

National Heritage Team of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Oral History Program

Interviewee: "Hobo" Jim Varsos

PSA:

Date:

Interviewed by:

*Interviewer: We'll just have you to introduce yourself and probably give a title that most Alaskans would recognize you by and then we'll go down the list of questions I have here. One thing, that it's really good probably for the public service announcements is that if you do mention a refuge, you know, you just would say the name, like if you were talking about the Soldotna area, you would probably say Kenai National Wildlife Refuge*

*Jim Varsos: Okay*

*Interviewer: Or other places that you might have been. And I think that's pretty much it. We'll let you go with the introduction and we'll get started*

*Jim Varsos: Should I just say, "Hi, this is Hobo Jim" just for starters?*

*Interviewer: Yeah, and I, you know...*

*Jim Varsos: Or, "Alaska State Balladeer Hobo Jim?"*

*Interviewer: Yeah, I was getting ready to say, you're also known as the Balladeer, so yeah.*

*Jim Varsos: Okay, I'll just do it that way.*

*Interviewer: Okay, go ahead.*

Jim Varsos: Hi, this is Alaska's State Baladeer, Hobo Jim.

Interviewer: Okay, that's great. Now why don't we get started with just the general question about you can tell the listeners about your connection with the outdoors.

Jim Varsos: Okay. I've enjoyed Alaska's outdoors for the past 32 years. From the Kenai Peninsula to the southeast, all the way up to the Arctic, and I feel Alaska's outdoors is one of the most beautiful places in the world. One of my favorite spots, of course, is the Kenai Peninsula and the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge.

Interviewer: Alright, you're good! One other thing about this recording too Jim is that feel free to anytime you want to stop and do it again, because I'm going to send this CD down and then they just cut and paste. So just yeah, it's really informal. But that's actually really good, really good and calm. My next question, you've already answered,

how long have you been coming to Alaska, so I've got that. Do you have a place on the Kenai too?

Jim Varsos: Yeah, I do.

Interviewer: Okay. Wow, you're lucky.

Jim Varsos: In fact, if you want, I can say something about that too if you'd like.

Interviewer: Yeah, go ahead.

Jim Varsos: Okay. I spend most of my time in the summer on the beautiful Kenai River, on the Kenai, and [let me try one more time].

I spend most of my time on the beautiful Kenai River on the Kenai Peninsula. That river is shared by the Kenai Wildlife Refuge along with state lands and private lands and we work hard to protect and enjoy that river. The National Wildlife Refuge is a great part of that.

Interviewer: That's excellent. You're, you're doing a really great, great thing here by tying this all in with the refuge. It's really tough for me sometimes to get the interviewee's to...

Jim Varsos: Well, you know, I'm part of that. I don't know if you've ever heard of the Kenai Classic, but it's the tournament that Ted Stevens puts on every year in the Kenai. We have 18 U.S. Senators and Congressmen that fish it, and we raise like a million or two a year for preservation habitat, restoration stuff. We work, actually, with the refuge a lot on that, so.

Interviewer: Wow! You know, I'm really probably still technically considered a cheechako! I moved to Alaska in 2000, so I came up...

Jim Varsos: You've made it a few winters, you're up at Fairbanks. You've put in more cold weather than most people!

Interviewer: Well, yeah. You know, some people say like after you've survived one winter in the Arctic, you can call yourself Renardo. But there are so many things that I still have to learn about Alaska, and just some of the great people that we have up here and the wonderful things that go on. Having the opportunity to do the interviews that I've done, just really made me aware of how ignorant I've been. But, you know, most people spend their entire lives learning, so I'm looking forward to it in the future.

Are there any really... There's some particularly fond memories you have of fishing or anything that treasure that you'd like to share with the listeners as far as...

*Jim Varsos: One second here.*

Interviewer: *Somebody's calling?*

Jim Varsos: *I'll be right with you.*

Interviewer: *Okay.*

Jim Varsos: *Excuse me, you can't get online right now guys. Hello, you can't get online, I'm doing an interview here.*

*Okay. We have a lot of guests for Thanksgiving here, so someone is trying to get on the internet.*

Interviewer: Okay, yeah, just any, anything that you'd want to share just to kind of, you know, show the link between, between you and...

Jim Varsos: Sure.

Interviewer: And if it's on a refuge, it's really good. If not, it's okay still even if it's off. But it sounds like you've probably spent a lot of time on refuges.

Jim Varsos: After all these years of driving on the Kenai Peninsula, I never get tired of seeing the mountains, seeing the Beluga whales in the Turnagain Arm. I never get tired of counting how many eagles there are along the Kenai River and Cooper Landing and in the Kenai Wildlife Refuge. I never get tired of taking the drive through the Kenai Wildlife Refuge to bypass the little that's hold out in the traffic in the summer and to see how close the wilderness really is to the towns in Alaska. One of my fondest memories is fishing on the Kenai with my wife, myself, and my boy in an afternoon of fishing on the Kenai, catching a 68-, a 74-, and a 76-pound King Salmon - what a place to live!

Interviewer: Oh my gosh! You make me want to go to work for the Kenai Refuge! Wow!

How long does it take to get a 74-pound fish in the boat?

Jim Varsos: In about 40 minutes. I actually fish the Kenai every... Well, nine guys are allowed six days a week, so I fish six days a week on the Kenai, from June to October.

Interviewer: Six days a week!

Jim Varsos: Yeah, and I take usually four people out on my boat and we live to fish!

Interviewer: Oh wow, that's amazing! Do you fly-fish or?

Jim Varsos: We do both, yeah. On the Kenai we mostly do bait. Can I say one more thing here?

Interviewer: Sure.

Jim Varsos: I remember one time fishing off the banks near the Kenai Wildlife Refuge for rainbow trout and catching a 12-pound rainbow. Pulling him in and taking my hook out of him and seeing in his snout a rusted fly that some other angler had the unfortunate experience of losing this old fighter. So I pulled out my hook and pulled out the hook that some other angler had left and let the old guy go in the Kenai. It's just such a wonderful thing to see that river building up in its' fish and seeing the fisheries doing so well.

I don't know if this is what you wanted, but.

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah. I'm sorry, I'm kind of caught up in the memory of that. I've beat the water to a froth down there a few times and never hooked into a fish.

Jim Varsos: Well, you're going to need to come down, I'm the easiest person on the Kenai to find. Come down anytime between June and the first of September next summer, I'd be glad to take you out.

Interviewer: Oh, I'd love that. Me and my wife have driven through on our way to Homer a few times, and we just kind of pull off the road and fish for an hour or so and we're probably fishing in the most heavily fished areas. If I recall it was September, so both times it was after the runs too, and we probably didn't know what we were doing either! But I know there's some prime fishery there.

Jim Varsos: Yeah, I've actually done PSA's before for the [U.S. Fish and] Wildlife Refuge and for the river too for proper fishing and cleaning up and taking out the garbage and fishing in hip boots instead off the bank. I've done a lot of ads for them.

Interviewer: In my little bit of research it's just amazing how much charity work you do. But that's probably very rewarding for you too.

Anyway, let's see, you've hit on a couple of other things I was going to ask too. One thing I'd like for you to maybe touch on is the value of Alaska's national wildlife refuges to Alaskans and all Americans. Would you, living in the lower 48 and in Alaska, you of all people could probably sum that up best, more than any people I've talked too just, you know, the benefits. People in the lower 48 really value Alaska and Alaska's national wildlife refuges, some maybe more than Alaskans themselves. But would you care to expand on that?

Jim Varsos: Yeah. Now they're not using this stuff for ANWR or anything like that?

Interviewer: No, no, no.

Jim Varsos: This is just for your refuges?

Interviewer: Well, this is for...

Jim Varsos: I mean for all of the refuges?

Interviewer: Yeah, all of the refuges.

Jim Varsos: Yeah, that's great. I just want to make sure I don't say anything that...

Interviewer: Yeah, we're sensitive to that. In fact Jim, if you would like, we'll send you a copy of the cut.

Jim Varsos: Oh, no, no. This is fine. So yeah, we'll just shoot for it.

Alaska's a real wild land and we have lot's of wild territory, but we also enjoy the areas that we've set aside to preserve our habitat for the future. Our wildlife refuges are something that we can leave for our children.

Interviewer: Excellent, excellent. Okay. We talked about charity. Can you think of anything you'd like to say, I guess maybe suggestions or examples of ways or things that people or Alaskans can do to help insure refuges will be around for future generations? For example, volunteering or some people do photojournalism, music.

Jim Varsos: When you come to Alaska or if you live in Alaska, make a point of visiting some of our many wildlife refuges and seeing the work that they're doing and seeing the habitat they're protecting. Get out and enjoy and tell other people what a great experience it is to visit the national wildlife refuges.

Interviewer: Wonderful, that's great. That's probably, I mean this is going to be a really short segment, probably less than 60 seconds. So we probably have more than enough, but I'll leave it open to you if you have any last parting messages that you'd like to pass along.

Jim Varsos: Let me say just one more thing. With all of the places in the world I've seen, Alaska is still the most beautiful. If you haven't seen it, come up and see it. If you have seen, you know, what I'm talking about.

Interviewer: Excellent, excellent! Okay, Jim you're truly a professional, you've done an excellent job. The best by far that I have experienced and I think your time with me is going to be really good and I think we're going to have a great PSA along with Tom Bodett's intro and then your comments. I think it will be really good. They will be running next spring. The refuge's 100th birthday is March 14, 2003, and these PSA's will be being played probably a month before and then a few months afterward all over.

Jim Varsos: Are they running statewide?

Interviewer: Yeah, my knowledge of what's going to happen is they'll send the cd's out to all of the refuges, 14 refuges or 16 refuges, and then those refuges will take the cd's to their local radio station and ask them to play those. So in Bethel, Kotzebue, Fairbanks, Anchorage, Kenai; so all of those areas should be playing these next spring.

Anyway, I thank you for your time and for putting the call on your...

Jim Varsos: Keep that in mind about the fishing.

Interviewer: Yeah, I will! Happy holidays Jim.

Jim Varsos: You too, goodbye.