

Kay Henry/TC1994.0057  
Mad River Valley Project/VFC1991.0004

KH Kay Henry  
JB Jane Beck  
MS Miles Smith  
Place Fayston, VT  
Date 06/22/1994

KH That does help. Yeah there are pieces but a now we're working on it.

JB Okay? [.25] Well let's start with how I think you told me your family came up here, let's sort of start back with first up in this neighborhood and then what led to the development of \_\_\_\_\_. [.42]

KH I first came up here to ski. I grew up outside of Boston and we spent weekends up in the area skiing had originally gotten a house and bought in with Glen Ellen, so had worked with Walt Elliot and my parents had season passes and it turned out that the kids had season passes until they were sixteen which meant that I had to start either teaching skiing or ski patrolling or whatever afterwards. I started teaching and then through college would come up weekends and teach skiing occasionally. Then so it was after I got married that we looked for land for a ski house. And

again we were attracted to the Mad River valley had spent a lot of time here, decided that a, it was a good place to put a second home eventually ended up working outside New York City, and decided this really wasn't our lifestyle. We took off for the west and travelled for awhile and when we came back ended up here, for a temporary basis we thought at first while we'd get settled to look for jobs and then ended up because of an accident with a horse and a car, ended up staying up here for an extended period of time.

[2.00] Meanwhile my husband had designed a canoe and a kayak which we used throughout our western trip, and we'd gone off to race and people were asking about the boat. So this kind of became the fall back thing that you could do so I guess Jim started making boats while I got a job as a computer programmer for the State of Vermont. And we started the business. [2.22]

JB It always amazes me the element of chance. And a, let me get you to talk a little bit more about how the business took off and when you knew it was gonna take off and how it really got going.

KH I think you're right it's the element of chance that

really started it, was we went over to the open canoe national championships which were being held in Maine that year in 1971 and Jim won the down river class in this first boat that he designed that Mallisite.

Sports Illustrated happen to be there and picked it up and put it in their Faces in the Crowds session.

People called and wanted to buy a boat and so he decided that he built the boats originally, he built a mold, he set it up with the back of his mind that he could always build and design canoes. But we really hadn't thought of starting a small business. My field was oceanography, geology. We were looking towards forest service jobs or something like that and then as there began to be a demand for the boats we decided no we'd stay around here and a, I looked for a job with the state. So the business grew slowly, kind of from the one at a time stage, until when we really decided to go for. [3.47] (Pause) [3.57]

JB Was that a five year period or a? When did you decide that you would quit the computer business and and develop your own business?

KH I think that's got a personal side to it too. It had

to do with a, we had both our children while I was working at the state and then I wanted to spend more time at home with the kids so we put the office in the downstairs of the house and I could have a play pen there, and handle the office part of it, while he had the shop close beside the house too. [4.31] That was probably in 1974, 75, and then we moved from here to Waterbury while we looked for a more permanent home and actually then worked with Dick Brothers and Mad River Green to erect the building where we are now. Our manufacturing building was put up in 1976. And we rented it originally for awhile, and then we've added on three or four times since then.

JB Yeah cause I remember you were on the other side of the road for awhile weren't you?

KH We were upstairs above Bisby's first, and that was right above the bakery. So talk about the smell of fiberglass mixing with cheesecake, that was pretty interesting. We really had to move from that one. [5.15] And being right upstairs in the middle of the shopping center was not the right kind of a place to manufacture boats. So we were in Waterbury I think

for just about a year out behind the concrete company.

And then, but we were really looking for a place to be in Waitsfield because that's where our house was, that's where a lot of the people who work for us lived, and you know as the business was growing by then it was probably just three or four people. We decided to go into this as a serious venture and got the building in Waitsfield.

JB I broached the idea about the name but I know it's pretty obvious. Did you go through a search for names or how did you come up with the name?

KH I think no we really knew where we wanted to live and Mad River kind of came out of that. [6.10] It was, it was a place that I felt comfortable with, we lived the Vermont connection, and we liked the connotation of the name. It's actually been a very positive part of the development of the company. I think a good name can be a strong feature in a selling environment.

And I think Mad River is a, is a good name, Mad River Canoe sounds like it's something exciting. [6.33]

JB It's really true. But as I told you a, a number of people have commented on a, what this business really

has brought to the valley and that it's the kind of industry that they like.

KH That's good to hear, I mean one of the things we tried to do was combine kind of new technology in the materials that we build the boats with, with some of the romance of New England and the wood trim the cane seats so the traditional plus the really modern and to make a strong boat but yet have it look reminiscent of what we all remember canoeing as a romance.

JB And lightweight.

KH And lightweight. Ha! Which makes canoeing applicable to our age and a, what's happening in the country right now.

JB Let me ask you about a, the other businesses in town and the prospect of having talked with Ed Eurich and a Edgar Tromblay about this development of the aquifer.

KH I, when I first read of the project I was pretty excited I think it's a tremendous opportunity for the valley and bottled water is only gonna grow. I also volunteer for the board of American Rivers which is our nationwide conservation group that really deals with rivers, and what's happening with water quality

throughout the country from a business perspective I think bottled water is a good place to be. And the opportunity to have something in town, the opportunity to get some, get town water, we exist in the manufacturing company that sprinkles it's building from a pond up on the hill up behind us. In true Vermont fashion when you have to improvise because we don't have any sort of a town water system. So I think this is a tremendous opportunity for Waitsfield.

JB What is, what do you see is a, the problem? With it? What it preventing it from happening? [8.40] Or what are the attitudes that are preventing it from happening?

KH Some how every body seems to want to find fault with whatever another person wants to do, I mean we tried to expand Mad River Canoe and just ended up with adjacent land owners or other people fighting about it for really some of the strangest reasons and, I mean they built their houses there after we started the business, after there'd been a canoe manufacturing plant and then to say you don't like it and you don't want it to get bigger and you don't want any traffic

on the road, it's kind of hard. [9.18] This seems to be an issue over traffic in a lot of ways and, I think we've got a, somewhere understand that we are gonna have to develop, let's be careful with it and I guess I go along more with the idea of a control development rather than use by right but I certainly think that we'd be stupid to not encourage this kind of development. It's the right kind of thing for our type of environment here. [9.42]

JB That's good. Let me give you the opportunity to say anything you want to say about you know what you think is the neatest thing or the best thing about your company or you know, get it a pitch for it a, in any way you want. [10.04]

KH You know what I think is the neatest thing about our company is that it's a real team effort, every body that's there really participates, we have a lot of ideas that are generated by the people on the floor, they have their standards of what they want to do and they feel very comfortable about coming to anybody and saying what if we change this, what if we did that? And I had some dealers in this spring and they came to



me and said I don't know if you think this is a compliment or not but I just wanted to tell you that this was a really interesting place to visit and we thought it was so wonderful, I mean you're not Mad River Canoe, it's your people that are. And I just thought that was, that really made me feel good. That it really is a team effort.

JB And the other thing I wanted to get a little bit out is, you know, how far flung it's become, I mean you going up there on the ice, that's pretty interesting you know if you think about it. A, a long way from Waitsfield, Vermont.

KH And the really interesting thing is we're probably known better outside this community than we are inside it. [11.06] We are, we do have a good reputation nationally and we sell a lot of boats internationally.

I always like the opportunity to go out and experience and see what kinds of things we're dealing with. Got a wilderness trip planned in northern Canada later this summer and try to keep up on that as well as visiting some of the international customers.

That's important for, for me. But a, I think the

company we've worked very hard to keep quality standards that we want to be the, the highest quality boat in the industry and I think we have that reputation. And Vermont is a part of it. I mean it's people that are craftsman that care, this isn't a mass produced type of a product, this whole community is not a mass produced type of people. I mean we really have a pride in what we do. And I think that's very important through out, through out our business. And our personal lives.

JB I think you got to say that \_\_\_\_\_, but you really did a, unless they give us any problem with a noise.

KH Okay.

JB I think that's really just what I wanted.

KH The kinds of pieces that you need. Okay.

JB Yeah. Yeah. I mean you know it will just be a small short piece on the business but I want to get it in and I like what you said about it.

KH Okay. Okay. Cause I think the people are the main thing and that's the part of the emphasis I'd like to get on. The combination of all, you know, new

technology and romance and then the people are probably the biggest focuses of what had made Mad River Canoe a success. [12.35]

JB Maybe I should also ask you cause you mention the international scene, when did you really realize and how did you feel when you, you suddenly woke up to the fact that hey this is going way beyond, well maybe didn't, maybe.

KH I think one of the things that I've learned an awful lot from is realizing that we really are in a global economy. And, I realize how isolated I've been, I'm not like the Europeans who can change money real quickly who can think in different currencies, as well as different languages, we are so isolated, and travelling and working in Europe trying to sell into the different countries, I've learned a lot and I'm I'm just amazed at how insulated we still are and we continue to be. When I go to Japan, which is a very different cultural experience, and how you really have to work to try and conform and understand to what they're asking, it's, we have to relate a lot differently than what we were trained to do and the

way we just kind of boldly go through things. I enjoy selling all over the world. I'd like to spend more time at it. Ha! Ha!

JB And you've obviously grown with the business as well, I think I remember you telling me you know you didn't even know was a business plan was when you started.

KH Early 70s. My a degree is in geology I went working in oceanography, no I wasn't really into business at all. I've gotten a lot of it through small courses, the seat of the pants stuff and now well this year I went to Harvard Business School for a three year course. And a, it's three weeks a year, for the next three years on campus and it's pretty intense. And it's been kind of fun because it's all the things that you've kind of learned over the years but now you're putting into a theory. [14.35] And to take it the next level. And that's been really fun. It's an ongoing education.

JB Okay. Well, I think we're done.

KH Good.

JB And thank you very much.

KH You're welcome. I haven't heard any bad noises from

in there so.

JB Nope I think that. The only other thing is to sign a release. Was that oh?

MS Yeah I need to get room tone. If we could just sit quietly for just like a half a minute before we start rustling around. That will be, make our lives much. This is Kay Henry room tone. [15.09]

JB [15.50] Last night we had a, we were recording his ninety year old sister and this other guy, he's 86, and he fell asleep while his sister was. [16.02]

END OF SIDE ONE, TAPE ONE

END OF INTERVIEW