

Interview with Leif Knutsen.

June 3, 2022

JIM

This interview is being conducted for an oral history project sponsored by (at least partly) by the Jefferson County Historical Society and the interviewer is Jim Heumann. This interview is taking place at Leif Knutson's house in Port Townsend on June 3 2022. And okay, so Leif why don't you give us your full name and age and we'll start there.

LEIF

Okay, well, my name is Leif Eric Knutson and I was born in 1941. And so that makes me really close to 81 years old.

JIM

Wow. Tell us a little about where you were born, just a short synopsis...

LEIF

I was born in Norwich, Connecticut, during the war years, obviously. And my father was in the merchant service during the war, and then ... when the war was over, then they bought a chicken farm in Preston.

JIM

Preston...?

LEIF

Connecticut, not too far from Mystic Seaport, about 18 miles north of New London. You know, pretty good. It was a good location in those years. And we started a chicken farm and it grew and grew and grew. And we eventually in 1956, we moved out to the West Coast, because competition was really getting awful back there.

JIM

But when he was in the merchant service, how aware ... were you? Were you interested in that?

LEIF

You know, I was only three years old when the war was over.

JIM

Okay, so you don't remember that probably...

LEIF

I don't remember a lot of that era. I lived in New Orleans for a while. My mother moved down there because my dad was shipping out of New Orleans. And he got torpedoed off of Haiti, and lost about half the crew. He was on the life raft for about seven days out there and finally landed in Haiti.

JIM

Okay, and did he tell a lot of stories about that?

LEIF

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People who are in the war don't as a rule talk about it.

JIM

Yeah, okay. So you guys ... moved across the country and started a chicken farm.

LEIF

Yes, we were basically looking to relocate and we wanted to go to the Pacific Northwest. And we ... drove out here did a little sightseeing on the journey and stuff and drove up along the north Puget Sound up here and then go down to the Columbia Gorge.... We didn't see anything that struck our fancy and we're heading back on highway 30 at that point. And going through the Columbia Gorge, my mom looks up and sees this open field up there and mountains right behind it and all of that stuff. She says that's where I want to live. So we turned around, went to Cascade Locks, stayed the night found out who owned the property and drove east. When we got back east, he wrote to the people who owned the property, and yes, they were interested in selling some property. And yes, the price was right for that four acres that we were looking at. And it was a done deal. We get the deed. And there's actually not four acres but seventy acres, thirty of which are under the Columbia River. However, we made some money on that because the railroad wanted to straighten the tracks out. And they wanted to go across our property. So we sold them the rights to the property, made them put a trestle in there instead of just a pipeline, which is usually just a big pipeline to flush the bay out, put a trestle in there, which was also a good move because now it made that a little park area. And the state actually made a park. We were bordering on park called Wyatt and which was a religious camp and a CCC camp and all kinds of different things over the years.

JIM

And what year by year was this that you moved there?

LEIF

When came out here it was 1956.

JIM

So you were about a little over 10 or 12 or something.

LEIF

Well, I went to the first year of school at Norwich free High School and Norwich Free Academy. So that would have made me 15.

JIM

Okay. And were you did you have boating or boat building or anything in your mind at that point?

LEIF

You know, I'm raised on a farm. I was fairly good with tools. I come from a family from Norway. Yeah, you know, so I did have that blood in my genes. I played with small boats and, you know, messed around. During that time, I had the river right there. I ended up with a canoe and I took it down the Columbia River to Ilwaco. And I decided I don't think I'll go any further with the canoe [laughing].

JIM

When you go much further than Ilwaco you are on the Columbia river bar!

LEIF

It was pretty far. I put pontoons on the canoe, it was a lot more stable. And I could sleep in it.

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JIM

Oh, really? Okay, how'd you get it back?

LEIF

Well, I put it in a cannery warehouse for a while up in the rafters and went back and just picked it up, I don't know, with a pickup truck or something.

JIM

Okay. You didn't try to paddle it back?

LEIF

No, no. I decided that was as far as I was going to go.

So I said, well, maybe I'll just hitchhike to Mexico. And I had my shots already. Because I didn't know where I was gonna go. And I was going down, got down about to Longview [Washington] and a guy picked me up. Asked me what I was doing. I said, well, I don't really have a plan. Right now I'm hitchhiking to Mexico. He asked me do you want to work on a fishing boat in Alaska? Oh I say, well, that sounds fairly good. How much does it cost me to get there? Oh, not a penny he says, I'll fly you up there. I said well when do we leave? Day after tomorrow. I'm saying do I have to clean fish? No. Next day, I'm on the flight, a Constellation flight nonstop to Kodiak

JIM

From Seattle, Portland?.

LEIF

From Portland.

JIM

Okay. And again, what year was this? Do you think?

LEIF

What year was that? That was probably about ... it all gets very foggy. That was probably about 1964. ... I think it was right after the Earthquake if I remember correctly.

JIM

Okay, which was 63 I think that earthquake was, maybe, I'm not sure. So you're, you're maybe ... are you still a teenager at this point?

LEIF

No, I was probably in my young 20s. Somewhere thereabouts. I'd have to check my memory bank for the dates on some of this stuff.

JIM

And so you just you didn't check with your parents or anything?

LEIF

No, no, I just said well, okay. So I accepted the job and I hitchhiked home ... and change clothes and got my suitcase and got a ride to Portland airport. There were my tickets. And so that's how that worked.

JIM

Good. All right. So you get up to Kodiak,

LEIF

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Kodiak and then from Kodiak. We went out to, not Larsson Bay, Uganik Bay, which is where the canary was. And he had a boat out there that was wintered up there. We got it together and since I had some woodworking abilities, primitive but they were abilities, and big shop right there. I ended up doing a fair amount of repairing work on it. Well, shit before you know it I'm a boatwright. So it's a long story. And it goes on and on.

JIM

So how long were you up there?

LEIF

The first year was just for the season, the summer season of the pinks and silvers and stuff. Never made a lot of money, but I made enough to justify my existence. And then we came back. He flew me back back down again. No, actually, that summer, I hitchhiked back down on a boat. Met a guy up there on a small cabin cruiser who'd been radio operator out there and he had to bring his boat back. He needed a crew man and I said, sure, I'll go with you.

JIM

Okay, so did you like the work?

LEIF

I did like the work. I did. In fact, I was kind of enamored with it. Which was really a big mistake [laughing]. But it was a learning experience for youth. I was never cut out to be a commercial fisherman. I'm not greedy enough. You know, I just you have to be greedy. And I'm not that way.

JIM

... by greedy you mean?

LEIF

You have to get up early in the morning, work really hard all day long, and get up early in the morning again. I didn't like that part [laughing]. I mean, you don't realize it when you're just a crewman. Because ... you don't have any responsibilities other than catching fish and bringing the net in and sorting them and doing that. One of my jobs on the first season was I was a cook. Nobody wanted to cook food. I'll cook. Do I have to do dishes? Oh, no. Hey, the crew will do the dishes. Oh that's a good idea. But I actually turned out to be a fairly good cook. Well, I have a lot of experience cooking in my family because my grandmother is from the old country. My mother was from the old country. So they and in that era, people cooked. People didn't go out and buy TV dinners. You cooked food. And you know, you watch people cook and you know what it tastes like, and so you're kind of heads up on things. So that's how that all worked.

JIM

Okay, and how many seasons did you go out fishing?

LEIF

Probably five. Somewhere there about five.

JIM

And then what do you do in the winter?

LEIF

Came back down here. Well, my parents decided that I was not doing very good in college. So they decided well, maybe we'll just buy a fishing boat. He likes fishing. Maybe that'll work.

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JIM

Oh, so you were going to college...

LEIF

I went to college for a little bit. I never did very well because I was dyslexic and socially incompetent. So ... I couldn't spell and I couldn't, you know, I could read but I'm dyslexic. And so I was not good at college. And I came from a high school with thirteen kids in my graduating class. And I was fairly smart. But you don't get a chance to excel in that kind of situation. You don't get good teachers you don't get you don't get motivation. I worked in a plywood mill during part of that time. And I did a lot of good jobs in the plywood mill. I was a roustabout, so I did almost every job in the mill. The first year I was just a sweeper with a guy on graveyard but then I was quickly upgraded.

JIM

Did you learn anything about woodworking during that? Or was it just manual labor?

LEIF

No, basically, it was trial and error. Oh, that one didn't work. I really did no formal training, again that was not the best way to go into that kind of occupation. But you do make a lot of mistakes and you eat a lot of mistakes

JIM

in in the plywood mill...

LEIF

In the plywood mill. You know, there I got to be friends with the foreman, he liked me. He'd give me a job, I'd do good on it, he'd gave me another job, I do good on it. Every night, somebody's missing, so we need somebody to fill in on this job, off you go, which I really liked, because that changes the whole whole thing. I've worked everywhere from the green chain to the pond to the shipping department.

JIM

Okay, so So during that job, were you learning about woodworking there? Or was that just basic manual labor?

LEIF

...it's more than manual labor, because you're, you're making, you're coordinating things, you know, I was actually a department [foreman] for better lack of a better word, a small department foreman, setting up ... the spreader crew, which you had to get the product there. That's where all the energy of the plywood mill comes down to and then it goes into making plywood. And then it spreads out again from there. And so I was coordinating the materials for that and doing that kind of stuff. So yeah, you know, I'm driving the Jitney, I'm keeping all that stuff together.

JIM

So you're learning to take responsibility?

LEIF

Oh, absolutely, yeah.

JIM

And then when did you meet? Joan, your wife?

LEIF

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That was probably about 1964. Maybe 65.

JIM

So, when you were going back and forth to Alaska?

LEIF

No, I didn't know her then. No, it was when I got back from there. I basically quit fishing at that point and became a peacenik.

JIM

Okay, so, so the early 60s is when you're going back and forth to Alaska, and you're working in the mill and you're trying to go to college, figuring out what you're doing. Then you come back and you, you get confirmed in your hippiedom, and...

LEIF

Yeah, that's when I started going ... I basically flunked out of Oregon State. That's where I started going to school. And during that interim, when I was working in the plywood mill, I started going to a psychologist, which was a good a good thing. And I had money. And so I would drive to Portland, and I spent two hours a week with him And not only that, since I had a little bit of money, I even paid for everybody that I knew that might have insights into me to go to him for a day. So really he could find out more about my background. Where I came from, because I was really kind of a messed up kid at that point. I can elaborate but I don't know if it's worth it.

JIM

Fair enough. Yeah, we can come back to that if we need to.

LEIF

If you find reason to for history, we can do that but it's probably best just to left to the ether.

JIM

All right, so then how do you make your way to Port Townsend?

LEIF

Oh, ... I got involved with a couple of people in Portland. I was going to [Portland] State. I got I got better grades in [Portland] State. I got involved in psychology because I thought that was really interesting but since I couldn't spell, ... you know it was beyond my pay grade to try to pursue that, but I did get good grades there. I got involved with the anti war movement back then. They tried to try to enlist me, what do they call it..

JIM

Oh, draft you?

LEIF

To draft me. I got 4F [deferment] because I was so screwed up. When I would be under a stressful situation my blood pressure would spike. Well, it's not much more stressful than going into, what do they call it, a medical inspection there...

JIM

Your draft physical...

LEIF

So anyway, so my blood pressure spiked and and I went to the doctor and he's, really your blood pressure is fine. Probably just well, then I knew what I did. Next time I did it again. They

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said, well, I guess we don't want you. So I ended up with a 4F, it was during the early part of the draft. So it was not bad. All of this kind of overlaps and does weird things. But still. So anyway, then I met a couple of people in Portland that I became friends with. one of the guys that I went to school with who was became a librarian. And he knew some people. And so anyway, then I met some people there and actually started living with them for a little while. And ... they wanted to know my about interest in boats because he wanted to be a commercial fisherman. And what kind of a boat would he use and how could he get in cheap and stuff like that.

JIM

Where is this?

LEIF

This was in Portland and we actually moved on down to Newport, Oregon after I left Portland State. And actually, during that time, ... I was working with a guy named Lee and living with and him and his wife. His wife went to school with Joan [LEIF's wife]. And so we crossed trails out there and she was married at the time and it was on the rocks. And anyway, one thing led to another and another and another. So we're down in Newport. We we ended up building another boat for Lee.

JIM

Another boat? You'd built a boat before that?

LEIF

I built my little sailboat before before that.

JIM

Okay, when? Tell me about that. When did you do that?

LEIF

I was on the chicken farm. when ... I was still young.

JIM

So that was your first boat?

LEIF

That was my first project built boat.

JIM

How big was it?

LEIF

A 29 foot Cascade 29. I bought a hull and a keel. And I built the house. And since I was working, I was making money. You wouldn't think you make money at a buck-seventyfive an hour, but you do. And I had an area there where I could work and and had a little house that I could live in and and they had the bigger house ... There was a little shack down there that I just took over.

JIM

Okay, so you built this boat. You said you you got the hull? And then so you finish the whole thing. But with no experience. You just made it up.

LEIF

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Yes, just made it up. That's exactly what I did. It floated good. I took it down to Newport, Oregon. Actually, I took it down as far as Coos Bay, it tried to sink on me in Coos Bay. I had a motor in there. And this was one of the learning experiences. Little diesel engine and it had a fitting that went down through the through-hull for the water cooling. Well, it was sitting next to the engine and when you're running the engine, it's vibrating and when it vibrates you have metal fatigue. Got into the docks in Coos Bay and go down there and the fitting falls off the boat ... Got a one inch hole or inch and a half hole coming up through there. Oh my goodness. Plug that up. So yeah, it was one of those serendipitous learning experiences.

JIM

So you build this boat, you take it over the Columbia River bar out into the ocean and down to Coos Bay.

LEIF

Yeah, all the way down. I launched it in Cascade Locks.

JIM

And had you had experience on the fish boat before that, so you had some experience out on the ocean and boats and stuff?

LEIF

Yeah, and well enough to get me back out of there again. We came back up to Newport, which was a better bar. Coos Bay's a lousy bar. And came up there, and we built that boat for Lee. And I finished out my little sailboat more.

JIM

When you say little sailboat that's 29 feet though, right?

LEIF

Yeah, but you know, it's little when you're in it [laughing].

JIM

And are you living on the boat at this point?

LEIF

Not yet. I've been living with Lee and Barbara at their house.

JIM

Okay. And what kind of boat did you build for this guy?

LEIF

It was a cascade 36 that we modified into a small schooner design. Oh, and it actually looked pretty good. And he fished it for a few years, and then he decided there wasn't enough money to survive on that. And sold it to a guy in Alaska. I saw it about eight or 10 years later going on floating out there.

JIM

And did you need permits for fishing back then? Or could anybody just do it?

LEIF

Not the same way. You needed a commercial license. That was all. And there was no permits. It was bad timing for fishing and fishing was kind of on a downslope. It happens like that.

JIM

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So you build this boat for this guy. And was it you mostly by yourself? Or was he helping? Him and you? How long did that take?

LEIF

Probably about a year and a half.

JIM

Full time?.

LEIF

You're hippies, nothing's full time.

JIM

And is he paying you?

LEIF

No, I'm working ... for free. Learning experience. You can't charge for a learning experience. I've never charged what I, well, I've never charged very much. I've always always tried to keep myself down on the low wages. Low edge of the wages.

JIM

That probably meant you always had work.

LEIF

Pretty much... And you know, I had enough experience ... by that point. You know, when we moved up to Port Townsend, I was tailgating down there and down in Point Hudson area, and did some work on a boat that JIM Peacock owned (you probably want to interview him). I saw him coming across, we were coming up the coast, he had a little boat, little sailboat, probably about a 32/34 footer. Had a little cabin on there. And he liked the little cuddy cabin I made on my boat. And so [he asked] "can you do something like that on mine"? Yeah, probably.

JIM

How did you decide to move to Port Townsend? And how did you get up here?

LEIF

During my fishing years I came here one winter.

[After Oregon State, and after the plywood mill, and after he worked on other boats in Alaska, LEIF's parent's bought a commercial fishing boat for Lief to work on. However, LEIF was not a captain at the time so he worked as a deckhand and they had a captain that ran the boat. He also did repairs on the boat himself. The boat was based out of Seattle. They didn't make much money and the boat was eventually repossessed].

And I came up with a friend of mine. The guy came down from Alaska ... and we came over here and we spent a couple of days over here. And we came here and at Christmas time because there was nothing else to do in the city and we wanted to get out of there. Took my fishing boat and came up here. Stopped at Point Hudson, checked the town out a little bit. The Town Tavern was a cowboy bar - 10 cent beers.

JIM

Ten cent beers!

LEIF

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Yes, during that time, that was good. Little beers, but they would be ten cents.

JIM

And did you drink a few of them?

LEIF

Probably. Yeah, I was never a real big beer fan. But I have drank a significant amount of it. Especially in my youth. I don't do it much anymore.

JIM

And had Joan been here before you moved here?

LEIF

No, not at that point, it was a few years later.

JIM

And she was just good for an adventure?

LEIF

Yes, she decided that that I was worth keeping.

JIM

What was worth keeping?

LEIF

I was! So she was working at the medical school getting her degree and so she had a you know, life to live, but then she would drive down to Newport and spend the weekend down there and went back to work and went back to finish her medical school. Which was also a good thing because now she's got a degree.

JIM

For medical technology...

LEIF

For medical technology. So then when we actually got together we traveled together for a while. We finally went up toward Alaska, up to Alert Bay on the boat. And then she ended up getting pregnant. And so we came back to Port Townsend, spent the winter here, settled in, sold the boat in the spring, bought a little house down in Irondale/Hadlock area. We lived there for eight years, and sold that property for about three times more than we paid for it because that was just the point when the property values were going up, the interest rate was 13%. So I gave the guy 10% interest and took the payments myself. Made over \$60,000 on that house.

JIM

What year was this?

LEIF

Not good questions [laughing].

JIM

Are we talking 70's?

LEIF

Early 70s. Yeah. I'm trying to think when we built this house. Sevrin [LEIF's son] was two, so we probably built this house in the early 80s. But we lived in a Hadlock for eight years.

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JIM

Okay, so your son Forrest was born...

LEIF

He was born right here in Jefferson County ... I'm trying to remember all of this situation ...

JIM

And anyway, you were living in Hadlock.

LEIF

And we were living in Hadlock. We, we ended up, Joan was working in Port Townsend, at the hospital, which was still owned by the nuns at that point. And Forest has gone to school in Chimicum. He's five years old at that point. And my parents moved up here, so they were around. And we brought a lot of people to Port Townsend. A lot of people traveled behind us.

JIM

And did you start working on boats right away when you got here?

Lief

When we got here? That was basically yes. I got involved with this guy down in Chimicum. He had a boat shop down there and I can't remember his name. He'd been here a long time and he died while I was doing this. First he he turned me on to this job. This was finishing out the little research vessel for the Chimicum high school. He'd started it and got it framed up. And then he ended up with cancer. And the guys he'd gotten tried to plank it and got some of the bottom planks on okay, but then they started getting to the tricky ones. And they were popping off on them. So ... he ran into me ... and he he said, "Hey, you want to do a job?" "I don't know. What is it?" "Finish out this boat down here". Chimicum high school they're not doing very good job on it. So I said well, I'll go look at it. You know? Yeah, ... the framing was all good. And and all that structure... you know, the deadwood stuff was okay. The planking needed attention. And holes were pretty big. He ... lived until we basically got that boat done. So he was helpful telling me how to do things. And we decided that we would wedge-seam it so they could glass it which would be a good plan for that particular project.

JIM

So you're learning this stuff from him.

LEIF

I'm learning some stuff from him. I'm learning stuff from everybody at this point because I'm working on a fish boat sometimes in the wintertime. So I'm helping ... a real shipwright [fixing up the the fish boat his parents had bought]. So I'm helping doing the tanking on the boat... That was era when they started tanking all the fish boats. So I'm learning that part.

JIM

What do you mean by tanking the fish boats?

LEIF

Well when they take the fish hold and turn it into a hold that will actually hold water. And you could put ice in it and it would keep everything cold, those kinds of things. Then you could put refrigeration into it. And on and on and on.

JIM

And was this down in boat Haven then that you're doing this work?

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LEIF

No mostly in Seattle.

JIM

Oh, Seattle. So you're commuting to Seattle?

LEIF

No, no, that gets all very strange. No, at that point, I was living on the fish boat because I was just crewing on our boat and we would hire a skipper from the cannery to run the boat. And I was just a crew man on there at that point.

JIM

Okay, just step back for a second. So you get to Port Townsend and you do this work at Chimacum ... high school...

LEIF

Yes, it all gets kind of mixed up.

JIM

Okay, so, so some of the time you're off fishing, some of the times you're working on boats...

LEIF

.... at that point, I when I was doing that job, it was a little later in my experience, and I've been doing some of this other work previous to that. And this is when I was working ... helping that guy out of his cancer problems, So then I was here in town at that point, and I was actually living here and I sold the boat and I had a house in Hadlock, stuff like that. So I know before that there was probably a four or five or six year span that I was doing other things and I was in Seattle living on the [families'] fish boat repairing it and we were working in the shipyard.

JIM

Okay, working in the shipyard in Seattle.

LEIF

I was working at fisherman's terminal. Ballard, Ballard is the shipyard in my view.

JIM

Right. Okay. But where when was that relative to you being down in Coos Bay and Newport?

LEIF

Later. It all gets kind of fuzzy, you wouldn't think it would but it does.

JIM

I believe it. Okay.

LEIF

Don't try to pin me down on this stuff...

JIM

All right. Sorry. Well, let's concentrate on when you've gotten to Port Townsend. When do you end up at boat Haven and really seriously working on boats?

LEIF

When Joan and I came back from my trip to Alert Bay on my sailboat. We got moorage down there. \$13 a month.

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JIM

At the Boat Haven?

LEIF

Yes. And we were poor as church mice. Joan was knitting hats that she'd sell down in the taverns. We'd buy a gallon Cabari wine, which was pretty cheap. Three bucks is a gallon. That was our entertainment. And then we had some friends that we met [sailing] on a trip. Okay, and we'd pick up little odd jobs. Joan painted a mast for these people and I did really didn't do anything for them. But I worked on other projects ... as a tailgater.

JIM

What does that mean, tailgater?

LEIF

That means you've got some tools in a truck and you're willing to do stuff [laughing].

JIM

When did you become like full time shipwright?

LEIF

Probably, well, after I'd done all of this stuff for a while, and the kids are getting a little bit more expensive to own, and we wanted to move to town and I needed a little more work. I started working from Mark Burns. And that's basically when I started becoming a full time shipwright.

JIM

And he had a boat building shop?

LEIF

He had that old railroad building over there [at Boat Haven], right now they're still doing boat work out of that railroad building, that engine room building. No, I know you know it.

JIM

I'm sure I've seen it but

LEIF

Oh, yeah, it's right down there towards the far end of the old yard. Okay, railroad used to cut right in there.

JIM

Okay. So this would have been then in the 70s?

LEIF

This was in probably in the 70s.

JIM

All right. And so you start working on boats full time.

LEIF

Started working on boats. Well, now not full time... I don't ever do anything full time. Most of our work was on fish boats and that's seasonal work. And so you get the summer off, which worked really good because you could collect unemployment and I could work on the house while Joan made money ... plus health insurance, big help.

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JIM

Okay. And then you look after the kids during the summer too?

LEIF

Part time, yes. We had traveling tots ... We would trade babysitting with ... some of our friends. Kit Africa (another person you'll probably want here interview). I was on the docks when he and Shannon came to town on their little boat from Sausalito or down ... south. And JIM Peacock, I was behind, anchored up behind deception, Destruction Island. I was anchored up there and JIM anchored up out there the same day. And so I recognize this boat and I didn't talk to him or anything. But then he came to town and I recognized his boat. So I introduced myself to him. "Oh, we were anchored right behind Destruction Island". Anyway, all that stuff runs together. Then I'm working for Mark Burns in the wintertime. And that works out pretty good. Learning skills from all the people there.

JIM

And were there a lot of people there at that point?

LEIF

There were six of us. Something like that.

JIM

Working on boats.

LEIF

Michael Auburn was there. Miguel is working there. He's probably the most talented person.

JIM

Miguel who?

LEIF

Winterburn. He died a few years ago. I think that was his name. And other people ... Kit Africa ended up working there for a while. Richard Wilmore was there. He's another person you can interview. He's here in town. He was one of the early... now he teaches out at or had been teaching at the wooden boat school in Port Hadlock.

JIM

And what was the Boat Haven like back then?

LEIF

Pretty primitive! A lot of tailgaters. Mark had the best yard down at that point. Everybody else were just tailgaters.

JIM

Okay, so you're working outside in the winter?

LEIF

Oh yeah. In fact I got a picture over here. I'll show it to you. We are early days of the co-op. That's one of the reasons I wanted to do the interview here because I can have the memories here in the house. It was just all kind of a hodgepodge of everybody trying to make a buck and doing things and doing the best they could with what they had. And we definitely brought boat building to Port Townsend. We were the early people right here. You know, there was, like I say, there was an old guy out there in Hadlock that built boats. I don't know anybody else. But once they were here and people realized what a nice place it is, fishermen realize oh, you can come down here and even paint in the wintertime on some days. So they bring their boats down here

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... from Alaska, all of a sudden they'd start seeing all this stuff that you really have to do, bulwarks and frames and planking and caulking and on and on. So yeah, we all just worked. You just learn what you can do.

JIM

And was there any work on yachts?

LEIF

No, hardly any. Once in a while. I steered away from yachts. I hated them. Right from the get go. Oh yeah, I'm not a finish person. You know that.

JIM

You did pretty good.

LEIF

I just make it so you can add putty and paint.

JIM

Okay, so you're down at Boat Haven and it's starting to grow. There's more tailgaters coming.

LEIF

More tailgaters and more talent comes to town. It's amazing the talent that's come to town over the years. And then all of a sudden you have computer programmers ... came to town, I had some help from some of those guys that were originally here. Steve Davis was an illustrator. He did a lot of illustrating for (he's dead now) for Passagemaker magazine ... I got a book around here with one of the boats that I did. Passagemaker Magazine. Any rate, some of those you look back on and you say, well, I was really lucky to get away with that with the skin of my teeth.

JIM

Was was the work particularly dangerous back then, do you think?

LEIF

I don't think so. We did a lot of stuff that was probably frowned on by workman's comp [laughing]. And as they got more and more into the movie, and everybody, insurance people, had their fingers in the pots everybody had to tighten up the position. I mean, we'd grind bottoms right out there and then drop it in the dirt. You know, all that stuff. That's all gone now. Probably for the best. Because when you start doing it, with that kind of intensity shit hits the fan. Still does.

JIM

Okay, and so is the railroads still in operation in the 70s? The ones that go went out into the bay?

LEIF

Yes, they loaded them up on a barge and took them over to the mainland.

JIM

And was that logs mostly that they were loading up? What were they loading on the barges?

LEIF

Railroad cars. There was a trestle went out there on a big lift thing and they bring a barge in and they line up the tracks up back the cars out on the railroad barge. Yeah, it was going on. It

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was even going on when we started the co-op because they would bring cars out there and park them right there and our offices on the other side of the car.

JIM

And what's the town like, when you got here in the 70?

LEIF

Oh, paper mill, paper mill town.

When we first got here, my friend and I were the only two long haired people we saw ... when we were walking in walking around checking it out. So that was a good point. But it became Californiacated quickly. Newport became Californiacated quickly. And then when we came up here, it seems like California is right behind us. But the port ... didn't hassle us very much. You know, as long as we're paying our rent and dealing with it and not making a big hassle for everybody else. They were pretty cool with us. Now they want you to have business licenses, you know, fancy trucks and insurance and bondage and who knows. Co-Op has to have have a lawyer on retainer. When we started the co-op we had to have a lawyer on retainer ... couldn't do that work without a lawyer.

JIM

Okay. Well, tell us about how the co-op got started.

LEIF

One of the guys that worked at Mark Burns when I was working there, he needed a business manager. And I knew this guy [Mike Stone] that was a business manager for a paper company down in Portland. They were moving up to Port Townsend and looking for work and I saw that and [suggested he] go down there and introduce himself to Mark. Well he did, and he got the job and he worked there for Mark for quite a while. He's a good business manager, he knows how to collect money. He knows how to keep the tax people off your neck. He's good business manager. However he's got a kind of an abrasive personality. One of the few guys I'd ever wanted to hit [laughing], that abrasive. But, you know, his good points were really good. He collected money, and he kept the tax people off your ass. So when Mark started shifting over to refrigeration and not much boat work anymore, then there was really nothing for us to do there. And so he and I are sitting up in his house, and one evening and talking and I says, well, why don't we start a co op? He says yeah, why not? So we asked, put the word out around the people we knew out of work and said, well, would you like to start a co op? It seemed to be a nice thing to do. And so we had about six or seven people there. When we started Carl Chamberland, (another person to interview) and Dave Thompson, of course, you'll probably end up talking to him. Steve Snap, he's dead now.

JIM

So anyway, Did you then formally form a business?

LEIF

We formally formed a business. Mike Stone (who is now dead) was the prime, he was our secretary who did all that work. And because he's a secretary, he's overhead. So how do you pay him? Especially when you're a bunch of tailgaters? Well, we made the co-op so your billable hours (we counted all the rest of the work that you did to keep the company together as co-op hours, and you didn't get paid for that), so the billable hours were the important ones for the bookkeeping, because that's the ones he could collect on. And we made it so his wages were dependent on the ... average of the billable hours that we all earned, put together. So some was worked more than others during the offseason, some people wanted to take off early, but it's all you know, lives go on. And we try to accommodate all of that. We paid Mike the average of what everybody else earned. So he wanted to keep us employed! He was the

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frontman. And so he you know, and then a [prospective customer] would call up the Co Op, and usually [he'd] accept it ... and then find somebody to do it. But it worked out pretty good. And that pretty much stayed until he died. And he worked there probably at least 10 years 12 to 15 years, something like

JIM

Okay, so you're you're working for the co op for all this time.

LEIF

I put in probably about 20 years there. I quit probably about 2000. And we started that about 1982, maybe 1981. When we actually got this moving in 82 When we were actually formalized.

JIM

And then our I guess gradually more and more boat builders are moving to Port Townsend.

LEIF

More and more people are moving to Port Townsend more and more skilled labor is moving to Port Townsend. If you've got boat works, now you've got machinists work, now you got electronics. Now you got this, now you got that, now you got all of the stuff that you have to relate to. And you need specialized people. I mean, I can barely plug in an electric plug... I can't wire a boat or anything with a radio. ... I get people, I hire people.

JIM

Yeah. But thinking back to the actual work you did. I mean, you work in wood, and you've done some work for us. And it seems like you have a natural talent for it. I mean, it's like you you can see things that other people can't see.

LEIF

It's really because of my dyslexia, oh, basically as you know, when you have some kind of shortage in some kind of part of your vision or something and then nature you make up with it in some other sense. And one of the things of dyslexia is it gives you ... a good ability to look at two sides of the same problem, whether it's a problem or so, like, if it's a space, I can look, I can visualize that space and say, Oh, I could do this and this and this. And if I put something up there it would do this. And then I could build off of that, and I could do this. So yes, it's all dyslexia, it's one of my claims to fame if you will. Basically, ... I come from Scandinavia, those guys built boats thousands of years ago, I'm doing the same damn thing. Most of it, a lot of it is the same stuff. I'm using using linseed oil and pine tar and that was what they fix fixed boats with back in the old days. That'd be really old days. That's how they painted the Viking ships. Linseed and pine tar.

JIM

And did you study that stuff back then? Or you're just learning from scratch?

LEIF

You just learn it. you want you know, you have this stuff in your yard. You have some linseed oil, you have some turpentine, and you got some pine tar and, oh, I'll just mix some of that together and see what happens. That's how it all came about. And then you want bedding compound? Well, what is bedding compound? Bedding compound is pine tar and something, thickener. I made some down here recently with silica gel. It's thick, thickened up pine tar and works really good is good for lubricating screws, but stay sloppy forever.

JIM

Are there any big jobs that you particularly remember that went really well or really badly?

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LEIF

I don't really want to talk about the bad days. However, one of the jobs that we did that turned out really quite good was ... was the Aleutian Dragon. It used to be a cable layer and came to town, I'm trying to remember it probably had some military name for it but it came to town. And when it came to town, here's this, it's got five inch planking on it, right, five inch thick. And it's got 12 inch frames on 12 inch centers. Well, it's a cable where you put in enough cable in it to go across from someplace ... to Queen Charlotte. Coil it up in the bottom. Has a big steam engine down there. You can run the winch with stuff like that, well this guy that I crossed trails with bought this boat, and he was going to take it out to Chignik and turn it into a processor, not a processor but a vessel for that area, tender, tender processor or all of the above. And he was a young rich kid. And he wanted this steam engine out of the bilge. And it was down there in Hadlock. So a friend of mine, at this time I'm not even really a shipwright, looks at that job and he [the owner] had a number of people trying to take this boiler out of the bilge and the boiler is about six feet in diameter, but two stories high.

JIM

Oh geez.

LEIF

Pipes, two inch pipes, I got a couple of the pipes right here in the yard still. 180 of them come up through this top thing that is about this big [five feet in diameter] with with pipes [very] close together. And you have to cut the top off and that means you have to cut each pipe off of the top perfectly because you can't have any of those still holding when you try to lift this top off... Two walls and three quarter inch thick to hold steam boiler live pressure [...] well built military [gear]. He had some people they're trying to start cutting this off. Well, I think out of almost nowhere, they decided they didn't want to try to do this anymore. And so he asked me and my friend, another kind of a roustabout guy, if we could do that and give him an estimate? He looked at it, and he's pretty good welder and he knows metal real well (he's dead now). He says, yeah, we can do that. And he asks, well, how long will it take? And he says, well, we'll have it out of here, this was Friday afternoon, ... we'll have it out of here by Sunday night. How much would it cost? Well, it'll cost this much money and you buy all the consumables, which are a lot of gas. And basically a lot of gas.

JIM

For the welder?

LEIF

For the burner, wood burning, you got to burn all of this stuff loose and then you got to burn all of this out ... And it's two stories high and these tubings are well over six feet. ... we had to get rid of that. A good portion of it, we don't have to tell anybody about this, a good portion of it is right down on the bottom of the bay by the boat school.

JIM

Oh, at Hadlock.

LEIF

It all had to go out through this companionway door ... and all heavy.

JIM

Oh geez. You can't lift it straight up.

LEIF

No, no, no, no it got to go out the door. Oh, so we have to break it down into consumer movable pieces, then over the rail [laughing]. [It's] all there. Good steel. Probably worth money.

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It's not even very deep. We took some of the pipe, he built a barn down there, used them for studs on a barn. I made some fencing here, I got one out there I'd like to get rid of, I'll show it to you before you leave. I've cut up others and ... used a lot of it. So we've cut all that out the first day. it didn't look like we're going very far at the end of the day. And he's [thinking he's] gonna really make out like a champ on this. The end of Sunday night we're sweeping up and he looks at that and he started to think I got burned. However, I told them, well you know, the longer you think about this, the happier you're gonna be because I think we charged 2000 cash so we're making 1000 bucks a day back in those days. And he was thinking he got burned. The longer you think about this, the happier gonna be - it's gone. It's gone.

So he remembered me. And when he opened up the cannery up there in Chignik he called me up and asked me if I go up there and be a shipwright for some of those boats up there because he's got all these native boats that need to get emergency stopgap repairs so they can go to sea. So I went up there and I did that. And then that turned out really well. I fixed a whole bunch of boats up there. I'm working in the snow. Ice in the boats...

JIM

Is this in the 80s the 90s

LEIF

Yeah, this is in the late/mid 80s

JIM

You're still working for the co-op though, but you're...

LEIF

True.

JIM

But then you're going up there and working just...

LEIF

We could take off.

JIM

But are you are you working for yourself when you're up there or still working for the co-op?

LEIF

I'm working for myself. I work at \$25 an hour up there and I'm working for 20 years maybe less down here at the co op. Probably less. We started the co-op we were working for 10 bucks an hour, charging 20 and we made sure that the company had cash flow. That was one of the things that Mike was really good at, make sure we had the cash flow. ... Now when you got money in the bank, and people look at that and say, Oh, you got to a 1A or a 1D, Dun and Bradstreet rating, which is the best you can have on a business this size, all of a sudden, they pay attention to you a little bit.

So anyway, I'm up there, I go up there to Chignik. It's only about five or six or eight, well, probably about eight weeks, maybe something like that. We got all these boats out there on the rails, they drag them up, and then slide them out here on the rail. And they have to go fishing. They're all built in the late 50s. And they getting tired, native boats, and quickly assembled government job grants. So I'm up working there.

And then a few years later, this Aleutian Dragon now comes back down here to Port Townsend and he needs some bulwarks, and he needs some covering boards and some stock on there.

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So we, Co Op now, this is now a co op job. We did an estimate for him told him it'd be about \$100,000. Big surveyors actually had a bet amongst other surveyors, they'll never do that for that kind of money. Cost a good bottle of scotch to some of those guys. We did that and we had a little bit of money laying on the table. That's for basically covering boards for the midships aft and some decking, and some planking, 12 by 12 frames, some frame tops. The boat was really well made. [They had] salted the upper edge, salted up that area up there so it didn't rot too bad. But when you salt it. that's hard on fastenings. They don't last that long.

JIM

So that was a good job.

LEIF

That was a good job. It turned out you know, that was now a \$100,000 project. And everybody was working for good money and we came out smelling like a rose and the surveyors they say, hey, I lost the bottle of scotch but those guys did good. And your reputation is made and made and lost on the last job you've done. Always has been, if you've done a good job, everybody in Alaska knows it because they're all on the radio. And if you did a shitty job everybody knows.

JIM

And the conditions in Alaska when you're working up there, that must have been brutal.

LEIF

It was pretty bad. I mean, when when there's still snow on the ground. There's ice in the bilges in the fish boats that I'm working on. And I have to cork the seams ... Well, if you wait too long into the day and it starts leaking, weeping, you can't cork because you can't cork against the water. It's not gonna work. Cotton gets wet. It's gonna be a big muck. So I have to clean the seams out. Cork-um, pay-um, do all that stuff before it starts melting. And then if it starts melting, I have to do something else. Some maybe planking or something, which I do, because I'm working 12 hours a day, seven days a week. Eight hours on Saturday, Sunday, so I can do some laundry and stuff. I'm living in the trailer house. That's now Brad's trailer house. He's the owner of the place and the reason I live in there is because I don't drink and that's where all the booze was at, all the beer. So I was a good person to have in there.

JIM

Did you ever shop to work in or was it all outside?

LEIF

I had a shop, They'd pretty much stripped everything out. But there was a bandsaw is in there, and the bandsaw worked, and needed attention, but it worked. And it had a planer and had some other tools. But it didn't have any lumber. I had to ship up the lumber. And I had to kind of guess on what I was going to ship up there.

JIM

How would know?

LEIF

He gave me some ideas.

... so we shipped up a bunch of lumber for planking and things and stuff that I thought would probably be appropriate for, you know, 40/50 foot boat, 40 footers mostly. And so yeah, there's a lot of guesswork in it, you know, and but it was a good job. And I made bought a new car when we came out, not a new car, a new used car. ... so that was, that was good. You know, you just make it, ... nothing's really planned, you just make the best with what you've got, and then see where it goes.

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JIM

Do you have any advice for younger people coming up? And particularly the boat building trade?

LEIF

You know, get training, get training, get professional training. You want to get it if you want to compete out there. Now you have to be trained. You can't do it on your own. I mean, think about being a plumber, and not having even the rudimentary training. Learning it yourself. Yeah, you'll make mistakes. It'll cost you money. But if you get some training, it makes the job a lot easier. Plus, it's paper. People like to see paper.

JIM

Okay. And any, any important lessons that you learned that you want to share?

LEIF

Well, I already told you one, your reputation is made on the last job you did. And you know, do the best you can and eat what you have to. I mean, you're gonna make mistakes. It's inevitable. Try to make the customer happy.

JIM

You and I've worked together a little bit, right? And you taught me that when you come up with a solution don't just come up with one but come up with like at least three? How did you figure that out?

LEIF

Trial and error [laughing]. First one is probably not gonna work. Other maxims] - leave it as long as you can for as long as you can, that's an old time thing that came down through history. You know, don't fasten anything until you have to, ... don't glue anything you do have to put it together. Go as far as you can, take it apart, change the things that you want to change now that you've got it all together. And those kinds of things. So yeah, that's ... not anything from me personally, that's just history.

JIM

Okay. Just you learned it from other people.

LEIF

Yeah, eighty year old, learning from other people and trying to pass it on ... there's probably other stuff that I could think of ... but that's basically the stuff that I pass on.

JIM

Well, I think we've been close to her an hour and a half, and you're probably getting tired.

LEIF

But no, I've tended to stay in the commercial industry. And I never just never really got out of that. I didn't go into cutsie pie stuff. I didn't go into small boats. There's no money in small boats.

JIM

Well, you built a couple, you built Shadowfax and you built...

LEIF

There's no money in small boats [laughing]. You're the beneficiary of that. [Jim and his wife Karen bought Raven, a 29' wood powerboat, from Leif in 2014].

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JIM

That's true.

Lief

I mean, I had probably \$30,000 in expenses in that boat. And I sold it for what \$15,000? And that doesn't count labor, right, just cash.

JIM

And a lot of those materials were you'd had already.

LEIF

Some of them some of them. Yeah.

JIM

What about that bigger boat, that bigger version of Raven that you you built? That was a 41...

LEIF

That was one I was happy to get away with on the skin of my teeth. He was a lawyer. We started building that. He wanted one set of conditions. And then he wanted to change the conditions, which I kept going along with because he's a lawyer. And it just gets out of hand. And finally I had to call an end to it and said, hey, I'm feeling like I'm getting abused here. I can't do any more this for you. Fortunately, it's never come back and bit me. Because it could, there's lots of things that could have gone wrong on that boat.

JIM

And that was a 48 footer?

Lief

Actually it was supposed to be about a 45. And we got building on it. And whenever you're building a boat, you leave it as long as you can, as long as you can. I mean, it's the boat now, right? So I left on the planking on the bottom, I left it three feet long. Good idea. So he's looking at the boat and say, Hey, we got all this boat here. Why don't we just make it 48 feet? Well, I'll tell you one reason it's gonna cost you a lot more money. He says, why is that, it's just empty space. I said that's not where the money's going. The money is going here in the middle. That's where you spread the house out. You spread everything else out, you've spent, you know, that's where the money is. And that's where it stays because you know that and we did we ended up lengthening the house and make it longer. So all of a sudden, now you've got, instead of a \$300,000 boat, you have a half a million dollar boat. And then all of a sudden you got \$750,000 boat. And each time you do something, well then he goes and he goes to a goddamn engineer, you're not on recording this...

JIM

Oh yeah.

LEIF

Okay, well, I'll try to clean up my French. Each time you do something, it changes the parameters. He get goes to a ... he wants floppy stoppers on it... It was quick boat ... you know it's quick. Same thing as a ferry. They're quick. It's got a four second roll period. Four and a half. Same bottom. same size, basically the same vessel. So he wanted big flopper stoppers. Well, he wants these great big supersize flopper stoppers. I say I'm not putting those on there. Where are we going to put them? We don't have a spot to put these things. You get flopper stoppers, you have to pull them out of the water. Oh, we can put a little winch right here. No, we can't put a little winch right there. Where are we going to fasten that to? ... We're not

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putting winches hanging on out there. And then where do we put this great big flopper stopper? I say besides that I'm working on commercial fish boats out here that got these smaller ones that work just fine on a boat that's twice as heavy and twice as big, but he goes through these engineers and they make this thing so they can handle these great big posts. Well all of a sudden now you got that big of a post hanging on the outside of your boat without some way fasten it to. Well you can fasten to the hull but now all of this is sitting proud right out there where the all this stuff is. Just goes on and on and on. I was happy to get rid of that, he's never come back to me, which is fine. But there was work in there that I'm not proud of. You can't be proud and stuff like that... I'm happy to be done with that one.

JIM

What is an example of work that you are proud of?

LEIF

Raven, Shadowfax [24' aluminum power boat], canoe [20+ foot wood/fiberglass]. A lot of the fish boats are still working out there. Yeah, there's a lot of work that I've done I'm happy with. Can you try to make it all happy? Doesn't always work. Look what we did on your fuel tanks [the original, used, plastic tanks split apart]. No, woops, I tried to put these in there and they didn't work. Fortunately, I decided that a boat should have be able to get the fuel tanks out without having to tear the goddamn boat apart. So we go out and in a couple of hours we got one of the fuel tanks out, couple more hours we got the other one out. Make up a pair ... it costs some money. Thank you. You didn't bitch, \$3,000 for new tanks. Well, I didn't have \$3,000, there's just that much more I would have lost. You just tried to, when I make things I tried to make them so they're repairable. And that's, to me, a very important thing. Make it so it can come apart without having to do a \$10,000 job just to get a fuel tank out. Or stuffing in the stuffing box. That's one thing I'm not proud of on your boat is how tight that came out. But it can be done. But the easiest way is to pull the engine out [laughing]. But there again, I mean, it's getting more complicated and things hanging on... But you can still change the packing in there and you shouldn't have to change it for the rest of your days. Good packing job ... should be in there for 15 or 20 years easy in a commercial boat. And you're not putting that kind of mileage on it. You can just tighten it up.

JIM

Which I do from time to time. Yeah, good. Anything else we should go over before we're done?

LEIF

Oh, I'm sure there's tons. Yeah, I'd like to show you a couple of pictures here. You can copy them if you want.

JIM

Yeah. Okay. But well, maybe we'll do another one at some point if questions come up.

LEIF

Yeah, sure. For sure.

JIM

Okay. All right. Well, I'm gonna turn this off and thank you very much.

LEIF

My pleasure.