



The Oral History of Alan “Al” Crane

May 1, 2024

October 2, 2024

Interview conducted by Robin West

Kenai Peninsula, Alaska



Oral History Cover Sheet

Approximate years worked for Fish and Wildlife Service: 20

Offices and Field Stations Worked, Positions Held: Agent/Pilot - Nome, Alaska (1974 - 1979); SRA (Senior Resident Agent) – Fairbanks, Alaska (1979 - 1995).

Some Important Projects Discussed: Operation Falcon; taking of wolves in violation of the Airborne Hunting Act, Kanuti National Wildlife Refuge; illegal take of trophy Dall Sheep, Wrangell-St. Elias National Park; Operation Whiteout; and the Ron Hayes Case (illegally driving trophy brown bears with an airplane to guided hunters).

Colleagues and Mentors: Ray Trembley (USFWS), Jim King, Bill Sladen, Mark Webb (USFWS), Jim Low (Alaska State Trooper, Fish and Wildlife Protection), Stan Reynolds (Canada), Larry Hood (USFWS).

Brief Summary of Interview: Al recounts growing up in a ranching family in southeastern Idaho where he learned most of what he thought about the environment and conserving wildlife from his dad. He talks about working as a protection officer for the Alaska Department of Fish and Game in southeast Alaska (Ketchikan and Juneau) and later as a District Officer/Wildlife Trooper and pilot in Dillingham in southwest Alaska. Al was employed by the State of Alaska when the Department of Fish and Game protection officers were moved to the Department of Public Safety, making them wildlife troopers. In 1974, he was hired by the USFWS as an agent/pilot and was stationed in Nome. The Marine Mammal Protection Act had just been enacted in 1972, so that was the focus at the time. While in Nome, he was very involved with the Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race, first as a Board Member of the Iditarod Trail Committee, and later as President. He also participated in the sled dog race as a rookie in 1977. In 1979, he transferred to Fairbanks as the SRA (Senior Resident Agent). One landmark case made during his time in Fairbanks became known as *Operation Falcon*. This was an international investigation involving the illegal taking, selling and moving of falcons all over the world. *Operation Falcon* contributed to the recovery of the peregrine falcon. Al recounts another case involving a local dentist and a pilot who ran a local flying service. After seizures of over 300 illegally taken animals and a “diary” narrating daily illegal hunting activities, the case concluded with numerous arrests and fines, including a felony violation of the Lacey Act against the local dentist after he violated the terms of his parole. Another case involved the taking of wolves in violation of the Airborne Hunting Act in the Kanuti National Wildlife Refuge. While executing a search warrant at the homes of the defendants, an orthopedic surgeon Dr. Jack Frost and a big game guide Chuck Wirschem, photographs found in the Wirschem search led to the investigation and additional case against Wirschem for the illegal take of a trophy Dall Sheep on Wrangell-St Elias National Park lands. Operation Whiteout was also discussed as one of many cases that Al feels made a difference. The details of the case were captured and summarized in an hour-long program on

Dateline and can also be found in a book titled *Animal Investigators* by Dr. Laurel Neme. In a follow-up interview Al also shared details of a challenging undercover case focusing on Ron Hayes, a well-known and successful Alaska hunting guide. The case resulted in highly publicized convictions of the Airborne Hunting Act and Lacey Act and undoubtedly helped shape how future hunting operations would be conducted.

Al credits much of the success of his work to the use of small airplanes operating in remote areas and often under challenging conditions. He received a *Safe Flying Award of Honor* from the Department of Interior for 20 years of accident-free flying.

THE INTERVIEW

ROBIN WEST: I'm sitting here with Al Crane, Alan R. Crane, in his beautiful home on the Kenai Peninsula, Alaska. We're overlooking the Kenai River. My name is Robin West, and it is May 1, 2024. I worked with Al a little bit here and there over the years. He's got a lot of stories to tell, and we look forward to hearing them. Al, why don't you just start by telling us a little bit about how you grew up, about your early life and how you moved to Alaska.

AL CRANE: I come from a ranching family in southeast Idaho, which is just over the hill from Jackson Hole. I was born in the 40s, and my dad's people came into that country in the 1800s, homesteaded it. He was one of those people who, at the time you didn't know when you were young, just how important he was to you. He was one of those people that knew everything about anything, how to make things and how to make things work. He didn't have a big education, but he hunted, he fished, and he provided for the family. He ranched and, if anything went wrong, he took care of it. He was a crack shot and when it came to grouse, for example, he could shoot the head off a grouse with a 30-30 off his horse. But he always told us that never, even if it was in the summer when you shouldn't be shooting them, you never take everything. We would turn a creek that dumped into the Bear River, we'd turn that creek out on the meadow to irrigate the wild hay. Then, we'd go there in the morning and there would be big rainbow trout, native trout laying in the stream, and we would never ever change the dam until all those fish were carried back to the stream, so that they would be there for the future. He was from Idaho, where the Claude Dallas problem was. I could have told you the verdict of that case from day one, because if there was anybody low in the world, it was a game warden. There was no need to have a rule connected to fish and wildlife. My dad was that kind of a person. He wasn't the kind of person that would pull the trigger on a game warden, but there was just no need for rules. They had their own rules. So, when I became an agent, he did come visit before he died, but he never had a discussion with me about it. Maybe I convinced him in the way I talked about things, that we did need it in today's world. That's where I learned most of what I thought about the environment and most of what I thought about conserving wildlife was from my dad.

ROBIN WEST: So, what was your dad's name?

AL CRANE: My dad's name was Jim Crane or James George Crane, and he was one of seven generations [firstborn sons] that had been named James. The first one came from Wales.

ROBIN WEST: What made you go to school in Utah, to leave Idaho?

AL CRANE: I went to school in Utah because it was just across the border from our area. Moscow, where I really wanted to go, was 900 miles away, and I needed to go to the ranch often. I wouldn't think of going to Pocatello. It was the most windy, terrible place on Earth. So, every weekend I could go home from Utah State over the border and help on the ranch. So, that's where I ended up. Also, I don't mind telling you that I'm LDS, and it was important to be around that. Even though Utah State is a land grant university and lots of "non" LDS people go there, but there's that way of life. I knew only LDS people in my community because there was nobody else but the LDS people.

I had served a mission in New Zealand and decided that I would go there. I met my wife at Utah State, and she's two years younger than me. After we got married, she helped finish school with me. Then, we jumped in our truck and headed to Alaska because I had worked summers in Petersburg, Alaska for the Department of Fish and Game in their stream guard program. I was never a stream guard, but I was an expeditor who flew around and serviced these people, went on boats and flew on airplanes and did all these things. It was just like going to heaven, and I just knew that I wanted to come back to Alaska. So, we decided after graduation, both as teachers, that we would go back if we had a job, which we did. We had signed contracts in Petersburg in southeast Alaska to both teach. She would teach English and French, and I would teach political science and whatever else they wanted me to teach. When we got to Prince George, on our way up in the spring of '69, we called across and said we would get on the ferry and be there shortly. They informed us that we hadn't signed our contracts, and they had given the contracts to someone else. Obviously, our contracts had been lost in the mail. We had one momentary struggle with a swallow, then decided that was just fine. We would head on to Anchorage and see what we could get.

ROBIN WEST: Had Jo been to Alaska before?

AL CRANE: She flew up the summer before we were married, with her folks to visit me in Petersburg. I was working there. As she was landing in a PBY Catalina that came from Annette Island, they landed on the water and taxied up onto the ramp. She got out of the airplane, and she says to her folks, (she tells this story many times) "Well, if it's like this, he'll never leave." So, we never left.

ROBIN WEST: Very good. But you didn't teach. What kind of job did you find then?

AL CRANE: There were several jobs. There could have been a job inlet, on the oil rigs and there was a job to paint. But it was getting a little bit like we needed to have a little money to survive up here. So, I called Juneau and talked to the folks that I had worked with in the summer, and they said that they had a temporary job as a temporary protection officer. And I thought to myself, *well, this would be okay*. I could hunt and fish to my heart's delight, and I could do all those things that I had been doing. What better way to see the state? So, I decided to drive back down on the Alcan and around the road to Haines. Then we went to Juneau, and they sent me to Ketchikan, and I became a temporary district officer there with another man by the name of Ed Eckhoff. We stayed there for 18 months, and after 18 months, they had some faith in me evidently because they shipped me to Juneau as the district officer. Juneau was a real awakening because Juneau had all the politics. Two things happened in Juneau. One is, it was a time when all of a sudden politics and the signs of the times demanded that the governor move the Protection Division from Fish and Game to the Department of Public Safety. We all became troopers in the signing of a pen, just like that, and it was a tough time for some people. Also, when you're doing your job, and you know half of the people you're doing your job with are politicians, senators or whatever representatives. I had an incident where you couldn't fish with two poles or commercial fish in Gastineau Channel in Juneau. It was for sports fishermen, and it is like there are a lot of Fish and Game rules that there was no biological reason for. It was to make sure the locals had an opportunity to fish rather than just commercial fishermen. I just happened to be there on a Sunday afternoon when the Commissioner of Labor was fishing with two poles. [Sports fishermen could only use one pole and the commissioner didn't have a commercial license]. So, I turned the king salmon loose that he had on one pole and cited him. It was on the weekend, and by Monday morning, the Commissioner of Public Safety was having a total meltdown because the Governor had called and wanted action. They never went after my job, but they went after my higher up's jobs, and that was what we lived through for a number of years with the

Department of Public Safety and Fish and Game. At the risk of swearing, I will just say it this way. We were bastard children of the state troopers, because it was not an important job. If you weren't chasing someone who was a robber or a murderer, then it wasn't an important thing. So, we had to fight that. I knew I wanted to be out of Juneau, and I knew there was a job in Dillingham that was a flying officer job. So, I went to work to get my pilot's license in Juneau. Like always, whenever I've been working anywhere, I've been involved in local activities. I immediately went to the Juneau Flying Club and became the president. That was a way to be involved in everything and maybe know everybody then try and get some hours. We made the thing successful by buying two Cessna 170s, and I got my hours there and my private license. With 200 hours under my belt, the state had faith in me and sent me as the district officer to Dillingham. I don't know if you've ever flown out of Anchorage across the inlet to Lake Clark and gone through Lake Clark Pass and know what it feels like to open up into this big open space – the Bristol Bay drainage - in a Super Cub with floats - and you've never been there, and you have 200 hours. That's what I was going to do – and the rest is history. I went down there and spent almost two years as the state officer there. I think I did a good job for them, and they were pleased with me. Then, one day I got a call from both Ray Trembley with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Bud Weberg, who was with NOAA, and they asked me if I wanted to go to work. I don't know how this happened, whether they were in cahoots or whatever, but the calls were within 20 minutes of each other. Well, I was not particularly unhappy with the job, as I was never cut out to be in a military-type regime where the guy that was over you was a corporal, but he didn't even act like a corporal. He acted like somebody who was six years old, and I had a hard time respecting him. Well, it just seemed very appetizing to make the change. It was like night and day because Ray was like a human, who treated people with respect.

ROBIN WEST: Where was Ray's office at?

AL CRANE: In Anchorage. So, there were three things that he said to me, “We would like to have you open a station in Nome, and your priorities would be marine mammal enforcement.” And he said, “We know you're good with the native people because of what we've heard about in the bush here.” And he said, “We would get your required pilot training completed.” That was commercial and instrument. I said, “Well, I've just gotten here, and I don't know how I would move up there by going clear to Anchorage and then back to Nome.” And he said, “Well, we have airplanes that come up and down the coast all the time. We have a DC3 that probably will be making a patrol from up the coast, and it would be no big deal to stop in Dillingham, if you had everything on the runway, to pick it up and take it to Nome.” Well, the decision was not hard, so I made that decision. The folks in Dillingham helped me get our worldly possessions to the airport, and before I got to Nome, Fish and Game people in Nome had moved all my stuff to the house where we were going to live for the next seven years. And we weren't even there.

ROBIN WEST: What year did you move there?

AL CRANE: That was 1974.

ROBIN WEST: So, the Marine Mammal Protection Act had been in place for a couple of years.

AL CRANE: Since '72.

ROBIN WEST: This was kind of a focus, then.

AL CRANE: Yeah. It just began, and it was a situation where there was only one thing between you and Washington, and that was Anchorage. And they expected you to do your job and do it without being told much. I obviously performed because I didn't have a lot of supervision. I could've had more supervision, maybe, but I didn't. Most of the time and most of the things that happened were very positive. We enjoyed Nome tremendously and we made some pretty good cases. I had some criticism from the hardcore law enforcement people in the beginning, like I was a social worker. But that's exactly what it was. The necessity was to tell those people what was expected before you went and enforced the rules. I held numerous meetings all over my area, which was northwest Alaska. I put blurbs on the radio in the native languages, all of them, all dialects – the Eskimo Southern and Northern Inupiaq dialects, Siberian Yupik, the Athabaskan Indian dialect, and in English - of all the Fish and Wildlife rules. I had a friend who worked at KNOM radio station who helped me and then other radio stations that helped with it, and they were played, and they were professional and those have ended up at Shepherdstown also. But anyway, then when it came time to do my job, it was much easier. People understood what we were up to, and why we were doing it. It wasn't until the Lands Interest Act that they really got busy in the bush, but in the beginning it wasn't there. Nobody had been around since the problem with ducks in Barrow. That was a very negative situation. But, in Nome, I found most of it all very positive and people were receptive. There was a time on Saint Lawrence in one of the meetings (we'll get to this a little later) where there was an antagonistic moment. But they all calmed down when I said "I don't care who it is, whether they are black people, white people, yellow people, red people or *you* people. We all know that we have crooks and thieves in our midst. There are people who do not even obey *your* rules. You know who they are, and you know that you can't put up with that forever because they'll ruin it for everybody." Then, the tide changed. And, eventually, I became very close friends with lots of people in the village. You might say, how could an enforcement officer become close friends [with people in the village]. If you can gain the trust and you do your job *honestly*, then I believe there's no problem with it. One of the biggest cases that we made was, and I'll talk about it later, but it was connected to a whaling captain from Saint Lawrence Island calling me and saying, "We have a problem. We need your help." And that blossomed into what was eventually *Operation Whiteout*.

ROBIN WEST: Yeah. I'm going to ask you about that. Maybe you could tell me a little bit about the flying, in those days. The Fish and Wildlife Service had quite the fleet of airplanes. Tell me about that and working with OAS (Office of Aviation Services). You did some amazing things being out on your own in remote bush flying. Just tell me a little bit about how that went. If you weren't a pilot, you really couldn't do your job, right?

AL CRANE: Today, I'm quite amazed that people don't think they need it as much as they did, but people are still doing things with airplanes. So therefore, an airplane is still a necessity. But maybe it's the approach that's different, I don't know. But, in my time, I saw that you could do nothing in Alaska with the road system because that was all where people were. And they'd gotten rid of all the wildlife in the numbers that there are. So, when you wanted to go do something, especially if you wanted to violate the law, you went into the bush. There was no place that couldn't be reached with an airplane. If you didn't have an airplane, and all the bad guys were there [in the bush], you needed to be capable and you needed to have the airplane as an extra tool to get you there and, in some cases, outwit them. So, the airplane was a big deal. [I remember] Trembley telling me that it was required to have the training, commercial and instrument training, I understood immediately, as soon as I got out there, that those were necessities that would keep me alive.

There's a certain amount of pressure for a law enforcement person to do their job, especially when it comes to the office part of it, and it was my therapy to go get in the airplane and leave and do something besides paperwork. That was a wonderful thing. Then when there were things to do, like surveys, I didn't mind jumping across from a law enforcement position to a survey position, because I was just as interested in how many and what kind, and what it was that we were dealing with, as I was in doing the law enforcement job. So, I flew the airplane on swan surveys with people like Jim King and even Bill Sladen. An interesting story with Bill is, after he flew with me for hours and hours, he called Anchorage and relayed that *he was kind of worried about Al out there because he would fly this Beaver airplane for eight hours and, even though he needed oil, he wouldn't land. He needed so much oil, he would just pour it in while we were underway.* Of course, you could do that with a Beaver because there was a side spout. And yet, that kept me from landing and spending all that time, so we could just continue the survey. Anyway, it was kind of a joke, but a lot of good hours were spent with Bill. Then there were a lot of hours where I was just flying VIPs. There were two, in particular, I remember. One was Cecil Andrus, the U.S. Secretary of the Interior from Idaho. I flew him up and down the beach, and that was the first time I had anybody that I thought might *notice or know or want to do something* about dead walruses on the beach. So, I showed him 300 walruses along the known beaches, and he promised me that he'd go back and do something.

ROBIN WEST: So, were they headless walrus?

AL CRANE: Yes, headless walrus. It was a long time coming, doing something, but I did have him in the airplane anyway. I also had Clark Bavin in the airplane, who was the Chief of Law Enforcement in the new law enforcement organization for the Service, and people like that. Those were good times, when we could just land anywhere. We had big enough tires on the 185 or the Cub or the Beaver, so we would just land anywhere, spend the night, build a fire and roast reindeer sausage. I have this reputation for being big into reindeer sausage, Triscuits and cheese. That was our "go to" lunch. Anytime I see somebody now from those old days, they always ask me if I still have the supply in my house. So, the airplane was a really important tool, so much so that I've owned an airplane, a Super Cub, since my days in Nome. I don't fly it a lot right now, but I flew one for 20 years for the government. I have something that's special to me. I have an *Award of Honor* from the Department of Interior for 20 years of accident-free flying.

ROBIN WEST: That's amazing.

AL CRANE: Something else that should be said right here about the airplane. Mark Webb knows how I love airplanes, he does too. Each one of the agents that came north to work with me either had their pilot's license or flew. They have reason probably to not like me because, the first thing I would do when we would get in the airplane, and they were all fooling around with the radios and going to do all the electronic navigation and do all these things, I would just reach up and turn the radios off, turn everything off and tell them to look outside and get the chart out so they would know where the heck they were any time they looked out. They have all come to me and told me how important that was. I was so far into that, it took me until halfway through my career when GPSs came, to decide I wanted to use the GPS, and it was another one of those things that comes to you hard...*Al Crane* hard, I'd say. I found I cut off an hour and a half on the trip to Nome by using the GPS rather than the compass because, you know, one degree can take you like this [indicating a curvy line], and it takes longer. Maybe not an hour and a half, but at least an hour. When you fly out to Nome, you would fly along, and here would come the Zane Hills. Well, the Zane Hills weren't right in line. The Zane Hills were just a little bit off to the south and

angling, so you'd go down that [valley] and then you'd turn back, and you'd see your compass moving a little bit. So, you just fly like a little "S" all the way to Nome. The GPS and modern navigation are important, but it's also important to know where you are by pilotage, just looking at the land. In fact, with the secretaries in my office, that was a standard question is, "Do you know where you are at?" One of them told me that she (Karen) lived in Barrow. I said, "Well, show me." She had no idea where Barrow was other than it was at the top of the world. And I said, "Karen, you have to know where that is. Because if I go down, I want you to know. When I tell you where I'm at, I want you to be able to look on the chart, find it and be able to relay it. And she went home and told her husband she had to learn geography; she was in trouble.

ROBIN WEST: Just so people understand, you are flying over remote areas where there are very, very, very few roads. So, how many hours roughly from Anchorage to Nome in a Super Cub?

AL CRANE: Seven hours. If you are in a 185, it was four hours.

ROBIN WEST: There you go.

AL CRANE: When I first left Anchorage in the Super Cub to go to Dillingham, there was an ADF, which was a low frequency beacon and to come back to Anchorage on KFQD, which is a 50,000-watt channel. And I could put it on that and after a while leaving Dillingham the needle would swing to Anchorage. Then you could follow the needle to Anchorage. There were no navigational devices for low altitude airplanes other than low frequency, and you did it mostly by compass. I know that sounds like a long archaic time ago, but it's been...well, it has been 55 years. The thing is, times have changed, and we rely on things just like we do the cell phone now, the GPS and everything else, as if that's always been. It hasn't always been so; it was critical to do things right.

ROBIN WEST: It sure has changed, communications and all of that. I want to hear about some of your important cases, but I think before we do that, if you could tell me a little about your activities in Nome. I'm going to lead you into the Iditarod, because I know you ran that race, an amazing race and were also involved with this race. I want to hear a little bit about that. Then, we'll take a little break and come back and talk about some cases.

AL CRANE: People might wonder, if they heard this conversation, what am I talking about - all these personal things that I did. And when I was thinking about what I would say here today for this interview, it came to me that it was important to say something about how life in the bush was for someone who was working in a position like mine. I'm just going to read this one paragraph because, I've taken some time to write it, so I think it's important.

The nature of a pilot agent job in the bush in Alaska was so intertwined with my personal life, especially in Dillingham and Nome, that it's impossible to talk about one without talking about the other. I was always a Fish and Wildlife officer, on duty or off duty. In the Alaskan villages, the job became a way of life which influenced every aspect of living, from recreation, to whom we associated with and what we did with them. It was a way of life, as generally everyone was a sportsman or their livelihood involved commercial fishing, guiding or trapping, and everyone had an opinion. Alaska is unique as with the fact that people are very passionate about the use or abuse of the resources. People have been hired and fired, elected or put out to pasture, including judges, legislators or governors over their actions or inactions and use of our resources. So, with

that, with the multitudes of significant happenings, both personal and career wise, I thought it was important that I list for talking about today not only the important cases, but things I did that put me into a better light with the public, and Iditarod was one of them.

ROBIN WEST: So, while you were in Nome, I know you were involved with Iditarod in more ways than one, but you ran it once, too. Tell me whatever you'd like about that. It had to be quite an adventure.

AL CRANE: I was in Dillingham when I first heard about Iditarod, and I thought, what an adventure. One of the reasons I came to Alaska in the beginning is I was always enthralled by the Jack London stories about the North, and even my dad was always talking about how someday he'd like to do something like that. So, when I heard about Iditarod and the sled dogs, that just sparked something right away. When I got to Nome, there had only been one race. I immediately got involved with the people because that was my nature to be involved with the community. I just always was. So, I got involved with people that were involved with putting the race together and became great friends with all these people who are now dying or are dead. Within a year, I had a little dog team started, and was involved with helping to bring the race to town. That's when the population of Nome doubled, and people came from all over to see it. Then there was the idea that if you didn't do it right, you could ruin its possibilities. So, we wanted to make sure the dogs were treated well and on and on and on. Because I was vocal about things, I was immediately elected as a Board Member for Iditarod, and eventually became the first out of town president for Iditarod, even while I was working. It was kind of a hard deal because I not only had a full-time job, but Iditarod was a full-time job in those years. Yet today, when I look back, it's one of the things that I feel really pretty good about. I had a hand in putting something on the map. I have been all over the world traveling, and if people hear the word *Alaska*, they ask about the race or if they hear the word *Iditarod*, they ask about Alaska. It's synonymous. That's the way sled dogs were to Alaska at the turn of the century. It was so interesting to me because I'm kind of a history student anyway, and I got involved in it. Not only was I involved on the trail, but I was involved with people in the villages. When I would stop, I would talk about Iditarod and the needs and what they could do to help. So, it was just a *door opener*. I've noticed in my job, and I've watched in judgment of other people, that often if people are your friends and they may be poachers, they won't do something if they feel like it's going to embarrass you. That's a principle that's not understood by a lot of enforcement people. So, they often keep to themselves and just do their job. But if you put this other element in there, you get something that is a discussion. There's often a discussion, and somehow, they wouldn't want to be embarrassed when you had to come to do something to them. And it helps the job. It helps do the job. I have an illustration of that, and it's really important. In Fairbanks, Jim Low was an Alaska Fish and Wildlife Trooper. He was a big, strong, healthy guy, but he never wanted to go up the ladder because he had a lot of things going on at home. He had two handicapped children, so he just wanted to do his job, get a paycheck and go home. He didn't need to be the President and didn't need to be the Colonel. When he retired, the District Attorney and near 100 people came to his retirement, including other troopers, a lot of town people and a lot of bush people. When his boss retired no one knew it, and they had to decide that they would go over there and say, "Well, let's just take him to lunch." The difference is, Jim was loved and well known because of the way he approached his job. It had to do with what I'm trying to say that you do with people. You include people in your job, and you want to include them in your friendships; you know their personalities and there's a lot to be said that they do not want to embarrass you, and they do not want to be embarrassed by doing something that's illegal.

ROBIN WEST: So, it's kind of an investment in the community and builds friendships, and there are personal rewards as well as professional rewards.

AL CRANE: I'd like to think that I was the cop who could do his job but could cry and hold a child in my arms that had just drowned, and yet go arrest the guy that just caused the problem. It takes a big effort to be that kind of a person.

ROBIN WEST: Absolutely.

AL CRANE: So anyway, Iditarod...Iditarod, for me, was one of those highlights that was like a religious experience. I flew the trail in my [own] airplane in the [Iditarod] "air force". I raised money and organized resources along the trail. For every aspect, even as a reporter, I'd go along with my tape recorder and then feed it into a telephone to go down the line to news from the trail. I even made some commitments where I wasn't sure if it went wrong, that Jo and I would eat the next month. I spent \$9,000 to pay Alaska Radio Network to come along the trail to give news coverage. After the fact, Iditarod paid for it just on my "say so," and it happened, and it worked because the next year ABC Wide World of Sports took the program. So, those were big commitments. I was a full-time Fish and Wildlife officer, and I also was a full-time Iditarod officer. So, by 1977, I decided I had enough of just the work of running things, but I would run it on the ground.

It was a catch-22 because I thought I knew every detail, I could run that race very simple I told myself, and it would be no big deal. I'll tell you, the distance between McGrath and Farewell is a lot longer on the ground than it is in the air. The meanders of the river just never quit, and I thought I had those all under control. It might have been better never to have seen it from the air. They paid the top 20 places. And it wasn't the finishing [of the race] at all, it was the doing. I ran all the way to Nome in the top five, then I injured my knee in a stupid way. Anyway, I came in number 15, and that was still pretty good for a rookie. My wife had been a little critical of all that it took because she was working full-time, raising two little boys. She wanted to have me just do it once; but when I came in that night at minus 31 degrees in Nome at 1:30 in the morning, she asked me if I was going to do it the next year. She wanted me to. I didn't do it the next year, but I kept involved in Iditarod. We recently put a book out called *Iditarod, the first 10 years*. There were ten of us who were involved in that, and it broke all records for sales. We didn't make any money, but we got the story out. It was a big deal. So, Iditarod was a big part of my life, and it also opened a lot of doors. I think it tempers people's ideas about the Fish and Wildlife Service, because they saw that here was a human being like them, and I was working for them. It is similar to what I told you about being a missionary for the LDS church. For a long time, I thought, *I wonder how people take that. Maybe I shouldn't talk about that all the time*. But I decided that it was a valuable thing, it was a part of my life, and I'm proud of it.

ROBIN WEST: I just want to ask you, Al. There's a lot of prep going into getting ready for the race, and then you're on the trail 17 or 18 days. What was a normal day like? I mean, you're on a sled, you're taking care of your dogs, and you're trying to get rest. Just briefly, what was it like?

AL CRANE: Well, when you took off from Anchorage you ran quite a bit longer than you did, when you got a routine. Because, if you're a rookie, you don't know how to do it. People don't do that so much now. I think they do it in a routine that's the same all the way. The strategy is to be a slave to a schedule and not get out of control or lose that schedule. After things got underway, the day would be about 110 miles. It

was important to stop and feed the dogs regularly. A dog could rest any moment. When you stop, they lay down and go to sleep, but you don't. So, that was another problem. You had to make sure that you got proper rest. I never had a moment that I thought or worried about not making it. It was day to day, minute to minute survival. Even when I hurt my knee, and the moose ran over me. A moose got in the team and caused a problem, where I thought the whole thing was over. Think of a horse that you might have seen in the pasture, chasing that other horse with his ears down, with his nostrils flared and his mouth opened, his tongue hanging out, and he's coming down your team, kicking the dogs out, and the lines are springing in, and the dogs are springing out. Then two Indian guys come up behind you and say, "you've got to kill him." And I said, "you can't kill him." I knew I was Fish and Wildlife, and I had to be really careful on what I did. I knew the rules about defense of life and property, and if they had not pulled a gun out and killed the moose, my chances of getting to Nome were finished. One of them had the gun and one had the bullets, and I heard *swoop boom*. It went right past my ear and the moose dropped on the back two dogs, the wheel dogs. It was in Rainy Pass, and there's 20ft of snow there, and wells around on all the trees right next to them, where if you fall in there, you go down too. The moose was on top of the dogs. I was so into it that the adrenaline shot in, and I was a lot younger than I am now and a lot tougher. It was a big bull, and I pulled that moose to the side and moved the snow slightly. And that moose went down that well. The dogs survived because the snow was soft enough, but it looked to me like two frogs that someone had stood on, and their tongues were pushing out their mouth. Then all, of a sudden they got back to normal, and they didn't have any consequences from the moose dropping on them. It was a traumatic moment.

ROBIN WEST: Wow!

AL CRANE: Maybe the most embarrassing or the highlight of it was what happened in the Anchorage papers. When I came into the checkpoint at Rainy Pass Lodge, there was a reporter interviewing the two Indians, and they were discussing how this, non-native fellow, this white man, had been so tough to pull that moose down off his dogs. Then, I discussed how they had shot the moose, and the headlines on the Anchorage paper were *Alaska Natives save Fish and Wildlife man*.

ROBIN WEST: Fair enough. Maybe, we can transition a little bit and you can tell me about some of the highlighted cases. You had lots of cases that you could probably talk for days on, but maybe you could tell me about a couple of them.

AL CRANE: I think it's important to impress how important my first few years with the State of Alaska were to the successful administration of my job at Fish and Wildlife. From my time working on the water in the commercial fishing industry in Southeast Alaska and in Bristol Bay, to working the guiding industry, both fishing and hunting, and spending time on the ice 100 miles north of Point Barrow, tagging polar bear, they all prepared me for what was to come with Fish and Wildlife. Then, there's one other thing I want to say is that it's so intertwined that without my experience with the state as a state officer, I would have never been as successful as I think I was in the job as an agent for the government. One time, one of my bosses said to me, "Al, you don't have to be a state warden anymore. All you need to do is this bird stuff," and this and this and this. And I said, "Hey, I carry both credentials. I carry a Fish and Wildlife credential, and I carry a state credential for the purpose of not doing one job, but for doing both of them." When I see something, I can't just turn my head. I think that's why I loved the job so much. I had just taken on new responsibilities with the federal government, and I still felt these old responsibilities, and I did them all.

When I went to Nome, I had been instructed that my job was funded with marine mammal money, and the Marine Mammal Act had just come to pass in 1972. Getting that job underway took a lot of public relations, then eventually, I had my first case. It was a case with a fellow by the name of Jim West. Jim West was an important name in Nome. He was one of the moving forces in Nome. He owned the oldest bar, the B.O.T (Board of Trade) in Nome, and lots of rentals and was involved in almost everything. In fact, I think he was probably the local godfather, meaning that he financed or was the financier of all the native community, when it came to anything they might want or need. Of course, it was a two-edged sword. He took care of them, but he was being taken care of by what they could provide for him. So, he would purchase polar bear hides and walrus ivory, etc. and put all of this into commerce. Then, he would do that by paying carvers and sewers and people to make commodities to sell. Of course, none of it was done in a legal fashion because it was supposed to be sold or carved by natives. But he was the middleman who made it all happen. So, I finally did a little sting operation on him, and we had witnesses, we had recordings, and we had a jury trial. It was the only jury trial in my whole career that I lost. We could have run a movie of exactly what happened; the part native and part non-native jury were not going to convict the hand that fed them. I eventually did get an \$8,000 civil penalty, but it was not a conviction on a criminal penalty. I've always thought about that, and it changed my tactics for the rest of my career. I would rather reach a settlement than have a jury trial, because the jury trial was always 50/50, even if you had totally run a movie. That was proven by that [West] case. Right in that town, it made the headlines, the whole works. Everybody walking down the street could see, but they were not going to change their minds about Jim. There's a funny thing I wanted to make sure I mentioned, and that is *how* my relationship with Jim changed [after that case] to, "Hello, Al," and it was almost *respect*. He knew how close I got to him, and he knew that I hadn't been bought either. He passed on a couple of things to me later, and I can't explain, sitting here, just what that means. Jim went to his dying day not changing much, but he did change his tactics on how open and bold he was about it.

I transferred to Fairbanks in 1979 and became the SRA (Senior Resident Agent) for the northern half of Alaska, at the time. During that period, there were a lot of things that I used to do my job that were state oriented because it wasn't just totally marine mammals in Nome. One of those was reviving a program that I started in Juneau in 1971 on cross-border meetings with my law enforcement counterparts in Canada. These meetings were held every other year on one side or the other, and they were hosted by one agency or another. What it was meant to do was to get people together to understand the problems on both sides, then to use the information we had, in case there was a flight risk, or they had information. What you see up there on the wall is a Fannin sheep. I wasn't going to say this, but that's a Fannin sheep that came from 18 miles inside Canada with very close friends that invited me, when I turned 70 years old, to come over and hunt. The folks that I knew there didn't know we knew each other, except we talked on the telephone, with intermediaries about each other's problems. I met the guy that owned a place in Phoenix down in Gold Canyon [Arizona], near my place in the desert where I go in the winter. I could tell he had a Canadian accent, and, as he's introducing himself to me, I said, "Well, who are you?" And just as he is about to say "Stan Reynolds," I said, "You're not Stan Reynolds [are you]?" Stan Reynolds was the guy that kept telling me that Americans were coming across to rob his sheep. He was helpful in getting American cases on illegal transport and illegal hunting in Canada. Then he said to me, "Well, who are you?" Just as I'm ready to say, Al Crane, he said, "You're not Al Crane [are you]?" We hadn't met in 40 years, but we met in the desert in Gold Canyon. So, 15 years after I had retired, he invited me to go hunting with him, and that's where I got that sheep. That's the first 40-inch sheep I got in my whole life, and I've killed 18 or 20 sheep.

ROBIN WEST: That's a beautiful trophy, and a statement to long-term friendships.

AL CRANE: Those [cross-border] meetings, those things came about because of our relationship with the officers on both sides, including people from the US Fish and Wildlife, Alaska State Fish and Wildlife Troopers, provincial and Canadian federal Fish and Wildlife officials, US and Canadian customs, state and federal and provincial park people. All those people from both sides would meet, have a barbecue, talk and spend 2 days on enforcement issues. It was a wonderful experience. Almost 15 years after I retired, I was coming through Haines Junction when Jim Low called and said, "If you're coming through Haines Junction, they're having their annual meeting over on the Canadian side in Haines Junction. Why don't you stop in?" So, I stopped in, and I was treated like a dignitary. It was wonderful to do that, after all those years.

I'm going to tell you about another case. We had several landmark cases in Fairbanks, and this one eventually became *Operation Falcon*. *Operation Falcon* was a national investigation of illegal selling and moving of falcons all over the world, especially to people for the purebred gyrs and peregrines for high sums of money. We knew that some falcons were being taken from the wild, but *unpermitted* and put into commerce. Sometimes falcons went for \$100,000 to Saudi Arabia and other places like the UAE. I'm kind of proud of our contribution to what happened to the peregrine falcon because of what we did when we started, before *Operation Falcon* actually took place. I brought agents up from the lower 48 on special operations and had them camp along the rivers and document nests close to the border. For two or three years, we watched these places to see what happened, and if we lost any [nests]. We had some incidents where a nest would disappear (the little birds). We weren't able to do much, but we gathered a lot of intelligence. Then, a couple of years before *Operation Falcon*, Larry Hood and I flew and went out into the bush (Larry thought I was a mountaineer and I thought he was, too). We went out into the bush and gathered one or two falcons from several nests and sent them to the lower 48 to be used as bait. They all survived and were used in *Operation Falcon*. We brought a successful conclusion to that case nationwide. Agents all over the country were part of the sting and conducted searches at a certain time on the morning of a certain day. And because of that, we contributed to the recovery of the peregrine falcon. To me, that was a real contribution. It was worth it. Makes you feel like you did something, spent money, and it was worth your time. Then, we had falconers that were on our side in the lower 48 that took care of these falcons and returned them back to us in Alaska. I spent a summer moving falcons back to these areas where they came from. Even the gyrfalcons were taken. For example, we returned gyrfalcons to Serpentine Hot Springs on the Seward Peninsula. The local presence of the Falconers Association helped me with that and flew with me. That was another thing I thought was worthwhile and I wanted to put down as a landmark accomplishment.

In the middle 80s, my oldest son was 12 years old, and I thought it was time for him to go hunting with me for a

Dall sheep, because that's Alaska, that's what we do. Everybody wants to go hunting. I knew where, in the Yukon-Charlie on Mount Sorensen, there was a monster sheep, probably 46 inches, and there were only 5 permits. So, I put him in for the permit, and he was drawn. Well, just before August of that year, the year that he was 12, I flew out and couldn't find the sheep. I thought maybe I had just made a mistake, so I would take him. We went out and hunted and hunted and came home with this little sheep that's way up there by the door [pointed to where the sheep mount was]. It's just a small sheep, but it was a sheep that he killed when he was 12. I had no idea what had happened [with the 46-inch sheep]. Maybe it was just a mortality of some sort. So, when I couldn't find that sheep, I put it in the back of my mind that something

had gone wrong there. Then, I was talking to a state officer who had run into a situation where he was investigating a local dentist. That dentist was Errol Remsing, and I don't mind saying Errol's name because Errol turned out to be quite a character. Were you around during that time when that Remsing case was on?

ROBIN WEST: I remember it.

AL CRANE: Okay. It seems that Errol and a guy by the name of Lee Pete were quite into hunting. Errol was a local dentist and Lee Pete ran a local flying service. So, they knew everything about wildlife that I knew about wildlife, or more. Errol spent a good part of his income on gas caches and spending time in the outdoors. The state did a search in the case on their residences and found all this stuff. It turned out that their search warrants were not fabricated, but were not 100% up to par. So, a local state judge wanted all this returned, and the case dropped. There was enough evidence that (under the cooperation of the state officer) I decided that we would take the evidence and seize it ourselves. So, the state judge ordered that the evidence be returned to the defendant, Errol Remsing. Well, through a series of events that I engineered with another federal officer, who had been a Secret Service agent, to go to the state troopers and to seize the evidence on behalf of the federal government, which we did - all 300 animals. If I say 300 animals, then that tells you it was a large amount, and we proved by a computer run out that every single animal was taken illegally. Even though the state judge had ruled the original search warrant illegal, there were other things that were permissible. One of them was a diary with a running commentary of daily activities and daily illegal activities, which was the downfall of the dentist because, he couldn't resist. It's just like someone when they kill somebody, or when they do something that they think is grandiose, they have to tell somebody. So, Remsing wrote down every single thing that he did. He even wrote down one time that Mary, his wife, had failed him. He tried to have sons with 3 or 4 pregnancies before finally, she was able to give him a son. He had graduated top of his class in dental school, but he failed to understand genetics, that he's the one that determined it. To make a long story short, Errol, I don't mind saying this, I think was the definition of a real true sociopath in that he never realized in any way, shape or form or believed that he was wrong. It was the government, and those were all, in today's terms, fake news, fake lies.

ROBIN WEST: So, I have to ask - was that that really large Dall Sheep from Yukon Charlie part of that seizure?

AL CRANE: Yes, that large Dall Sheep from Yukon Charlie was part of that. I found out that Lee Pete and Errol Resing had flown to Yukon Charlie in July, a month before the season and before my son was to try and take his sheep, they killed two sheep. The second biggest sheep wasn't big enough. So, when they realized they killed that one, they left it and took the biggest one and only took the head.

ROBIN WEST: Wow.

AL CRANE: Furthermore, they went back and implicated a taxidermist who helped them secure the "biggest sheep of the year" award for that sheep. That sheep was almost identical to the sheep in the picture from the Wirschem case, which I gave to the National Park Service.

ROBIN WEST: So, what kind of penalties, when this was all said and done, what happened?

AL CRANE: It took quite a bit of effort to eventually have a trial. We had trials for each of the defendants. One or two pled guilty before trial, but Remsing did not plead guilty, and we had his trial. What was peculiar about this case is that of all those animals there was no paper trail of any kind, shape or form. He would bring foreign hunters in and trade grizzly bears for desert bighorn sheep hunts. There were no paper trails. Nobody got a license, and nobody knew they were in the state hunting. If it hadn't been for the diaries, we wouldn't have known. So, when we finally got to the witnesses, some of the witnesses were willing to testify. Before it was over, Judge Kleinfeld, who was the sitting judge on this case (who eventually went to the Ninth Circuit), made some amazing remarks and sentences that changed the tide for what happened in Alaska on a lot of wildlife cases. The first one he did was he sentenced the taxidermist.

He made some statements like that it was this little thing; and he made some statements about how the law says we have to do this. He was showing that he had no idea about the importance of wildlife cases in Alaska. He was not a hunter. I knew what was coming before we had the sentencing hearings for Remsing. I knew it was coming. Nothing would happen. Skip Scott, the taxidermist, spent some days in jail, but minimal penalties. I talked to the probation officer, who had the ear, who is the right hand of the judge, about *what am I going to do when this trial is over?* I said, "I have to talk to this judge, or I have to write a letter. I have to do something". He said, "Al, you have to write a letter now." So, I wrote a letter, and I read the letter last night to my wife, and I can't believe it was me that wrote that letter because it's amazing. I was so passionate. I told the judge that he needed a little help to hear some facts; and I went through the facts of what happens in this world with wildlife enforcement and wildlife criminals who use drugs... they use all sorts of things in wildlife to transport it, they have shiploads full of wildlife and they've even decimated some species by having a shipload of wildlife that all dies. The traffic in the world is like terrorism, drugs and guns and then wildlife, in percentages of illegal things that happen. I would like to submit my letter with this interview, because, after the sentencing hearing I remember on the stand (and this was after the judge had got my letter) I was asked by the prosecutor, the US Attorney, to read a passage from the diaries. It was a passage where Errol had taken his young son and had him on his shoulders to take him out and show him the illegal things he had just done and how to do it. I didn't cry like I might at this old age, but I choked because I thought of my own son, and what a travesty it was for that boy. I turned and looked at the judge, and I knew right there that he got it. He looked at me, square in the eye and indicated, *Yes. I know what you're thinking Al.* When Errol got his sentence (and I believe, I'll put that with my letter), he [the judge] said something about the fact that, in today's world, we couldn't have a cop around every bush; that a lot of the civility in the country or anywhere depended on the ethics of individuals to trust people because nobody wants to have a cop around every bush. Even when you're in a public gathering, people get tense, and they don't have enough cops. He said that Remsing was at the top of the line of arrogance and how he did business; and he said that because he was a member of the community and had a family that his sentence would include that consideration, that he had to feed his family. In essence, he said, "I'm putting you in jail on Friday afternoon and I'm letting you out of jail at 8:00 a.m. on Monday morning; and you're going to do this for a year." He said, "I'm taking both airplanes, and I'm fining you \$10,000. You're not to be in any hunting or fishing camp or anywhere near hunting or fishing for a period of five years, and you'll be on probation. While we could have pursued the felony clause in the Lacey Act, the prosecutor had not done that. "So, you haven't got a felony, but if you break the probation, you will have a felony." Remsing appealed the conviction and lost the appeal. He went to jail that afternoon, even though the lawyers asked that he be out of jail until his appeal. It turns out that he went to Mexico, during his probation, and came back with, what he called, some *bones* for his kids [to play with]; but they were desert bighorn ram heads, so he got the felony. He then pulled up stakes, sold

his business, left town and went to Manhattan, Kansas. He bought a hunting reserve and lived happily ever after, but - he didn't, because his hunting days were over.

ROBIN WEST: Al, I'm going to ask you about a couple more cases. There's one I know that happened, regarding wolves on the Kanuti National Wildlife Refuge in the interior. What can you tell me about that one?

AL CRANE: Well, that's kind of another important case in that it included not only the Kanuti National Wildlife Refuge, but also the Wrangell-St Elias National Park area. The people that were involved were included in both places. There was a ranger by the name of Bruce Collins flying from Bettles to Fairbanks one day, and he overheard this conversation. Most of these things are all recorded in magazine or newspaper articles. What he [Collins] heard was that there were two airplanes in the process of chasing wolves. This was during this land and shoot thing with the trapping regulations, so people thought it was perfectly legal to land and shoot. Never mind that they were driving the animals until they could hardly breathe. Then they would stop, land and shoot them, and that's totally prohibited by the Airborne Hunting Act. So, he heard that they had landed. Not only had they been able to kill these wolves with bows, (*which is really interesting, how did you do that?*) but one of the wolves had an arrow up his butt. So, Bruce Collins came to me and said something about that and asked if we would like to help him. I said, "Absolutely." I went on to find out who was at the lodge at that time. I found ends of arrows in a wastepaper basket, which I collected and found out who they belonged to. I then went out and flew, until I found a lake that had all these airplane tracks on it that looked as though airplanes had been taxiing all over the place. I found a spot where I could see a blood spot, walked into the trees, and I found the carcasses of these wolves. Mark Webb has a story there, because he was with me, and the snow was so deep that I had to leave him there when I left. I didn't dare fly out with extra people, and I had wolves in the airplane, so I had to come back [for Mark]; and he was all alone out there. To make a long story short, those wolves went to the lab, and I have the photographs of arrows and one of them with an arrow up its butt. We put two and two together and eventually searched homes in Anchorage of a big game guy by the name of Chuck Wirscham and an orthopedic surgeon by the name of Jack Frost. Wally Soroka was one of the people involved in the Anchorage search on the Jack Frost house. As a side note, not only does the wildlife officer find what he's looking for when he goes through a freezer (if the guy was illegal) he finds other things, especially if it's a doctor. You may not know, but Wally actually came across a human leg in that freezer. I don't mind saying this because there's another life for everybody, even an orthopedic surgeon. So, we did the search, those people went to trial and were convicted. In the process, at the Wirscham house, I saw a couple of photographs that I recognized as the terrain to not be anywhere except and, having flown around here, as a state officer and a federal officer, enough that I knew they weren't Chugach mountains, and I knew they weren't the Brooks Range, and I knew it wasn't Southeast Alaska. In another photograph in the sequence, there were fish and it said, *Summit Lake*. Well, Summit Lake in the Wrangell-St Elias has notoriously big rainbows and this rainbow that was shown in that photo led me to believe that I should go to Wrangell-St Elias to look for where this sheep was killed, and it was a huge sheep. I'll give you that photograph to put with this material I've given you today. Wrangell-St Elias National Park was closed to sheep hunting by then, but that didn't stop Chuck Wirscham from stopping while he was in that area and killing the monster sheep. He got all the kudos for this beautiful, wonderful sheep. Then, suddenly, here we were on his track. I took the U.S. Attorney with me in the airplane with those photographs, and we flew down there. I didn't tell anybody we were going. I didn't even tell the Park Service. I just flew down there and started looking. I found the mountains that were shown lined up [in the photo] then started looking very closely at the draws and different other little places. As I flew

lower down in the draws, I saw trees and little things that made it look like I could identify the spot. Then, all of a sudden, *boom*, there was the spot where that sheep was killed in Wrangell-St Elias. We knew by the dates on the photographs what dates they were there. I went to the Park Service and ask them if they were interested, and of course they were. They provided the money and the helicopter for me to fly with a park ranger out to the area. By then, Steve Cooper, the US Attorney, was back in Fairbanks working on the other part of the case. I landed on that area, looked around, just made a circle around and saw exactly the spot the sheep was killed, and I just kept walking in a circle. I eventually came to a little cave and in this little cave were the remnants of a sheep carcass. The saw marks on the neck, I took back to the labs, and they identified them as being the same saw marks that were on the head; and we made the case. We seized the sheep head, and we kept it. It was forfeited to the court. In that case, I decided that the best home for that sheep was at the information office on the Wrangell-St Elias over in the Glennallen area. We presented the sheep to that office, and within about six months, the sheep head had been stolen from that office. We heard through the grapevine that it was just thrown into the Copper River. If they couldn't have it, nobody could have it. We just recently heard (this is 30 years later) that there was a sheep head being used as a model in the lower 48, in a certain place and this might be that sheep. But I had a Fish and Wildlife officer out here the other day to look at this photo I'm going to give to you, and they've determined that it's not the same sheep. So, that's always a mystery.

ROBIN WEST: Well, so the lab you're talking about in these cases is the forensics lab in Ashland, Oregon?

AL CRANE: Yes. Ashland and the state lab in Anchorage. I used both of them.

ROBIN WEST: Very good.

AL CRANE: What's interesting is that the Alaska lab is pretty good, but they work in coordination often with the federal lab because the federal lab has done some really landmark work on ivory identification and blood-typing of animals. They both have a good standard. We've gotten a lot of good things from them.

ROBIN WEST: Well, if you're willing, I'd like to ask you about at least one more case, I remember, *Operation Whiteout*. I know that was a big one.

AL CRANE: I had a lot of really good cases where we never lost, except the Jim West one in Nome. A lot of really good cases that made a difference. This one, *Operation Whiteout*, was one that made a difference. It'll take me just a second to tell it. One day, I got a telephone call from a whaling captain named John Apangalook and his son, Leonard Apangalook, and they wanted help. They said there were a lot of drugs coming to the island, and they knew a lot of ivory was leaving and other commodities. They wanted to know if they could get help, and I promised them that they could. We started investigating and, before it was over, we had done enough work with the lab, who came north and did necropsies on animals, that we got our case down pretty firm. If anyone wants to read the story ever, they could look in a book called *Animal Investigators* by Dr. Laurel Neme. This particular case is featured in that book, along with several others. Before it was over, we imported agents from all over the country to what we called *Operation Whiteout*. We even used the National Guard to fly agents to different areas, including Diomedes and Saint Lawrence Island to conduct searches. It was a very professional operation, and it did the job and made the point. There were numerous subjects that were prosecuted in the native and

nonnative community. It was the first time that people in that situation, misusing the native subsistence rules, were actually prosecuted to a point where the native community agreed. That's a highly unusual thing. It was also interesting because it brought national attention to the situation so much so that I met with celebrities from Dateline NBC, Jane Pauley and Stone Phillips. Those names may be known to some people who are a little older. They came north and saw the results of the case on the Nome beaches and put it into an hour-long program on TV. What the most interesting thing for me was the finale and it's what I'd like to say at the end of this interview. When Dr. Laurel Neme decided she wanted to use the information from that case, put it into a book and include the contributions of the lab in Oregon, she came to me and asked if I would be willing to participate in her quest, 15 or 20 years later, after I had retired. Maybe it was 10. I can't tell you exactly how many years later that it was. Anyway, I flew her in my Super Cub along the Alaska beaches to show her a little bit of what we had been investigating, how it felt and the places where this all happened. Then, we jumped on a commercial airplane and went to Saint Lawrence Island, and we went to Leonard Apangalook's home. Leonard is the father of the kingpin of the investigation, which was a sad point for me when it all happened, because Leonard had come to us, and yet his son was so highly involved in the whole situation that he was taken down with it. And that was pie on the face of the father. If we say can say anything about the Alaska Native community, family is an important thing. And the fact that the father had asked for this and then had to face the music that his son was involved, and he didn't know. It was a big deal. Well, we knocked on his door on Saint Lawrence Island and were invited inside. But, before I tell you what happened, I first want to say that we walked around the village at Gamble and on the bulletin boards in Gamble was a validation of my years as a fish and wildlife officer in Alaska. All that I'd been preaching for 30 years was not necessarily all being used by the public but was being pushed by Kawerak and the native corporations. It made it all worth it. Big time. So, we went to visit Leonard, and he invited us in. We had tea, and it was a very congenial conversation. I said to him, "How is your son?" And he said, "Thanks to you Al, he's a nice, upstanding citizen in Anchorage now." I said, "Well, I have Laurel here and, after we've talked, she would like to use what you tell her, in a book." I said, "I can promise you this. She won't print a thing unless you authorize it." He said, "Al, you don't have to send it to me. I know if you tell me, it's okay, it's okay." So, there you go. That's the end.

ROBIN WEST: Al, it's been great hearing a few of your cases. I know there's a lot more. As your career matured, and you were called on to do other things, I know you had some international travel and assignments. Maybe you can share briefly about that.

AL CRANE: Well, I think I mentioned in the discussion we've been having that I had gone to Kamchatka [Russia] with Fred Zeillemaker and Jay Bellinger from refuges. That was the first that broke the ice for international travel. I went a couple of more times on official business for the Service to the China border with the Amur Tigers and then to Magadan, which was over near the Siberian coast of the Sea of Okhotsk. Doing that opened the door, basically, for other agents to travel worldwide to not only teach, but to go on enforcement investigations. What also was probably the culmination of the whole thing was sometimes, even though it was a dangerous trip because of traveling like that and because of my opportunities in the enforcement field and my contacts, a friend who worked at Langley invited me to work undercover in Kazakhstan to assist in an illegal wildlife surveillance situation where I would go and pose as hunter. I carried a rifle in a case through the Moscow airport unbeknownst to anybody and who cared in those days after perestroika. And I went to Kazakhstan - went out and rode a Mongol pony to the big, barbed wire fences in no man's land on the China border. I worked with George (I'll call him) who was working for the Vice-President of Kazakhstan and our equivalent of the Secretary of Interior. What was happening was

Americans and other people from all over the world were coming to Kazakhstan, just like they were in Russia or anywhere else after perestroika. They could pay \$10,000 or \$5000 for a sheep or a Marco Polo sheep or a bear or whatever. If it wasn't the right one, they would just shell out more money, and they could shoot it from a helicopter, get it and bring it home. And we wanted to get a handle on it, so that was one of the reasons I was there. It was the trip of a lifetime. I don't know how much I could say about this, other than the fact that "George" stood with Yeltsin on the tank that had fired at the White House [Russian Parliament]. That tells you the importance of the case.

ROBIN WEST: All right.

AL CRANE: Finishing it off, I never *worked* a day in my life for the government. I *enjoyed* it...every minute of it.

ROBIN WEST: Well, we were lucky to have you. They were lucky to have you. I sure appreciate it. It's been a pleasure.

Follow-up

ROBIN WEST: I'm sitting back down with Al Crane is his home on a beautiful fall day. It is October 2, 2024. We're going to finish with what we started in May. Al, I know there was another case or two you wanted to chat with me about to explain a little bit about the Lacey Act, Airborne Hunting Act, and undercover work that was really important while you were working up here.

AL CRANE: Okay. I appreciate you spending more time with me. Aside from the important cases I have discussed already, there were a number of consequential cases involving the commercial guiding industry in Alaska that I was involved in, specifically Alaska big game guiding. My job with the State of Alaska had given me an edge in understanding the problem as I had worked the industry as a Protection Officer and Wildlife Trooper in Southeast Alaska and the Alaska Peninsula, having lived in the Alaska panhandle and in Dillingham in Bristol Bay.

Working in Southeast Alaska during my first employment with the State right after statehood also gave me a leg up in understanding the same inherent problems with the commercial fishing industry as the guiding industry where the vastness of the usage of the resource and the lack of adequate personnel contributed to a major problem that history would remember as the *Seine Boat Wars* or *Creek Robber Wars* of the early 1960s and 70s. "Creek robbing" was defined as unscrupulous fishermen in seine boats, sneaking into a bay behind closed marker placed there by the Alaska Department of Fish and Game commercial fisheries employees, closing the mouths of salmon streams to protect the thousands of fish congregating there prior to following their instinct to spawn upstream, insuring future generations. Under the cover of fog or dark nights, fish bandits would enter these closed areas to seine salmon (sometimes in very large numbers) that had schooled up in front of freshwater streams to enter on the next high tide. Stealing those large amounts of fish was like robbing a candy store. It was not only detrimental to the escapement of the salmon for reproduction, but of course catching those large numbers in one or two sets could be very lucrative. Not to mention that in some cases this illegal activity could totally wipe out the future production of salmon in that stream. Creek robbing still exists but is by no means anywhere near as prevalent as it was all those years ago. Working in those environments made me more at home with Alaska resources as a federal agent and I think more successful in the protection approaches I used to police the problems. As far as I know, I was the only FWS LE agent to spend my whole career in Alaska because of this State experience. I worked details all over the country, but my home remained in Alaska.

At Statehood in 1959, due to intense lobbying by well-established big game guides during territorial days, the State of Alaska gave a nod to the industry to ensure a continuation of their way of life and to protect their very profitable hunting and fishing businesses by providing rules that required non-residents be guided while hunting some species, i.e. brown/grizzly bears, Dall sheep and mountain goats in Alaska. This was a two-edged sword in that it protected the guiding businesses to a certain extent by making it a necessity for non-residents to hire a guide to hunt those species, thus assuring ready-made clients, but it also provided an avenue for would-be guides and unscrupulous guides to hunt unchecked, most often unlawfully, where many became multi-millionaires at the expense of the public resource. In some cases, whole regions were changed forever from the paradise of unbelievable numbers of trophy animals that was the Alaska we once knew, to diminished numbers and less trophies statewide.

While there was a large volume of consequential cases my office worked involving big game guides, there is one in particular that I'd like to mention in that it had such far-reaching consequences in helping clean up the big game guiding industry involving the illegal use of airplanes. As I stated, part of the success of the case stemmed from my previous state experience and being armed with federal laws, i.e. the Airborne Hunting Act and the Lacey Act. I'm sure that our Fairbanks office seized and had forfeited to the U.S. Government more aircraft used in illegal hunting practices than any other station in the over my career. With that said, I'm certain that we surely contributed greatly to the winddown of old vintage guide practices using the resource not just as a livelihood, but a wealth-builder, at resource and public expense. And I would be amiss if I didn't say that much of our success must be credited to Assistant U.S. Attorney Stephen Cooper in Fairbanks, who was on the same page I was in protecting the resource against abuse. These cases were not "one duck over limit" or "hunting without a license" but involved hundreds of thousands of dollars gotten illegally, mostly using aircraft to find and drive their quarry to a hunter on the ground – in some cases shooting the animal from the air – and transporting the illegally taken game to another state or country.

I mentioned earlier that I, like a lot of people, had always wanted to come to Alaska because of what I had conjured up in my mind reading the Jack London stories. But I also think that the whole idea had jelled when, during my teen years, a movie I had seen in the little town where I went to high school sparked my interest even more. *Alaska Safari*, presented in living color, showed frame after frame of hunters stalking and bagging trophy animals and macho men flying airplanes in the grandeur of what is Alaska. The big game guide it profiled was Ron Hayes. The film would make any outdoor enthusiast envy every detail of Ron's lifestyle. Within a few short years I would be headed north. By the time I was in Alaska, Ron Hayes was an Alaska legend making an estimated \$500,000 or more a year hunting big game animals. There were rumors as to the legality of his hunting activities, but no one had been able to prove anything. And no one was talking because a majority of the trophies Hayes and his clients took were trophies listed in prestigious Boone and Crocket or Safari Club International record books.

After transferring to Fairbanks, I received what seemed credible intelligence about how Ron was doing business. With that, I took the challenge to see for myself and what I learned was that all the glitz and success that was Ron Hayes was just like a lot of other guide bandits we knew about, but who had not been slick enough to evade the law that Ron had seemed to be adept at evading for years.

My plan involved undercover work employing the sills of a Mexican American Special Agent from Nogales, Arizona who would pose as a well-heeled hunter from Nogales, Sonora, Mexico and who would book a spring brown/grizzly bear hunt with Hayes on the Seward Peninsula where he would hunt out of a

camp between Nome and Kotzebue. Special Agent Jose Ramos was successful in booking a hunt with Hayes in the spring of 1980 and traveled to Alaska under the necessary cover with a bogus identification background. I met him in a hotel room in Anchorage with a game plan and instructions including how we would communicate, and I provided him with an animal tracking device that he was to drop at the scene as he was leaving.

An operation like this could be tricky and was definitely dangerous in that people in desperate situations can be very unpredictable, thinking they are in the wilderness with no communication to the outside world – that no one was around – and that surely no one would ever know the truth if there was an accident, especially if the guilty party sensed their livelihood and reputations were at stake. Even if there were violations and everything went well, both I and the Agent had to gamble his cover would not be blown, that there would be no aircraft accident (as all off-airport flying is inherently dangerous), and that Agent Ramos would come and go undetected.

The next morning Ramos flew to Kotzebue in Northwest Alaska and was met by Hayes in his Super Cub and flown to the hunting camp on the Seward Peninsula. Little did we know that there would be two Mexican nationals in the camp there for the same reasons – to hunt brown/grizzly bears – and that their presence would create a near catastrophic failure of our plans to expose Hayes. We had not suspected or counted on these clients being in concert with Hayes in violating the law, but their mere presence could pose a problem, and indeed it did! Their recognizing Ramos' border Spanish and a discussion about Ramos' lack of a personal referral prompted Hayes to seek help from them to fly back to Kotzebue to call Nogales, Mexico to check out if he was the guy he said he was. Ramos' cover stood up to the scrutiny and Hayes decided to fly out with Ramos and an assistant guide by the name of Earl Basso on the hunt the next day. Even so, as they were flying out, Hayes threatened him of the consequences if he was a federal agent and from the back seat of the Super Cub Agent Ramos somehow persuaded Hayes to continue. After locating a bear from the air, Hayes dropped off Basso and Ramos nearby and drove the bear to them with the aircraft at which time Ramos shot and killed it. After the bear was skinned, Hayes transported the assistant guide and Ramos with the bear hide and skull to the hunting camp. As Ramos was leaving the kill site, he dropped the radio device and a pair of gloves as backup evidence to identify the location and to prove he had been there. The hunt lasted less than six hours. The next day Ramos was delivered to the Kotzebue airport. When he was safely out of the State, my job began.

Knowing the landing sites would mostly likely require a Super Cub for landing in short, tight places, I flew six plus hours to the Seward Peninsula area southwest of Kotzebue with another agent in the back seat. Agent Dan Mayer was a former Secret Service Agent whom I felt was more than confident in handling any security situation while I was locating the kill site and collecting evidence. In all those thousands of miles of nothing, I did locate the site and bear carcass in the middle of the Imurk Basin lava fields on the Seward Peninsula (which reminded me of the lava fields in Kona, Hawaii). I landed in the Super Cub tracks I found in a patch of sparse snow. I knew it would be nip and tuck anyway, landing on the snow patches that were remaining in the early spring thaw, but I hadn't counted on the 65-degree May day that was quickly melting the remaining snow I had to land on. I was on wheel-skis, which are heavier than straight skis, and with the length of the snow patch melting so quickly, I determined I had just barely enough takeoff length to get airborne to avoid the sharp uneven boulders that would surely shred the aircraft into un-survivable wreckage if the snow melted any further. After I completed the investigation at the [kill] site, I decided to leave Agent Mayer to walk out of the lava fields (approximately two miles) on his own and attempt the takeoff. Even with the precautions, I scraped the bottom of my skis on the exposed lava boulders as I lifted off – just in time to avoid the disaster that could

have been. It was one of the few times that I tested fate in an airplane, and I never took for granted that I was blessed or lucky that day. At that moment, I made the decision then and there to never get caught in that situation again and I didn't. It was a tough and dangerous several hours walk for Dan to an area free of lava boulders and with adequate snowpack where I could safely land and pick him up, but we were both alive and well and that's what counted. Finally able to relax, we flew the six hours back to Fairbanks.

Looking back, I think that most of the violations surrounding this case were quite typical of the times. In the following year that I completed the legwork of the investigation, before charges were filed, I found that all of Hayes' Spring season bears that year were taken in the same manner – using an aircraft to drive the animal to the hunter the same day airborne – exciting for the hunter, but illegal. What was even more astonishing was uncovering the names of “who's who” in the hunting world who hunted with him. Apparently, the American ethic of fair chase, lawfully taken (and swearing to these facts), didn't mean a thing when the record bears were listed in the trophy books. Among the dozen or so more spring hunters in that particular camp on the Seward Peninsula in that period were a rep from Colt Firearms, the importer for Bacardi Rum, owner of the Peterson Hunting Magazine empire (and his vice president to top it off), Mexico's signer for CITES (Convention in Trade of Endangered Species) and his buddy – part of the family ownership of General Motors import to Mexico and Televises Mexico. In all, 12 hunters had hunted on the Seward Peninsula and some 35 had hunted on the Alaska Peninsula that spring: a total of nearly 50 hunters, all at \$5,000 a pop – a hefty sum back in 1980. Today's (2024) bear hunts go anywhere between \$30,000 and (on Kodiak Island) \$40,000.

There were a lot of strange twists and turns in this case but eventually, with the help of a great Assistant U.S. Attorney, defendants began to crumble and try to keep their reputations intact. The Mexicans who were threatened with denial of entry into the United States from Mexico, which was critical in their business activities, reluctantly agreed to capitulate to avoid losing their travel privileges. We made the point that we were serious when I traveled to California and Tucson, Arizona to interview (in the presence of their attorneys) Robert E. Petersen and his vice president, Thomas J. Siatos, under oath at his Beverly Hills mansion, and the Mexicans, Marco Pastrana and Victor Hugo O'Farrill Avila, in Arizona. Eventually, all pled guilty and turned state's evidence to avoid jail time. All paid hefty fines forfeited their bear hides and agreed to testify against Hayes. Hayes was convicted of federal Airborne Hunting Act and federal Lacey Act violations and was sent to jail for a year, but only served 28 days. He lost his guide's license for five years, paid a large fine, and forfeited his aircraft used in the violations.

Hayes' conviction was a bittersweet triumph when I located him the following spring at an aircraft repair shop in Kotzebue to seize his Cessna 185. In that encounter, I seized and disabled the aircraft's ability to start up and fly away by placing a chain and padlock around the prop (until I could get it inspected for me to fly to Anchorage for storage). I knew this would effectively put a “kibosh” on his spring hunting activities and maybe slow down more violations. During those moments I was with him and looking him square in the eyes, I just couldn't resist speaking for myself and the many others who I knew felt the same disappointment by telling him that he had been a hero and mentor to so many, that it was obvious he was so good at what he did he didn't have to violate the law. What I didn't tell them was that the reason he probably got caught up in “assembly line” big game hunting was due to pure greed, that only his booking the quantities of clients for bear and other big game animals hunting by illegal means would bring in the dollars he had gotten accustomed to.

What's the clincher in this case is that the odds of getting caught had been low enough over the years to make it worth the risk, and the money was too good, that even after his episode with me he couldn't resist taking the gamble once again when he thought he was safe. This time, in a Federal/State of Alaska sting, Hayes again was targeted and caught. This time he knew the consequences of conviction – that he would lose everything – thus he made the mistake of threatening a witness in a foreign country against talking. With that, and his previous conviction, and without a guide license, Ron Hayes landed in jail for two years with a felony conviction, paid a hundred-thousand-dollar penalty, forfeited more aircraft, and lost his hunting privileges. However, this time, Ron became a born-again poacher and went about preaching - even on a National Geographic special – on behalf of law-abiding hunters, about the ills of breaking the law and depletion of the resources. He also shocked the hunting world with his acknowledgement that the 37 brown/grizzly trophy bears recorded in the books – taken by hunters who had hunted with him over the years were all taken the same way, illegally.

Today, Ron Hayes is in his 94th year, still admired by many for his skills as a pilot and remains an Alaskan legend.

This case, and many like it, got the attention of the public and the guiding industry, and the wholesale slaughter of the resource began to diminish. We surely had some effect of cleaning things up but then again part of the change has been, as I said in the beginning, most of the vintage folks who did as they liked to have passed on and the trophies and numbers of animals, they squandered in times past are no longer available. I would like to think times have changed because of the work we did to protect the resource but that may be a look through rose-colored glasses.

Working cases like these brought some control to the “out of control” guiding world of early statehood days in Alaska but we may never again see the paradise of the Alaska we once knew. With that said, I tell this story to illustrate the importance of the title “Special Agent/Pilot” and our responsibilities in doing our job. This case couldn't have been worked without the agent or the pilot and being somewhat adept at both!

ROBIN WEST: Great work, great story. Thanks for sharing!