

**Interview with Alfred on 6/21/00, Tape #13. Giocomettie, Coming to Alaska, 70-Mile
Prospecting, Ed Stanton the Quaker of NY found along the river of Alaska**

Interviewed by Sharon Hollensbe in Alfred's kitchen in Fairbanks AK

Something new becomes the new Academy, things are no longer living, they become concretized. So my job as an artist is to shatter this. What's that like for me? I love to do it, but I've really kind of surrendered. Here I am in Alaska, you know. I really have no options but to do it, but to see things in a different way.

What does being in Alaska have to do with that...

That perhaps I should have stayed in New York. In order to achieve recognition, fame, and lots of money. But I don't equate these things with art. Like I paint the way people breathe really. So what's all the fuss about?

There's something about being validated by others I think—it's like the painting is a communication of something and it needs to be received, doesn't it?

It needs to be received and understood, and I am reminded of when Patti took me to the opening at Poindexter Gallery. She knew nothing about it, didn't realize I was one of its stable of artists. She started looking at the paintings.

I said, "You don't look at the paintings. You stand and look at the artist. Because he is under attack. There will be a fellow giving you something to drink. And you take a drink and when the artist turns toward you, you raise your glass and he'll come to you. And he'll say 'That son-of-a-bitch with Times, I think he's unfair about number 13 over there. The bastard. I said

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why don't we have the right to refuse the reviewer who's going to do a number on us?' And you agree with this."

We're talking about Jules Olitski. He had won a Carnegie Award for a quarter of a million dollars, and here he is having a show, but that means nothing. What means something is that people are still giving him shit. Here he is at the height of something and feeling very insecure. So you support him no matter what.

I went to that guy's show involuntarily, my wife dragged me there, not realizing that I was once associated with the Poindexter Gallery. I remember nothing of that show. For that matter, Cy Twombly returned to America and put on a show, I forget where, and he said, "Well, I have to admit it was pile of shit, and I really deserved the reception that it drew." So you know when people hurl things at the canvas, there is some sort of conscience in all of this.

I was in Paris and I had a lady who I was friendly with in New York—I think this was 1962. I went there with Pierre Bennerup who I had fought fires with. I ran into someone I'll call Eve, and I said I'd really like to meet Giacometti. She knew him. She was Swiss living in Paris and so was he. And then we had the mix-up with the coffee shops, and this was intolerable to my waiter. Anyway I got to see him, sitting there putting little things that looked like peanuts into the ashtray. But we finally toddled off to his studio which I wanted to see. It was on Montparnasse. When you see paintings of Montparnasse, you see these corners of an avenue and they are really corners. We walked up this corner and then we were in this cobbled courtyard with stables. These were once stables. Fortunately there had been a spring rainfall and sunshine, and the whole area was drenched in the fragrance of horse piss. Anyway, this guy is doing his work and indeed living in a stable. We went in through this stable door, where the top opened up

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so the horse could look around. And we went into this dark place that was only illuminated by this half stable door. I couldn't see anything and I kicked something and hurt my leg.

I was saying, "God damn. You're getting thousands of dollars for your fucking sculpture, why do you live in a place like this. *Why?* In heavens name, why?"

I could speak to Giacometti because he spoke Swiss and it's like a patois of French and German, and I understand this and can speak to people. Yiddish is Germanic and I had a superficial understanding of the essential words in French, so I could speak to him. My shoe somehow inadvertently kicked some steel rebar, and it's dark in this place, and then they said "Above you is a light switch. Pull on the string and there'll be light in here."

And I'm thinking *You \$150,000 son-of-a-bitch, telling me to pull on a fucking string.*" And I did and the place was illuminated and the light was above a bed, and on the bed was this glorious-looking young lady, a beauty of the first magnitude. And she stretched and yawned. And this young person was the wife of Giacometti, and she said, "Well, uh. I have to leave. I'm going to the chateau." And she left.

Through the half-door and the window, this Ferrari went by containing her. Meanwhile, we have a solitary lamp light like you would have in a prison cell. Giacometti said, "In this place, I lived at the chateau, I lived there for two years. Alors, but I couldn't do any work. Nothing. But in this place there are molecules of creativity. You know what I mean?" And he would pluck with his fingers at these little molecules of creativity. And I understood. Then I got used to the light, or lack of light. And there were his paintings.

People think of him as a sculptor, others as a painter. I think of him as a painter and a sculptor. I think of the drawings of Rodin which were scooped up by Mr. Keck in New York because the nation of France just ignored them and trod all over them. His paintings were not

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preparatory to doing sculpture. They were something in themselves. There was another dimension to them. And he worked in this kind of darkness like umber. UMBER and gray were major colors, his palette. And this strange use of perspective lines, not plastic or poetic, but really architectural. There was a sculpture in this dark gloomy place. So I just loved it, I felt privileged, I enjoyed everything even my shin which was palpitating. To turn on that light and see that 19-year-old young lady, and then her going up on the cobblestones and driving off in this fire engine red Ferrari. I thought, my God. The artist's life is glorious. If only I'd saved those things he threw in the ashtray at La Rotonde.

I liked Alaska. I liked fireweed which I thought was an exotic plant. I had seen it in England as a child, as seeds which had escaped from the British Museum from the German bombing attack. And here I see it in full regalia and I might very well be responding the way my parents did at the Millennium in Russia. I recognized things from childhood like sorrel which makes a wonderful soup, hot or cold. When I came here I felt secure, I felt like it was like walking into a big house, and I felt secure. It was almost like A French village in the old days, you felt secure. You were amongst madmen and you felt sane. I feel sane up here. I feel that I am amongst kindred spirits.

I met Patti's mother four or five years before I met Patti. I went prospecting in the Seventy Mile country, and we had deficient maps and her mother was in charge of the USGS mapping in Fairbanks. The maps were so screwed up that we decided to come back to Fairbanks. We were all bushier than hell. We all had Rocky Mountain fever, or beaver fever from the water, whatever the hell it was. And we would hallucinate each in turn, and we all had guns, and finally one guy would carry all the guns and when he felt he was going crazy... So this was sort of ghastly but very familiar to me. I thought I belong here. And statements like, "He

can't do that, we'll place him under citizen's arrest." And I'm saying this and I'm in Alaska illegally you know. It was mad.

Working at 70-Mile in the bush

We were up at Seventy Mile sitting around a campfire and we had about five miles to go to the Knik Arms Falls. We felt that the Falls would leave a treasure load of gold. We had studied the geology of the place at Claremont Men's College library, and we felt that the river at Seventy Mile had a natural riffle board. All we had to do was use an underwater dredge, suck up all the gold and become millionaires overnight. Well, it didn't work out that way. But as we were preparing the evening meal after we had crossed the river, which was a monumental undertaking, because we had to reconstruct the trolley bridge that existed there and had been unattended for a quarter of a century. I shoved my finger into the logs on our side of the river and we had to replace all the logs on our side of the river. Then we drew lots on who was to cross the river because the other side could very well break. Anyway we finally did it after constructing the bridge. Can you imagine doing anything like this in New York or England? No way.

So we were sitting around the campfire, five miles away from our goal. And a dog comes running down the game trail next to the river. We had this wild guy from Yugoslavia—we all met as firefighters—and this guy pulled up a rifle and was going to shoot this wolf. And I said, "Put the gun down. Wolves don't wag their tails. This animal belongs to someone."

And the "someone" came down the trail, and he was a cheerful young fellow. And this Yugoslavian says, "I'm gonna kill him."

And I said, "You're not going to kill anyone. This is America. We don't do that. We're going to sit him down and offer him coffee and something to eat."

And he sat down—I forget his name—and he said that he had staked the falls, the Knik Arms Falls. But the postmaster flew over his site and informed him via tin can and a message that he was drafted into the Army to serve in a place called Korea. He was in the National Guard and a pilot. He said that there was nothing he could do but go and serve his country, and we could work there, and if we gave him a fifth and sent it to his mother he would appreciate it very much. We all agreed to this except the Yugoslav, this Montenegrin who didn't accept this sort of thing. So the young man got in his canoe and off he went down the river.

Later on in this business, we had a boat with a suction dredge and couldn't get it up the river. In one episode we lost the boat and all of our food. The only things that survived were in plastic and could float. So we salvaged all sorts of spaghetti and two of us had to come back to Fairbanks to get food and also to have repairs made to our dredge. Four of us had managed to line the boat 12 miles into the Seventy Mile River. When we came back a week later—you know this is so Alaskan, so unlike anything I'd ever been involved with—we went to Eagle which was our base town. We had a 20 mile walk to the river and we looked forward to floating down to where our friends were. Where we slept was in the old Northern Commercial Company store, which I remember as a magic place. There was an old circus picture, and picture of Jenny Lind, cobwebs all over the place. We lit a candle and put it on this post and then one of the other partners had fled the giant Yugoslav, and there he was illumined by the candlelight.

I said, "My God, what are you doing here?"

"Branko went crazy and started flogging me," he said. I thought this is outrageous, thinking I'm back in England. This can't happen here.

"I'll place him under citizen's arrest!" said I.

Then I learned that these two guys had dragged the boat almost 24 miles. They did all this work, and that's what it takes: flogging. Yugoslavs understand this. Having been occupied by the Turks for three or four hundred years know a thing or two about moving forward. We convinced Lindley to return to the project. This meant walking the trail to the Seventy Mile River, donning our skin suits and jumping in the river and in sunshine sealing down it like happy beaver. Finally Lindley said this is where I left him

And I thought this is where I'll arrest him—me the ship-jumper. We got up on this sand bar and we saw poor Bronco. He was sitting there all alone with a fire. When he saw us he came toward us like a gorilla, his hands held low and we all kissed one another. The law and order business disappeared.

We then learned something about the Seventy Mile River: it can rise eight feet in six hours. We lost a lot of equipment again, and sheltered in a lagoon. The water didn't lower so there was no way we could reach our equipment. Then we did a very English thing: we all shook hands and said let's go on back home.

Being the oldest you're placed in command. We pawned our scuba suits with a guy who was sort of the unofficial mayor of Eagle. This was the sort of fellow who had all sorts of different hats. One minute he'd be the mayor, and we said we need a pawnbroker, he said, "I am the pawnbroker." So we pawned all our equipment and got a tankful of gas to head back to Fairbanks. The boys started complaining. We need soda pop, things they craved. I thought where am I going to get money to satisfy these bastards. We had enough money to buy a hamburger which we would split in four, if we got to Big Delta.

Art was very far from my mind during all this. I enjoyed this immensely. When I came in from the Bush this man approached me and he said, "Alfred! Is that you?"

So I said, "Yes, it's me."

He was the Rector of the Episcopal Church in Eagle. He was the Episcopal Missionary. His name was Lord Crewe. The Crewes were like Colin Powell, head of the military staff during the Crimean War and things like that. Very distinguished family in the military history of the British. We had met in London through some literary writer. This fellow was about 20 years old, and he seemed like an illusion. Here we are out of the Bush and this fellow says he knows me. And we were all suffering from this fever (giarrdia). I was relieved of all the guns because I was acting kind of strange.

I asked him, "Do you have a potato?" He said he didn't.

I said, "You do have potatoes don't you. I'm craving a potato."

"Really Alfred if you want a potato, come into the rectory, I've got lots of potatoes."

I got kind of ugly with him. I said, "You sonofabitch, you've got potatoes, why don't you give me one."

Anyway we wind up in the rectory, and under the sink he has potatoes and I don't want them cooked. I just want to eat them.

"I'm not reaching these people," said he. "Like comic cuts."

"No," I said, "You must say 'the funnies'. These are cartoons." So I am making little changes in his sermon.

"You know, I'd really like to go into the church now, and pray," I said. So I went to the church and I checked the offertory box immediately. There was about twenty dollars, and I took it all for my crew, to buy soda pop and ho-ho's. I remember looking at the altar and saying, "I'm sorry about this. I'm a Jew. There's nothing you can do about this. But I'll repay you five score."

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And Jesus seemed to say, “You cheap sonofabitch. How about ten score.”

And I said, “Alright, I’ve got twenty dollars. I’ll repay you two hundred bucks.” I leave the church pursued by these illusions. I went to what used to be the Biedermeyer’s cabin which used to be a grocery store and told them to buy whatever the hell they wanted. They got soda pop and stuff like that.

We got to Big Delta and there was a restaurant there in the Bay Hotel—we called it the Bay of Pigs—and there was a waitress who knew of us, named Uta.

“All we can afford is one hamburger,” I told her. She understood. She came back with a huge hamburger and we all ate this, and had enough money for gas back to Fairbanks.

The citizens of Eagle placed bets that we wouldn’t get out of there, that some of us wouldn’t make it, that we’d get lost. When we were there, they took us to a community cabin in which on a far wall there was a three-dimensional map. They said that when the prospectors came at the turn of the century, one of them was a British ordnance officer. They said some of us are going to make money, some won’t. But if you give us a map you’ll make lots of money. There’s no law here and we need a map to settle arguments and that’s your job. So the Englishman made this splendid map. It occupied the entire end wall in this cabin and along the side were benches where people could sit and guys could confront one another and look at the map.

Years later I went to Eagle and this had disappeared. I asked where is the community map? They said what map. There is no map. I said how long have you been here? The curator said I’ve lived here for 16 years. I said I was here almost 38 years ago and I tell you there was a community cabin with a map. Where is it? Someone from Fish and Wildlife had stolen the goddam thing.

There is also the Amundson Cabin. I made sketches of it, made a painting of it, now in the Museum. And that had disappeared.

Anyway this situation was like Greenwich Village. It was a replication of that. Anxiety and survival. I was very familiar with it. People couldn't understand why I prospered.

By this time I was in a hotshot crew of fire fighters from southern California, and I mentioned that I was really worried by something. These boys go on the fires with fetishes and good luck charms, particularly if they are jumpers they have rabbits foos and god knows what else.

I says, "You know I robbed this offertory box in Eagle and I should go back there with the money."

And they yelled, "You *what!* Holy shit. Man, people will die because of this!"

And I said, "No, no, no. What we're talking about is twenty bucks, no more." So they raised the money and I went back to Eagle and put two hundred dollars in the offertory box.

We had some guns, one was an old Swedish bolt-action rifle, another was a flat trajectory Winchester, hand-guns. We decided we would drive by the USGS that was down on a street corner, and we were going to shoot up the goddam place that gave us these phony maps. And we drove in there, and a pleasant lady came out and we thought, oh, well, we'll come back when she's not there. And we came back and the pleasant lady came out again. She was running it—this was Patti's mother.

"She's employed by this office," I said, "so we can't just go in there and shoot up the place. There are women in there, for Chrisakes." We went in there and that's how I met Patti's mother. I said the maps were abominable. We saw other maps in Eagle that had creeks that

weren't in your maps. She said they were going to be photographing the area and producing a new map. This was about four years before I met her.

When I was in Paris, the boys on the hotshot crew were going to go prospecting and called me and told me to come on back. There would be muskrat fires and it would be like staking us—easy fires.

But when I arrived in New York and I had only about four or five dollars from Paris. And I thought that in New York I knew people and could borrow money. But everyone was out for the season. They were either in Woodstock, Provincetown or Long Island. Here I am on the telephone.

While on a fire the year before, a patrol came in and said there were two guys living on the river bank wrapped in newspapers. They said they wanted bread.

I said, "Americans never want bread. They want cake or candy. These are either foreigners or rich kids. But we'll take bread if that's what they want."

So we went out there and there were two guys, Ed Stainton and Tommy Fetter.

I said, "You gotta get out of here because we're going to backfire against the river."

They said, "We're expecting the Yutana Barge Lines, and we're waiting."

I said, "Good, because you better not be here."

They thanked me for the bread, and I thought Jesus Christ, these must be rich kids; they're Americans, and they also swore by newspapers, but these were the Herald Tribune and the New York Times. Oh, these are rich kids.

I had on a field jacket and this kid put his card in there: Ed Stainton. He was a Quaker and so was Fetter and he adopted the name of Siegfried Sassoon, as Quakers do. Someone who kind of embellishes their beliefs. **I remembered this when I was in New York a year later, not**

making contact with anybody. I looked through my duffel bag, and here was this business card. So I called Ed Stainton. Any harbor in a storm.

He said, "Oh, yes I remember you. Oh my God, the man who gave us bread! Where are you?" I told him I'm in the bus terminal in New York on 42nd street west. He told me which bus to get, and said he would wait for me at the bus stop.

I remember thinking twice about buying a hot dog and it was about three dollars to go on the bus. I arrived in Staintonville in upstate New York, not yet putting together the fact that this guy's name was Ed Stainton. Here are these two guys in a jeep who I'd helped on the Yukon River. They kind of gathered me up and we drove into the hills.