go for training to learn those specific things?

DK: Not to operate them, just the maintenance.

DT: Just maintenance.

DK: Just the maintenance. They sent us to Long View, Texas, right to the factory. That was interesting. We learned how they make the machines and we got to operate

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- big forklifts that were made similar to these, but we never knew anything about them.
- DT: Yeah, it must have been totally new, right?
- DK: Yeah.
- DT: And you knew how to operate other equipment, but...
- DK: Yeah, you had a rheostat for forward and reverse and the top speed was 3 miles an hour, either forward or reverse, and you had a toggle switch for steering and a toggle switch for a throttle.
- DT: Wow.
- DK: That's basically all you had. The engines ran at a certain RPM to keep the right voltage on the motor. They had an electric motor in each wheel. They'd go slow but they'd...
- DT: Did a good job?
- DK: Oh yeah.
- DT: Did it... did the project produce what they had hoped? Was it... did it regenerate?
- DK: Some areas it did. Some areas they, like Mystery Creek, they should have burned it after we crushed it. That way they could keep the fire down low and they could get their... all of their nutrition back to the soil. They didn't get... they didn't get to burn it and now it all come back up as the same thing, spruce.
- DT: Which is what they were hoping to get rid of, right?
- DK: Yeah.
- DT: But in other areas it was more successful?
- DK: Yeah.
- DT: Such as?
- DK: Swan Lake Road, around the Portage Lake area. That was part of an old burn, but it come up a lot of burnt aspen, but they should have burned that too. Now it's so thick in there you can't... I don't know how the moose could get through it.

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DT: So dense?

DK: Real dense. It needs to be done again, but they don't make the machines no more.

DT: Were they pretty...? How much were they? Do you remember or have an idea?

DK: If I remember correctly, they were something like \$100,000 a piece. That was in '70. Today probably... they'd probably be... if they made them, they'd probably be closer to \$300,000. And this was a small machine, they made bigger ones. The next bigger one was 75 ton and the biggest one was 120 ton. I never did get to see one of those. The 120 ton was 24 feet wide. That would do some damage.

DT: I guess so, yeah.

DK: The only thing they'd never let me do was drive over a car. I wanted to drive over a car with one of those.

DT: Just to see what it would do, huh?

DK: Yeah. Yeah. I ran over a porcupine and he walked away.

DT: He was too small probably.

DK: I think he went right between two of the cutters. He got up and he walked away. One thing that's interesting though, we seen lots of eagles, we'd see moose. The moose... they'd hang around. They'd just walk off to the side when we went by and come right back in. Once we got working in the area, they knew we would dumping feed for them, and we had caribou hanging around. We had wolves, but the best were the eagles.

DT: Lot's of them?

DK: (Intercom) Oh yeah, they were watching because we would be working in an area and as we were working, they'd get smaller. Well, after they'd get so small, the rabbits didn't have no place to go.

DT: Oh.

DK: So they would take off across the open field and ...

DT: Eagle bait.

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DK: The eagles were there waiting for them.

DT: And what were the wolves waiting for then?

DK: I don't know. They were just sitting there watching us.

DT: A whole pack of them or just kind of some strays?

DK: Three of them. The one day we had three. One day we had one chasing the caribou. And the caribou come right in front of the machine and we were sitting there letting them warm up and the guys wanted to get pictures, but I told them, I said, there's gonna be a wolf coming. And so he went to stand by the machine and I told him to get up on the machine, I says, because you never know what that wolf is going to do when it gets close.

DT: Right.

DK: He might see a movement and just go for it.

DT: Yeah.

DK: And, about that time, the wolf came around the corner and spotted him and ran off and then he got mad at me for scaring the wolf off. And I told him, I says, you know, I explained it to him and he said, "Oh, I didn't think of that." Well, he's gotta be thinking of that kind of stuff. Yeah, we used to see... We used to see a lot of animals.

DT: Was the food that readily available for like moose and caribou or is it just that you turned it over?

DK: We were dumping the trees down and some of the trees...we always dumped down some big cottonwood or aspen for them. And then we'd just dump the tree and then leave it and go off to work and we would come back and they'd eat just the tips off of the whole tree. And then next time, they'd come eat a little farther down. And finally, they would get to be... they were peeling the bark off of it, so when they started on that, then we'd dump another tree down for them. So they... All of these small aspen and that we were dumping, they were getting the food off of that and we would be going along and they'd step off to the side, maybe 10 feet off from where we were going, and as soon as we went by, they were right in there feeding.

DT: Well, it sounds like they figured it out pretty quick.

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DK: It didn't take them long. The first few times, they'd run. After that, I mean, they'd just walk and then come back... right back to feeding.

DT: Moose food.

DK: They put that machine with that food on the ground and...

DT: Hey, this is all right.

DK: Yeah.

DT: So how long did that project last?

DK: Boy, I can't remember what year we got rid of them things. '78, something like that sticks in my mind, somewhere in that area.

DT: So for eight years you operated those tree crushers?

DK: Off and on, yeah.

DT: Wow.

DK: And then we'd turn around and give them to the state, to fish and game, and they did some work on (undecipherable) off of the Sterling Highway and by Lily Lake and then out at the moose research center. And then they, I guess they didn't have no money to run them, so they sold them to a guy in Anchorage and then I heard he sold them and they're in Nova Scotia. And that's the last I heard, that they were in Nova Scotia. But, they're saying that they wished they had them now. I do too. They'd be a lot of fun.

DT: Yeah, I heard that before they burn, that the crushing only... crushing then burning is the best way of doing it now.

DK: If you crush an area and let it sit for about a year and then burn it, let the stuff dry out a little bit. That way, you get a good deep burn and it won't run on you. You don't have any tall trees for it to...

DT: To spread.

DK: ...spread fast.

DT: Did they go back in and burn any of those areas that you crushed?

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DK: No, no they didn't. We did one area out by the moose pens that... we crushed all around one area and left the center and they burned that. No fire line, just fluid lines, and they burned that. That went on... that burned up pretty good, but they never did burn none of the crushed areas.

DT: Was that the original idea, though, or they were just crushing?

DK: Well, mainly, they got it just to crush that old... the old '69 burn. And then they got expanded from there. And we'd run them during the winter. We couldn't run them much in the summer; they were too heavy.

DT: They'd get bogged down?

DK: They'd get stuck to easy. Well in the wintertime they'd get stuck too. (Undecipherable) always stuck because I was in the lead. I was always running the lead machine. I'd get too close to a swamp. We had them stuck pretty good a few times.

DT: In the bogs, or?

DK: Yeah. We had all three of them stuck at one time.

DT: Is that right?

DK: Yeah.

DT: How did that happen?

DK: A rainy wet fall.

DT: Out at Mystery Creek or? No?

DK: (Inaudible) oil fields. We had one stuck, so we backed another one up to it or was gonna back it up to it and he got stuck, so we backed the third one down and he got stuck, so I just told the guys (undecipherable) we're gonna let them sit for a day or two. And we come back in and talked to the manager and them and told him got all three of them stuck, and he said, "How are you going to get them out?" I said, I'm going to wait until the rain quits, and I says, then I'm gonna need a crew to cut a bunch of small trees. And we did that and jammed them behind the wheels and then I told him I'm gonna walk them out of there, and he couldn't believe me. We started backing up and as the wheels started to turn, you'd just turn it as far as you can one way and keep going and then you go completely the

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other way as you're backing, and you just walk it right out. We got 'em all three out just like that.

DT: That's pretty amazing. So you had to put trees underneath, though, to give it a little more leverage, or?

DK: A little bit to get up on. And in another way is we use cables. You got one stuck, you hook the other two onto it, and pull.

DT: Like a wench? No.

DK: Just the... just the machine.

DT: (Inaudible).

DK: You start it out with inch and an eighth cable, which is big cable. And we'd break that like a piece of string. That's just... no jerk, just a steady pull. We had to go to an inch and a quarter cable, and that's heavy.

DT: But that did the trick?

DK: Yep. We never broke none of them. One time we had two of them stuck back-to-back and I to drag... we had to drag in about 600 feet of cable. I had one machine on high ground. I just used it as the anchor. I went from it down to one drum, back up, and then back down to the other drum and I used the drum like a wench. I wrapped the cable on it and that's how we got out.

DT: I bet you needed to have that kind of backup.

DK: Yeah.

DT: On some days.

DK: We had them guys out at the oil field even. (Intercom) We had the guys out at the oil field a big boss out there. We had some of his bosses and they were stuck and one guy looked and he says, "They couldn't get that thing out of there." And the supervisor from out there, he looked at them and he said, "Don't underestimate them guys". He says, "I've seen them do some amazing stuff." About that time, we popped out of the hole and almost ran over them.

DT: Oh, no.

DK: Yeah. We tried to tell them to get out of the way.

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DT: Was it the same crew that kind of worked together?

DK: Yep.

DT: Who were the other people?

DK: I had two, one was Jim Segura and Bob Schowalter. They were local... local guys. But, Jim Segura, he's the head of the (inaudible) now.

DT: Right. I recognize the name.

DK: Yeah.

DT: And Schowalter is pretty active too, isn't he, or?

DK: I don't know. I've never heard what happened... whatever happened to Bob. I know he was in Anchorage. There's a bunch of the Schowalters.

DT: Yeah. It's a common name.

DK: Yeah, we had a few different operators. But, Jim... Jim and I went to that (inaudible) school together in '70. I went back three other times. Because I told them the way we're working the machines, we only work them a few months out of the year, but every so many years it would be good to get a refresher, so they sent me out every couple of years for a refresher. It sure helped.

DT: To make sure all of the maintenance was up-kept and everything?

DK: Yeah.

DT: So did you and the crew get to be pretty good friends, sounds like?

DK: Oh yeah. We were always.

DT: You spent a lot of time together.

DK: Especially when you're living together.

DT: That's what I mean; you're living together and working together all day.

DK: Yeah, it helps when you get along. And one guy, he didn't... he didn't like to cook at all. We bought our own... we bought our groceries and we did our own

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cooking. I'd cook breakfast and we'd fix our own lunch and the other guy, he'd fix the evening meal and the third guy, he didn't like to cook so he said, "I'll wash dishes."

DT: Well, you've got to work out a system, right?

DK: It worked out fine. And if you wanted any thing for your own personal, you just bought it. Otherwise, we just pitched in and we all bought... we all bought groceries. It works out a lot easier than each one buying their own. We'd pitched in and lump it all together. We all ate about the same kind of food anyway. We weren't... we weren't very picky.

DT: So, if you could only operate the machines a couple of months of the year, what were you... what were you doing the other months? What kind of work?

DK: Road maintenance. Campground maintenance. A little bit of everything. Yeah, for a while I was the only one working out of the shop.

DT: In Kenai?

DK: In Kenai. I had to keep all of the equipment running, all of roads maintained, do the maintenance on the buildings, just... I mean I... I was doing it all.

DT: It sounds like that in itself was a pretty major job.

DK: It was.

DT: Did you have any help with that?

DK: Usually in the summertime. In the wintertime I was there by myself and there was mostly snow removal and vehicle maintenance. It was a cold shop to work in too.

DT: This was the old facility in Kenai? What did the shop look like there?

DK: It was a 32-foot deep. About the biggest thing I... Well, I could get our old flatbed in there, but it was tight. Otherwise, just a pickup was the biggest thing you could get in there. And, you put a can of water on the floor...

(End of tape 1)

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DT: The date is March 17th. This is Diana Thomas interviewing Dick Kivi for the oral history program. Dick works as the heavy equipment operator at Kenai National Wildlife Refuge and Dick was telling us about the tree crushing project. Who was the manager that hired you, Dick, when you... when you first came to the refuge?

DK: The manager was John Hakala and he came from the same town I did. He went to school with my mother and him and I graduated from the same high school.

DT: How many years apart? That's...

DK: Quite a few years apart.

DT: That's amazing.

DK: Yeah. He was a good manager. He pretty much left me to do what I was supposed to do and...

DT: Did he actually interview you and hire you, or?

DK: No. John Kurtz. He was in charge of recreation. He's the one that interviewed me and, and he's the one that hired me.

DT: And how long had Hakala been manager at that... when you first came here?

DK: He's been here quite... quite a while, but he had been in different... different refuges and then he came here and I had... He was here only I think about a year and then he retired then we got a new manager, Jim Monte. And I think he was here only about three, four years and we got a new manager. That was Jim Frates and...

DT: That was in 1980?

DK: I think it was.

DT: (undecipherable).

DK: I think it was. And then there was Bob Delaney and then Daniel Dozier and then the last one is Robin West. But, I've seen a few managers.

DT: You've been around the block a few times.

DK: Yeah.

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DT: So how... how big was the staff when you first came here?

DK: There was probably five, six... five or six full-time, and then big crews in the summer. Temporary.

DT: So you had a manager and a...

DK: Manager and assistant manager and a forester and recreations and then your administrative officer and then secretary. And that was it.

DT: And when did... when did they move from Kenai to over... to this refuge headquarters?

DK: That had to have been almost 20 years ago. That was the office that moved. We didn't. The shop didn't move until a year or two later. That was interesting, working out of the shop in Kenai and office in Soldotna. We had vehicles in Soldotna and they had something go wrong so I would have to come all the way over to work on them and try to figure out what I needed. It was... it was a hassle.

DT: Sounds like it.

DK: It was interesting. Kept me running.

DT: I bet. A lot of time commuting it sounds like.

DK: Yeah. Lots of time.

DT: So why did they decide to leave the... the Kenai buildings? Just too small?

DK: To expand and then our refuge office would be on the refuge. I think they could have picked a better place than Ski Hill Road.

DT: Where would you put it?

DK: I would have put it out... out in the... oh probably around the west entrance of the (undecipherable). In that area. I think that would have been a better area

DT: More central?

DK: Yeah. Because even the way it is now we got so far to travel to get from job to job, and then if you gotta move equipment... it takes a lot of time to move this equipment around. And like the grader, we gotta drive it from here on out and it

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- takes an hour and a half to two hours just to get there. You can't get much done in an 8-hour day when you gotta be traveling for an hour and a half each way.
- DT: You pretty much have your day shot sounds like.
- DK: Yeah. You spend almost three hours a day driving just back and forth to the jobs. So usually we try to, if they let us, we'll work over 10 hours a day if they'll let us. That way we can get more done.
- DT: So, what was the refuge like when you first came? Was it fairly small, like you said? Was it... did you socialize at all with refuge people or did you have your own life outside?
- DK: I pretty much had my own life outside. But, a lot of them... a lot of people... a lot of refuge employees did. I guess they figured that they spend eight hours a day with these people. Get away from them.
- DT: Right. It's not like an isolated refuge where you're...
- DK: No.
- DT: You're all pretty much forced together.
- DK: No. Here you're... everybody's got their own thing.
- DT: So, who was your supervisor? Were you kind of... were you...
- DK: When I first started?
- DT: Did you directly report to?
- DK: We... when I...
- DT: Hakala?
- DK: No, I... well, I guess my original one was John Kurtz. Recreation. But, they all pretty much, we... I'd tell them what I had planned for that (undecipherable) day or week and they'd say, "Fine". If they had any changes they'd come and tell us.
- DT: So you had a lot of autonomy. Pretty much.

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DK: Yeah. For awhile there we had a maintenance man and he'd stick... stuck around the shop pretty much and did the maintenance on the buildings and that. But, him and I, we got a long real good. We more or less run the crews.

DT: Who was that?

DK: That was Ralph Mumm. He was old retired Navy. He was a character. He knew his stuff.

DT: And when did he come on?

DK: He was here before I came.

DT: Oh, I see.

DK: Yeah. He was the only (undecipherable). For a long time, he was the only permanent one they had besides the people in the office. And, then they hired a mechanic full-time, and then a lot of... quite a few temporary during the summer. And I was mainly hired for the tree crusher, for the operator. And then I got involved in everything. We started getting more equipment; graders and dozers, backhoes.

DT: As the refuge grew. So, when did you become permanent? You said originally you were a temporary yourself.

DK: I think I only worked here probably less than a year and then they put me on permanent. But (undecipherable) they had that position open for an operator and I just happened to be there, and it's been a real good job. Good people to work with. I done a variety of stuff. One of the... one of the enjoyable things... Well, I used to get to do a lot of flying with the pilots, surveying.

DT: Biological surveys you mean?

DK: Yeah. Moose surveys, swan surveys.

DT: Oh, really.

DK: Went out banding swans one day. Dipping them off the floats of a Super Cub. Boy, that was a... that was a lot of fun.

DT: When was that?

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DK: It was in the late 70's. With Vern Burns. He was the pilot. Biology pilot. One day he was going out and he come into the shop and I said, "Where ya going?" He said, "I'm gonna go band some swans". I said, "Need any help?" And he said, "Sure. Come on". So we went. Now, that was a blast. We got on a float with a dip (undecipherable). We'd float by them, dip them up and then he would do all his stuff and put a band on them and then let them go, then fly around and look for some more, land, and chase 'em.

DT: That sounds pretty fun.

DK: Yeah. And I guess he get out... he worked on just about all the moose there. (undecipherable) everybody needs to get six. And that low-level flying.

DT: Oh. When they circle a lot you mean?

DK: Yeah. Yeah.

DT: You must have a strong stomach.

DK: It never bothered me, so I'd get... I'd get to do a lot of flying. That's all changed.

DT: Was that about the same time then? The moose? Was when the staff was still pretty small?

DK: Yeah. Yeah.

DT: So who was... who was refuge manager then?

DK: Well, this was during Jim Monte and Jim Frates and Bob Delaney. Right around in that era.

DT: In that era.

DK: Yeah. Right in that era, and it was small... a small crew and...

DT: You needed extra body?

DK: Yep. 'Cause everybody got sick.

DT: So you just counted the moose, right?

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DK: Yeah. That's all we did was just moose... moose counting recording (undecipherable) in the winter. (Undecipherable) was different. Used different pilots.

DT: And you must have known the area pretty well then.

DK: Yeah.

DT: Also.

DK: Yeah. That helps. And then we got... I worked on the caribou transplant.

DT: Oh, you did.

DK: Yeah.

DT: When was that and how did that occur?

DK: That was about 10 years ago. First year we went up, they used helicopters to dart 'em and then they'd sling them into the lake onto the ice. And I was on the ice catching them when they'd bring them in.

DT: Was this (undecipherable)?

DK: No this was Lake Louise.

DT: Louise. Okay. And where were they bringing them?

DK: They were bringing them from Lake Louise to here.

DT: To here.

DK: At Kenai, yeah. They were pretty much between Skilak to Tustumena.

DT: Yeah. Okay. From Skilak to Tustumena.

DK: Yeah, they'd bring them in.

DT: How many did they bring?

DK: The first year we started out with about 50 animals. We were only up to half. They put 'em in a big trailer and half of them got trampled on the way down 'cause they were loose in that trailer. We ended up... I think we ended up with 25

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animals we got up into the hills. (Undecipherable) 'em, loaded them in a helicopter and they'd fly 'em up. And the second year we did it we put them in individual crates. I hauled them down on a flatbedded trailer 18 animals at a time.

DT: Wow.

DK: We'd start from Lake Louise and didn't stop until we got here. We'd drive nonstop. And then we put 9 crates in the helicopter. Fly 'em up and then turn 'em loose, then come back and get the other nine and fly them up and then we'd head back up for another load.

DT: What time of year did they do that?

DK: It was in the winter.

DT: Winter?

DK: Yeah. We had to do it in the winter because Lake Louise... the lakes were frozen. That was a lot of fun. The second year they used a big net, hang it... 75 foot square. Hang it off the ropes with blasting (undecipherable), and then we'd put feed underneath them and then the caribou would come underneath. They'd wait till they got so many under there and then they'd cut the (undecipherable) off and they'd blow that rope apart. The net would drop right on top of them and then we'd jump on the snow machines and go like crazy and get up there and jump on the animal and hold it down so they could tranquilize it. We had all the locals from Lake Louise helping. We had a lot of fun.

DT: That sounds like a pretty wild project.

DK: Yeah.

DT: So how many did that?

DK: The second year we hauled about 75 animals. No, about 50 animals or somewhere around there, and we didn't lose a one.

DT: Much better odds, huh?

DK: Yeah.

DT: Yeah. So it was just done those two years?

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DK: Yeah. They just did it two years and they got... the herd started between Skilak and Tustumena. Now it's going strong (undecipherable) the avalanche has been killing them.

DT: Yeah. I heard they lost a lot.

DK: Three avalanches so far. The other year they lost something like 150 animals. This year they lost a bunch, and I talked to a guy that works out at the moose pens and him and his girlfriend were hiking back there someplace and they found a third one. Some animals got caught in an avalanche. So they're getting their herds thinned down.

DT: Yeah.

DK: They're losing a lot of their radio collars animals.

DT: So they may have to go back and collar some more?

DK: I wouldn't mind. I wouldn't mind it at all. (Undecipherable). I got lots of overtime.

DT: Kinda nice workin' with the wildlife, huh?

DK: Yeah. We don't get that much overtime.

DT: Are they pretty healthy caribou then?

DK: Yeah. In fact, I heard they started the season on it. Permits. I think it's permit only. They want to get some of the animals out of there, but the only way you can get in there is walk in or horseback.

DT: Pretty far back, isn't it?

DK: Yeah. You can't use an airplane.

DT: Can't fly.

DK: Can't fly in there. I'm not walking that far. Not anymore. I used to be able to do it. Not anymore.

DT: So they just asked if you want to get involved in that? In... in the project, or? You had to drive there?

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DK: I'd drive the truck.

DT: Some of the equipment.

DK: I'd drive the truck. I did get a say in how they did the second one.

DT: With the separate crates?

DK: With separate crates. I made 10 of them, 10 crates. Because they brought some collapsable reindeer crates and I looked at them and I told, Ted Spraker then, I said they're too small. The caribou ain't gonna fit in them. Oh yeah, they'll fit. And then he says, "Better make 10 of them crates". So I did. And then we get up there and the caribou wouldn't fit in their crates. So we had to figure something different, so they were coming up with all these ideas and every time they come up with an idea I'd tell 'em, "That ain't gonna work". They were really getting defensive, but what did I know? I was just a grunt.

DT: Right.

DK: They're biologists. They know all this stuff. Finally the one guy asked me, and he says, "Well, how would you do it?" And I said, "Well, I'd partition off the front half of the truck and get four caribou up there." And I said, "Then you fill in behind it with the portable crates". But they wanted to make compartments through the whole truck and trailer, and I said, "You can't get the front animals in there". They says, "Okay. We'll do it like the way you said". So they did and it worked. They'd get 18 animals to a load.

DT: That's pretty good.

DK: Yeah. And we didn't lose any and they hardly lost any hair. But, that's a long drive from Lake Louise down here without stopping.

DT: How long is that?

DK: Probably...

DT: Especially in a big truck like that.

DK: Probably about 500 miles. The reason they didn't want us to stop very long is that they start heating up and getting hot. You can see it. You can see the steam rising off the truck if you stopped too long. And when we get here they had big fans that were blowing just to keep the animals from overheating. Then we'd cover their eyes and load 'em in the helicopter and had four crates hanging out each side and

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one in the middle. The reason we covered their eyes was so they wouldn't get frostbit... frostbitten.

DT: Oh, I thought it was to minimize stress.

DK: That was partly it, but frankly, it was just to keep them from getting frostbitten. It was... it was cold.

DT: I'll bet. Did you have an alternate driver or just you?

DK: Well, yeah. Al Olguin. He took one trip and I think I took three. Two or three trips. And I had a pickup following me.

DT: Oh, you did.

DK: Yeah, that's... well, that's one of the things I made sure. They didn't want to and I said, "No way". I'm gonna have a rig with me so in case I break down we got the wheels to get someplace. They didn't think of that.

DT: Good safety measure. Yeah.

DK: For safety. They're always talking safety. They're one of the most unsafe people I've ever seen.

DT: Safety first.

DK: Well then, we got... (Undecipherable) so many different projects. Hydro axing. We got the hydro axe. We did that to cut the fire breaks.

DT: When was that? When did you get the hydro axe?

DK: Oh boy. Probably eight years ago. At least eight years ago. Maybe longer than that. But I've...

DT: You taught me how to ride that hydro axe at least eight years ago.

DK: Was it that long? Maybe it was more than that. Maybe it's been more than that. 10 years ago.

DT: Was it here when Bill (undecipherable) was here?

DK: Yeah. Yeah.

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DT: I think you gotta go back a little bit more. Yeah.

DK: It didn't seem like that long.

DT: What was that originally purchased for?

DK: Fire.

DT: Fire?

DK: Building fire breaks. But I've used it to clear roadsides. I've had it in Cordova twice. When he worked for the forest service. They were doing some moose projects and they needed the hydro axe (undecipherable). And I took it to Portage and did some hydro axing around there for them. And now I gotta ship it to Cold Bay. Gotta do some work down there. I've been getting around with that.

DT: That's a pretty expensive piece of equipment.

DK: Yeah. I don't know what they... I don't know what it cost. It's a big rotary lawn mower.

DT: So, was that originally purchased to... to help with the prescribed burning program?

DK: Yeah. For building the fire lines. We built a few of them with it.

DT: Out in this retreat?

DK: Yeah. I did lots of work along the roadsides. I did the whole Skilak.

DT: That's a lot of work.

DK: That was supposed to be the State, but I did it. I did Swan Lake Road. And I was working on it this year, re-doing it. The machine quit on me. It was about 12 below and it quit. And I sit on the machine for almost two hours waiting for them to come from here with a pickup to get me.

DT: And where were you? Skilak?

DK: Swan Lake Road.

DT: Oh Swan. I'm sorry.

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DK: That was after spending a cold night in the trailer. The furnace quit because the battery went dead.

DT: That sounds like a story.

DK: It was interesting. I had to get up about 5:30, 6:00 o'clock in the morning to start the generator so I can get the furnace back working. It was 12 below outside.

DT: December?

DK: No. No it wasn't. It was in November.

DT: Oh wow.

DK: Yeah. Latter part of November. Yeah, it was...

DT: A lotta cold.

DK: Yeah. It was get... It was gettin'... If I would of... If that machine wouldn't have quit on me I would have had most of the road done before we got the snow.

DT: Just trying to wrap it up, right?

DK: Yeah. Because once you get deep snow you can't... you can't run that thing. It's just helpless.

DT: You must have gotten awfully cold waiting there for two hours.

DK: It was good and cold. And I was dressed with these shoes on, which are steel-toed and these kinda pants (intercom). These pants on, which are useless.

DT: Just cotton.

DK: Yeah. They're cold.

DT: And you had no extra gear or anything with you, did you?

DK: No. My pickup was probably a mile or so back down the road. And I wasn't about to walk. Not with these shoes on and there's about that much snow on the road. I called and had 'em come and get me.

DT: Yeah. You were probably getting close to hyperthermic.

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DK: It was getting chilly.

DT: Getting chilly.

DK: And then the wind was blowing. After that I started carrying heavier clothes with me.

DT: As a backup.

DK: Well, the thing is...

DT: Yeah.

DK: Once they start... you start running the hydro axe, once it warms up a little bit and you... and the machine runs a little while it gets so hot in there that you can go in your shirtsleeves. It can be below zero outside, but it's awful hot inside.

DT: But mighty cold outside.

DK: Yeah.

DT: Just another safety precaution.

DK: Yeah. Usually I have somebody out there with me, but nobody wanted to stay out in the trailer with me 'cause it was too cold.

DT: 'Cause it was too cold. Yeah.

DK: Let's see, what else?

(End of tape 2, side 1. Side 2 not recorded.)

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DT: 7th, 2004. This is part of the oral history project for the Fish and Wildlife Service. This is Diana Thomas at Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. Today I am interviewing Dick Kivi and he is the equipment manager.

DK: Operator.

DT: Operator, excuse me, at the Kenai refuge. Dick can you tell us a little bit about your early years when you started out over at the... describe the Kenai refuge in Kenai?

DK: Well, it was a pretty small operation. It was... our shop was only 32 foot deep. About the only thing we could get in it was a pickup. Couldn't get nothing bigger in it. And the office was real small and there was only about maybe seven people working out of the office. Then there was, actually there was two of us for quite a while working out of the shop. There was me and the maintenance man. And usually in the summer we kept all the crews operating. They hardly ever went into the office, and we had big crews. But we...

DT: What kind of crews?

DK: Just... they were doing campground maintenance.

DT: Oh.

DK: Garbage pickup. We each had a garbage... trash cans at every campsite and every... every campsite and every campground. It was usually two or three days a week picking up garbage.

DT: I can believe that. That's a lot of trash.

DK: Oh there was a lot of trash, and then they finally decided to go to big... big dumpsters and we got rid of all our garbage cans and that took a... it took a big... big load off of everybody. We even had them all along the roadsides.

DT: Trash cans?

DK: Yeah. And we were getting all kinds of trash from all over.

DT: Did you have to supervise the crew? Or they were...

DK: They were, well they'd just... we'd just tell them where to go and what to do and they were on their own. Then we'd go out and work with them. Sometimes with

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- them and sometimes we'd go to other areas. But, that was a... that was a every week thing. Monday morning everybody was out picking up garbage. It was interesting. Meet a lot of people. A lot of nice people. And they just... whenever they got through with trash clean-up they'd start cleaning up the campgrounds; replacing parts and barriers, cleaning fire pits, and we had people say that we had some of the nicest campgrounds they've ever seen. The cleanest. And then one year they decided they're gonna run everything out of the office. So we let 'em.
- DT: Do you remember what year that they switched over?
- DK: Probably in about '75, '76. Somewhere in there.
- DT: How big where the crews to do that much? I mean, from one end of the refuge to the other is a huge area to cover and all that garbage.
- DK: We used to have a lot of big crews. Big summer crews.
- DT: Like how many in a... in a... in a crew?
- DK: We'd have at least... at least four people to a crew. We had... we had 'em going... I think there was times we had at least 22 people living in Kenai. We didn't have a very good vehicle either. We had an old military 4X's. We got surplus. But, we had to do it in whatever we could get a hold of.
- DT: Are those 4X's the ones where you, like a convoy truck?
- DK: Yep.
- DT: Some of them sit in the back.
- DK: Yep.
- DT: On a crew?
- DK: Yeah, because you could only get three people in the cab. Anymore and they'd have to ride in the back. Some of them were what they call ambulances. Those military ambulances, so you couldn't... you had seats in the back. But, we did... we did a lot of campground maintenance. Then we started getting more equipment. We got the grader and then I started maintaining the roads and then that's what I've been doing ever since. Keeping the roads so people can drive on them. And I lost a wheel off a grader going down the highway. And they got all excited about it and then they bought me a new grader.

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DT: When was that? Do you remember?

DK: That was about 17, 16 years ago. It's sure nice running the new equipment.

DT: I'll bet.

DK: Compared to the old, old stuff...

DT: So the one you first started with was that kind of just a... they picked it up... old? Used? (Undecipherable) or surplus?

DK: We got our surplus from Kodiak.

DT: Oh. From the refuge? Or just?

DK: No. I think it was from the military.

DT: Oh, military.

DK: Yeah. We run the... I put a lot of hours on that one. But once I lost that wheel they got scared.

DT: I bet. So what did the facility in Kenai look like? I mean, the shop was just one building.

DK: It was... yeah, we had... We had... actually we had four stalls. Two of them were mechanic shops, two of them were carpenter shops, and then there was another section that was cold storage and for vehicles. Then the office, when I first went there, was a little building with a Quonset hut hooked to it. And then a few years later they upgraded it and put a basement under it. Just part of it. And, not, a couple years after that they moved it to Soldotna.

DT: So, how many people... when you first started, at the refuge... How many people were working?

DK: There was probably about seven. Six. Seven.

DT: So they had biologists then, or just?

DK: They had a manager, an assistant manger who was also pilot, and they had a forester, and then one in charge of recreation and then your administrative officer and then secretary, then a maintenance man and then the equipment operator, and that was... that was about the size of it.

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DT: Yeah. Pretty... pretty tight group, huh?

DK: Yeah. Pretty small. And it just started growing. And they started getting biologists and assistant biologists and then they, I mean they just... just kept getting bigger and bigger. For awhile we had two pilots. And we didn't... and most... most of them, I don't even think they had law enforcement authorities. One of them might of. Not like today. We got... I can't remember what the total is on the permanent staff, but it's... it's way up there.

DT: It's gotta be at least 15 or more?

DK: More than that. I think it's...

DT: 20.

DK: 30.

DT: 30.

DK: At least that if not more. Most of them are in the office. Right now in the shop, full-time, we got myself, we got the mechanics, the heavy duty mechanics, automotive mechanics, and two maintenance workers.

DT: All permanent.

DK: All permanent. And we got, we got about three that are seasonal; a carpenter, a carpenter helper. I think there's two or three. Not that many people in the maintenance anymore.

DT: Not really considering how much the refuge has grown.

DK: Oh, the refuge has. This has really grown. We started out with maybe eight vehicles and today we got about 50 vehicles not counting heavy equipment. We got probably close to 70 or 80 vehicles.

DT: That's a lot of vehicles.

DK: Yeah.

DT: So that is the work of the one automotive mechanic? He's able to do all that?

DK: He's gotta do it all. Yeah.

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DT: There's some work, I guess, that's just surplus out?

DK: A little bit. Not very... we don't have... we don't ship very much of it out. Most of it is done right here. Most of our vehicles are so new anymore that they're not breaking down.

DT: Yeah. So it's mostly like oil changes.

DK: Oil changes, service jobs. But now we added... he's got snow machines to work on, outboard motors, if he wants to. He's not supposed to. Of course, we've got other people here who are supposed to do that.

DT: So the heavy automotive is... is more of the... the graders and big equipment.

DK: Yeah, the graders, the loaders. Yeah, the big equipment. Those are for heavy mechanics. But, he's been here for almost 20 years. It don't seem possible. (inaudible due to room noise) possible, but he has. He's getting ready to... getting ready to retire.

DT: So, you're talking about Al, right?

DK: Al, yeah.

DT: And Al's last name is?

DK: Olguin

DT: Olguin.

DK: Yeah, he's getting up close enough where he's got enough time to retire. I've been talking about it, but... We'll see. I'm still having too much fun.

DT: That's right.

DK: Mainly if I can stay out on the equipment.

DT: So, what kind of a manager was Jim Monte? Was he a... was he a biologist's background, or?

DK: I can't...

DT: Tell me a little bit about him.

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DK: I can't remember, but he... he was a good manager. He pretty much left us alone. We'd just tell him what we were gonna be doing and... Most of them are that way. They just left us... They just left us alone. They knew what we were doing. And they had... they had trust in us that we... we knew what we were doing.

DT: So it was just kinda lining out projects?

DK: Yeah. We kept... just... we just line out, like earlier. When we were at Kenai we'd line out the crews, then we'd go in and tell him what we had them doing and if they had a change then we'd make the changes. It worked out great. Then you get new people and they come with new ideas and...

DT: Did you ever have to train people? Did you train a lot?

DK: I... Yeah, I did. I... they sent me out for, I can't remember the, what year it was, but they sent me out to Florida to... to a heavy equipment instructor class.

DT: Fairly early in your career?

DK: No, this was probably 10 years ago. 15 years ago. Right around in there.

DT: So then you could train other people.

DK: I've gone around the state to different refuges training their people. I keep tell... I kept telling them, I... when I train them I'd like to train them on their equipment because that's what they're gonna be running. They're not gonna be running the equipment I got here.

DT: Right.

DK: And they agreed. They... they always pretty much let me go if I needed to do it.

DT: So how long was the school you went to? Was it a pretty intensive class or how long were you gone for that?

DK: I was gone about... I was only gone a week. It was a 40 hour class. I went to Merritt Island.

DT: And, where is that?

DK: In Florida.

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DT: Florida?

DK: Cape... Cape Kennedy. It was... it was interesting. Never been there before.

DT: Kinda fun?

DK: Yeah. It was in... it was interesting.

DT: Did you get to meet people from all the other refuges too, or was it...?

DK: Nationwide.

DT: (Undecipherable).

DK: Nationwide. Yeah. There was a guy from Michigan that (tape cutoff).

DT: So what kind of training facilities did they house you at and so on, Dick?

DK: They housed they... well, we... we stayed at a motel and we went to the refuge maintenance yard to... for our training. They had all different types of equipment there to work with and...

DT: So did you... what kind of things did they train you on? I mean have you work on? All different equipment?

DK: All different equipment; grader, loader, backhoe. Just a little bit of everything.

DT: So was that something you had been interested in working towards, or?

DK: Well.

DT: They asked you if you would be willing to do it?

DK: Yeah.

DT: How... how did you end up gettin' in that role?

DK: The guy... the guy they sent first, he transferred from here so they didn't have one for region 7. So then they asked me if I'd go and I said sure, because I was the only operator in the state.

DT: So they were...

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DK: Yeah. If I would have...

DT: You probably remember who... who that other person was, or did you...?

DK: Ben Kyle. Yeah, he was... he was... actually he was my supervisor and he went out for it and then he transferred. So that left... left region 7 without an instructor at the time and then they asked me if I'd go and I told them sure. Now I think they've got a few extra... a few other oper... instructors in the state, but they're coming up with a new... new training schedule and we'll wait and see what that's gonna be like.

DT: So do you like training people? What do you think of it?

DK: Oh yeah. I think it's interesting. It's interesting to... especially when I get to go to the different refuges and see what different places are like.

DT: That would be the (inaudible).

DK: Yeah.

DT: Real good perk of the whole thing.

DK: Well then, well I've been... I've been doing a little bit of traveling with... especially with the hydro axe now that we got it. I've been to Cordova working for the... did some work for the forest service two years in a row. Cleared some area for 'em and I went to Portage with it to do some work for the forest service, and now at the end of the month I'm gonna be going to Cold Bay to do some work. So I get to see parts... different parts of Alaska.

DT: Yeah. That's neat. Yeah. Well, you trained me, so I know you must have trained other people at our refuge too.

DK: Oh, yeah. I think I've trained most of the people here, but not on the hydro axe, on other equipment. I've... so far I've trained... well no, I've been training one other one on the hydro axe lately, which is... Eventually, I'm gonna be retiring and they're gonna have to have somebody to take over.

DT: Who are you training now for that?

DK: Craig Hill. He's our maintenance man. He's been learning and I'm supposed to train a couple others if I can get them to break away from their schedule.

DT: Not always easy, is it?

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DK: When I'm ready to train 'em, they're not ready. So I tell them, well tough.

DT: Yeah.

DK: Yeah, you got... you got certified on that.

DT: Yeah, I worked on the hydro axe and...

DK: You drove dump truck.

DT: The dump truck.

DK: The Bombardier.

DT: Some of the other trucks too.

DK: Yeah.

DT: Yeah. So, how many people do you think you... you train each summer? Do you have like usually a few people every year?

DK: Yeah, I use... Well, here the last few years, I've been training all the fire crew on the Bombardier because they have to get training on that. So I gotta take a minute to take them out and run them around through the woods. That gets interesting. Some of them are afraid and don't wanna run the machine, but by the time they get done they feel pretty comfortable with it.

DT: Yeah, I thought it was not too intimidating when I first got into it, but...

DK: It can be.

DT: It can be with just trying to figure out the different gears and everything.

DK: Yeah.

DT: Especially when you're not used to driving much else besides a car or truck.

DK: Yeah, and then you get something with tracks underneath it.

DT: But it sure gets kinda scary when you get into that muskeg kinda wet, marshy stuff.

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DK: Yeah, I imagine I'll have to train some more this year. So I just gotta work it into my schedule.

DT: Did they have a fire program when you first started?

DK: Nope. They didn't have no kinda fire program. They didn't have any fire people working.

DT: Who was the first fire management officer or person that started up the fire crew?

DK: I think that was Bill Larnard.

DT: Bill Larnard?

DK: I think he was the first one they had.

DT: So Bob Semel was kind of a...

DK: Forester.

DT: Forester.

DK: Yeah, he was a forester.

DT: Forester. No fire.

DK: He didn't have much to do with fire. He was mostly... yeah. And after him was... after Bob Semel was Al Johnson. He had a little bit, not... not much to do with the fires.

DT: Did they do any fuels reductions or?

DK: Just...

DT: Like that?

DK: No, they did just (undecipherable). It's a mistake they made. They didn't burn after the crushing.

DT: Yeah, they spent all that money on the crushing.

DK: Yeah. Originally the crushers were bought to rehab the swamps from an earlier fire. That happened in '69. That's when they bought... that's why they bought

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those. And then they started using them other places and they were gonna burn after, but they never did. The Mystery Creek area. Now they're starting to try to burn it. It's kinda late now. All the trees have grown back up.

DT: Yeah, it's been what? 20 years?

DK: Yeah.

DT: Or more?

DK: More.

DT: 25?

DK: Probably 25 years or so.

DT: Yeah, so you're getting a pretty good sized saplings back.

DK: Yeah. Yeah. Gettin' some pretty good sized trees. But, it's getting so tough for them to burn. All the regulations and if the smoke is blowing towards Anchorage they... You know, if the wind is blowing towards Anchorage you're not supposed to burn because the smoke will carry over there and...

DT: It gives you a pretty small window of opportunity, that's for sure.

DK: I think you know more... you know a lot about that.

DT: So you think Bill Larnard was the first SMO?

DK: If I remember correctly, I think he was.

DT: So that must have been... 80's?

DK: Probably close to that. Yeah. That's a long time ago.

DT: 24 years now. Do you remember why they started the program, or any of the discussions about it?

DK: No.

DT: No?

DK: Nope, I don't. I try to stay away from the office as much as possible.

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DT: Yeah, there's definitely a real division here between the office and shop.

DK: Yeah.

DT: And usually it doesn't mix too much.

DK: No.

DT: Except when it has to.

DK: Yeah. And they... they don't come around here too much. And then they wonder what we do.

DT: Of course, if they did come around, I'm... I'm just guessing that that probably wouldn't go over real well either.

DK: They're all most... they're all good... good people to work with. They must be. I've been here this long.

DT: That's right.

DK: No, I enjoy... I enjoy it. I get a variety.

DT: So tell me about when Al Olguin started, 'cause I know you two have been here quite awhile and seem to be pretty good...

DK: He... Yeah, he got hired on...

DT: Buddies.

DK: He got hired on as our heavy equipment mechanic.

DT: How long had you been here before Al came? Roughly.

DK: 20 years. No, about 15 years.

DT: 15?

DK: Yeah, about 15.

DT: So that made it a little easier to split some of the work, or just to have somebody else...

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DK: Yeah, because before... before Al came there, I think there was 3 years I was here all by myself.

DT: Is that right?

DK: Yeah. Keeping everything running and all the roads maintained.

DT: That must've been quite a job.

DK: It was interesting. It was interesting.

DT: Did you have to work a lot of overtime? Or how'd you get this all done?

DK: No. I just... I just did it. I don't know how I did it, but I did it. I kept everything going. And then I was doing the maintenance on the buildings too. I was the only one here.

DT: How can that be? How can you get everything done?

DK: I don't know.

DT: That's unreal.

DK: I don't know. Yeah, 'cause the time the mechanic left, the one we had, and Al came there was, I think, 3 years.

DT: Were they reluctant to hire that position or we just couldn't get any people?

DK: I don't know. I don't know what the hold up was. Yeah, I was doing it all myself.

DT: Well, I bet you were glad to see Al then.

DK: Yeah. Yeah. We... we worked pretty good together. Then a lot of times in the summer I'll let him go out on the grader just to get away from here. Give 'em a break.

DT: Take a break.

DK: We were hoping to get another grader then both of us could get out of here.

DT: That sounds like a good plan.

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DK: Yeah. No, actually, we could have used two graders. We got enough roads now. Seeing that we're doing most of the maintenance on Skilak Loop with the State maintained roads.

DT: So the State's supposed to work on it, but they...

DK: They're supposed to. They did a little bit of work on it last... last year because it washed out. I mean it literally washed out. There was places you couldn't even get through. I'm sure glad we didn't have to do it because we don't have the equipment.

DT: Yeah.

DK: I mean, you need lots of equipment. But, we've had some interesting jobs. A couple... about two years ago we graveled part of the road to the moose research center. That was... we had three dump trucks hauling; a grader out there, and a loader. That was a nice job.

DT: Yeah. That must've taken them awhile.

DK: Well, we worked too fast. It didn't take long because we had three drivers and Al was on the grader and I was on the loader.

DT: Wow.

DK: So nobody had to be jumping off and on.

DT: Where'd you get the other three to do the... the trucks...

DK: We had the...

DT: or did you have to detail somebody here?

DK: No, we had... we had Bob Schulameistor. He was the maintenance man here at the time. He drove one truck and our mechanic, auto mechanic, Steve Strecker, he drove one dump truck, and the State had a guy driving a dump truck, and then Al on the grader and me on the loader.

DT: Sounds like a good plan.

DK: Oh, that was. That was a lot of fun. We had a lot of fun. We had a ball. We got the work... we got it done.

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DT: Where were you getting the gravel from?

DK: They had...

DT: (undecipherable) have to go back?

DK: They had it stockpiled on the pad.

DT: Oh.

DK: They had... the oil company had tore up one pad and road. They had to reclaim the gravel and they talked him into hauling it out and dumping it on the pad for us. Stockpiling it.

DT: Well, that's what made your turnaround time so quick.

DK: Real quick. That's why...

DT: That's awesome. Yeah.

DK: That's why it was good that we had the guy on the loader. You didn't have to be jumping back and forth.

DT: Well, that makes sense. So that... the moose research station, that's quite a ways out though. How far out is that?

DK: 50 miles from here. We keep that maintained in the wintertime. In the springtime we leave it alone. We don't touch it.

DT: Breakup's the worst, right?

DK: Yeah. In the summer time I'll... I'll grade it once in awhile. Mostly it... just maintained it. The State fish and game has people staying out there doing research on the moose and caribou. And then we keep the road open for them.

DT: Yeah. You maintain the road for them. That's a good...

DK: Yeah.

DT: Cooperation between state and us.

DK: Yeah.

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Tape 3

DT: ... and Federal.

DK: Once... once...

DT: This project's been going on quite a while.

DK: That's been going on since your late 60's when they built them. Four pens and each one is a mile square. And all fenced in. And you gotta go through gates to get in there.

(End of tape 3, side 1. Side 2 not recorded.)