

Interview with Alfred on 7/12/00, Tape #14.

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

I came back from Paris and I was called up by a friend, William Raymond West, and he said we can go fight fire and go prospecting for gold on the Seventy Mile River. I arrived in New York not during the season when people are in New York; rather they are in Woodstock or Amaganset or Provincetown and places north-south-east-and-west, but they are not in New York. And here I am on the East River with five dollars in French money and the only thing I remember was that when working on a fire on the Yukon River, a patrol came in and said, "There are two guys and they want bread."

And I said, "They can't be Americans. Americans never want bread. They want cake or banana splits. These must be spies or foreigners or Russians."

They said, "No no, Al, these guys are Americans."

So I said, "Okay, let's get bread and take it out to them and then tell them they have to leave the area in case of a back-fire." So I went out there and that's where I met Ed Stainton and Tom Fetter. And I thought, either they are rich kids asking for bread—only spies, Russians or rich kids would ask for bread. So anyway they seemed like nice people to me, and I had to tell them to leave the area, but they assured me that they were going to be picked up by Yutana Barge Line which would pick them up that evening. These guys incidentally said that said they "rode the rods" which was something I had read about in Steinbeck or Upton Sinclair, that they rode the rods up here, and also that they had learned a trick whereby they could keep warm by wrapping themselves in newspaper. And here are these boys on the Yukon River beyond Fort

TAPE 14. Page 2 of 13

Yukon and they were wrapped in the New York Times and the New York Herald Tribune. I congratulated them and one of them said, "You have been very good to us, to give us bread." I thought, man only a rich kid could say anything like this. "I want you to take my card." I put his card in my field jacket and forgot about it.

On the sidewalk in New York with nowhere to go, I looked through my rucksack and there was this card. The field jacket had been laundered with this card in it, but I could make out Ed Stainton and I called that number.

He said, "Oh yes I remember you! You are the fellow who gave us bread! You must come and visit us."

And I said, "Can I do that immediately?"

They said yes, and where are you. I said I was on 11th avenue and 54th where the ship deposited me. They said I could get a bus directly to Staintonville from the terminal on 38th. That was a short walk. I managed to exchange some money with some sailors coming off a ship. After that I got a hot dog, a major expenditure, but I made sure I had enough money for the ticket to Staintonville. I got on the bus, arrived and I wondered would they be there, and where the hell am I now, with nickels and dimes left.

But sure enough, here were these two guys in a jeep and they welcomed me and the next thing I know we were driving up into the hills. Of course, I was wondering where these rich kids lived or maybe they are not rich kids. We drove up what appeared to be a mule trail, but this became a splendiferous road with a filigreed New Orleans-type gate and there was a 60-room mansion in which they lived. So I thought, my God any harbor in a storm, and I can't believe this. Anyway, they swept me into the house. There were mysterious people who would do little jobs around the house. They said tonight that they planned to sleep Yukon River-style

TAPE 14. Page 3 of 13

before their fireplace. They had this handsome armorial fireplace and in crevices were suits of armor which I've never seen before or since in America. I've seen them in England or in museums. They had sleeping bags for each of us, and we were to sleep and talked about the Yukon. For awhile I had to repress what I really wanted to talk about. But the evening was a fascinating one for me.

I made it clear to them that I didn't have any money, and yet I wanted to go back to Alaska with these other fellows who were firefighters. They had researched out the geology of this river, and we felt that we could get gold at the foot of the Knick Arm, because the riverbed there is like a natural riffleboard and we felt that a half century has gone by without any exploration of this area. With new technology, with suction dredges and scuba suits, we could go down there and pick up a fortune. I said I need money. All I have is about 25 cents.

And they said, "Well, how much do you need?"

And like an idiot I said a thousand dollars. And they said okay, we'll go get it tomorrow. Tomorrow being Sunday. So on Sunday we drove into town, and went to the Stainton Bank. And we went in there and they opened the safe and counted out a thousand dollars for me. Of course, a thousand dollars was much more than. But this was so casually done that---well, there are all sorts of things I regret. I regret not asking for two, three, five, they would have handed it over.

At that time I'd received a green card and my entrance into the United States was legal, and I was practicing the Presidents of the United States for the immigration test.

I had memorized 15 Presidents—I want to say that when I went for my test, the immigration agent looked at me and didn't ask me these questions about the Presidents and what-have-you. He said, "What can you tell me about the electoral college?" and I knew that

TAPE 14. Page 4 of 13

this was a great puzzlement amongst the American people, so I said whatever sounded pleasing to him. I may have passed my test on answering what the electoral college is all about.

Well, during the course of this Yukon River chinwag by the manorial fireplace, Thomas Fetter said, “My father will be the 15th interim President.”

How can that be? At that time the cold war was on, and Russia was threatening American and America was threatening Russia, there was talk of pre-emptive strikes. Realistically, America felt that they could kill 60 million Russians with an atomic attack but they opined that the Russians could easily kill 40 million of us. I had never realized it before then, but every state would yield a President and a Vice-President from their electoral college. And they would travel to Washington every month from every state and be briefed on the state of the nation. And in the event of a 40 million pre-emptive strike and the loss of the President, they would reach out to states and men would come in who had been briefed and calm the nation. So under this proviso, Tommy Fetters’ dad was the fifteenth so designated. That was an incredible thing to me, and also I had a thousand dollars which they had withdrawn from the bank.

They said, “No we don’t want to write any paper on this. If you make money just pay me back. I’m staking you, understand?” Once again a word that he probably got from Jack London.

So the following day I really felt great. I had money—I wondered where their parents were, but their parents were enjoying the first salmon runs in Norway. There was a fiord they would go to with 50 other people on a chartered boat out of Southampton, England. They would enjoy this luxurious repast of the first young salmon.

I asked to borrow the jeep, and I drove around the area. I came back sure that I had found the house. I drove up a trail but no mysterious gate appeared or entrance to the house. And

indeed I found that I was in a copse, what we call a little stand of trees, and the trail didn't go further. I felt that if I went back to the road I'd find the main trail. Suddenly men came out of the woods armed with guns, and the guns were unusual. They were blunderbusses. Also the men wore black pants and brass-buckled belts that were whitened with white clay. They wore homemade shoes and homespun stockings and striped jerseys. And they had these old-looking guns, and another strange thing about them was that they all looked very much alike. They looked like ventriloquist's dummies. I thought I have blundered onto the site of a movie. I looked around for some reassuring Jewish faces directing this and there was no movie going on.

An older man spoke to me, and he said, "What be ye doing in the Master's car?"

I recognized this as a West Country accent, such as Elizabeth Kline had, so I answered in kind: "Oi'm driving the Master's car because Oi got permission to drive the Master's car, and Oi can't find the house where he lives and Oi think it would be koind of ye to lead me there."

All the guns came down and they cocked their ears to catch my voice, so I'm not looking down the barrels of guns. Two young men jumped on the mudguards of the jeep and the older man said, "They'll show ye to the Master's house."

I was very calm during all this. He accent caught my ear, and all of them had cocked their heads to listen to mine, and now I had an escort and we went down the path and up the next mule trail to the manor gate. And then these two young men disappeared. They opened the gate and disappeared. Edward and Tommy came out. By this time I was shaking from the shock of this and they said, "Oh they won't do you any harm."

I said, "Oh, yeah, they won't do me any harm—then why did they pull guns on me?"

And they said, oh, they're the black and tans or the black and whites or something like that. I thought of trouble of Ireland. They said, no, these are deserters from the armies of

TAPE 14. Page 6 of 13

General Burgoyne and Cornwallis. I don't know how they could have kept these homespun things, they must have woven them in the woods. They lived by supplying firewood, cutting lawns. These were the descendents of what we call the Revolutionary War. Right.

(That's a little hard to believe.)

Yeah, it is hard to believe.

[Patti and I were in that State and we were going to Staintonville, but we couldn't find it on the map. Also we were in a position directly south of the place, and what was once a simple road now was a six-lane highway. If anything was going to disrupt the habitat of people like that, that would do it.]

I said to the boys I'm heading for Clairmont California because the rest of the crew is there, you know, the hotshot people who fought fires are going to go there, two of us with wives: Littleye Mixon and Bill West with his wife. We thought we were going to make a lot of money. At that time gold was \$35 an ounce. And then, incredibly, Ed Stainton and Tom Fetter turned up in Clairmont. They were really remarkable fellows, who were very argumentative over how things ought to be done, but they were handy with tools and built a potter's kiln for Lindley Mixon. I remember that. They let gas pipes into it, they did the brick work. But they didn't want to go back to Alaska; I daresay they'd rather talk about it.

When I was in the East they invited me to visit their old alma mater. I think the name of it was Oberlin, a Quaker college. We visited the campus housing and there was the lady counselor or landlord who took care of them when they were students there. It was wonderful to walk around an American campus like that. There is something so impersonal about NYU, its campus spilled into Greenwich Village or City College with sort of imperious buildings. This college was not like that. Of course it was a Quaker college, and Stainton had adopted the name

of a Quaker hero. He was known as Siegfried Sassoon. When a Quaker dies in the line of things his name is taken by a living Quaker. A former teacher there was a French composer who was the first one to concoct things with electronics. They played some of his music, those old records that would go around, and I remember they had this *huge* English sheepdog that looked as big as a bear. And he could just not abide the music of this French gentlemen. His ears just stood up on end and he was led out of the house.

(How long did you stay with these fellows?)

I was there for about a week. Ed Stainton had another hobby that he pursued. Wherever George Washington had slept, he would buy the house. I know what you're thinking, but some of these houses were shacks and a complete wreck, but we visited all of these and oohed and aahed over the splendor of some and the debilitated condition of the others.

These were very wealthy people with secret responsibilities to the nation. On our honeymoon when I married Patti, we visited the Staintons and he had married a young lady from an entirely different circumstance. She was a mother of three or four children and was kind of difficult to be in the same room with, or the same house. This marriage was a mystery to us and we thought we'd better get out of here. At that time they were living in Philadelphia and resurrecting some Washingtonian refugees of the General.

Robert de Niro was an interesting man. He was one of the artistic elite who managed to live in a condemned building, thus he didn't have to pay rent and he didn't have to pay electric bills as I have explained to you before. The first time I saw Robert some people had left some electrical cords from an adjoining building and there was a fire. So you couldn't call the fire brigade because they would order the building knocked down. So we fixed up things ourselves. He was sort of out of it, ignoring the whole damned thing. He had a towel wrapped around his

TAPE 14. Page 8 of 13

head, and he was a figure you might say of repose. Since I lived on Thompson Street and this place was on Thompson Street in Washington Square, I came back a few hours later to check for any smoke. He had been getting up and about, it now being late afternoon.

I said, "What do you have to eat around here?"

He said, "Nothing. But this is America and no one starves. I read that in the newspaper."

And sure enough there was a knock on the door and some young lady arrived with bread and ham and stuff like this. Our favorite place to eat was the White Castle hamburger stands. The hamburgers would cost about 15 or 20 cents, but they were delicious. They had some technique for cooking them.

I believe that some of his favorite paintings were flagellations down the centuries. I think Carravagio was one in this respect that he favored, and you realized that he faced life prepared to be whipped by whatever life was to throw at him. This was a constant source of his inspiration. I thought, my God, you can always starve or there are other things you can do to evoke inspiration, but this inspiration from being flagellated by life-- And you see an echo of it in his son who portrayed Jake Lamotta and put on 50 pounds. Like father like son I rather think.

There were conversations with de Niro that would involve his son, who was about 14 or 15 at the time, and I would walk him up to the subway station on 8th street, and this would go uptown. I would say, "Well, say hello to this kid of yours."

Finally on one Saturday he said why not come along with us. I had nothing to do so I went along with them and they got off on 42nd street. At that time it was lined with movie theatres on the East side and on the West side there were about 4 or 5 theatres, but every other building housed a movie theatre. The movies shown on 42nd street were always a surprise.

TAPE 14. Page 9 of 13

There was always foreign movies with subtitles. I thought this is great. Take the kid to the movies. So we went in to see one movie—I can't think of its name, but it was a top flight movie with Eric von Stroheim and Jean Gabin and it's that classic of prisoners who escape, break bonds, one German, one French. This was a profound film. I remember Jean Gabin greeting the sunlight, stretching, just an immortal shot of a man escaped from a prison camp and enjoying the warmth of the sun.

So we get out of there, and it's now about 11:30 and there used to be this humongous clam bar catty corner to Times Square. That place was immortal, full of people eating clams, clam burgers, clam chowder. I'd say one of these days this city will be destroyed and archaeologists will discover these people underground eating clams. I was there a couple years ago and all the great theatres are gone, the clam place is gone, and now they are all porn houses.

Anyhow, I thought what are we going to do now. Well, they went across the road into another movie house to watch another movie. I think it was *Les Enfants du Paradi*. I said, "You must be kidding!" He said, no we're going to go in there and see that. They were going to go back in there, come out around 1:30, and go see another movie.

I said, "I can't believe this. How can you take your son to the movie houses like this? You're going to lose your visitation rights. You're divorced and you told me these are visitation rights. This is a crazy idea."

He said, "The boy wants to see the movies. He says he's going to become a movie director and a movie star."

I said, "Look, I wanted to become a locomotive driver, or an astronaut. We can't be these things. Be reasonable now. What you should do is go whether the other fathers go, to the

zoo or Central Park and see them playing ball with their kids. I ‘m going to get you a baseball and a bat.”

He said, “That kid wants to see them, and he’s serious, and he keeps notes.”

But I wondered how he could sit through these movies and then talk about them. So we went into see *Les Enfants*, and by this time I had a headache. And this is on a beautiful Saturday. So I said, “Well, I can’t take this anymore. And really you shouldn’t do this.” It upset him when I said he could lose his visitation rights. But then his ex-wife would not have objected to this. She was a secretary of the Actor’s Studio. So she may have even implanted this. I don’t know. I know that they saw four movies that day. That’s six hours of movies, and of course, the baseball mitt and ball—no use was ever made of them. I thought, well, this kid is interested in movies but someone should stop that sort of thing but I’m not in a position to do it.

Then sometimes Robert would be very agitated because of there would be some statement that his son would make. I think by now he has reached the age of wisdom, 16, where they know everything. And he would say to his dad, after a serious bout of moviegoing, he’d say something like, “Dad, why don’t they kill all the fucking fags.” So this would become a topic of conversation. Where did he learn this, is this a widespread feeling, what in my family is this a residue of? There would be these profound statements from his son, which I remember from this entire decade of my life—“he said this about that” and so forth.

Robert was a strange man, I suppose, but he would absolutely do anything: he would starve for painting. Other people developed survival tricks. He did not, refused to. If he had suffered then that’s a good thing because it would show in his paintings and it did. If he was serene or lyrical then this would show in his paintings too. I’ve never seen a life that was so integrated with stuff on the easel. To me he’s kind of a pre-eminent painter.

TAPE 14. Page 11 of 13

Our other friend was Gandy Brody who also worked from the figure. But I think we had the respect of people, but the hangers-on or the people who would come into the movement like sheep would be annoying.

For some years I didn't see any of these folks except very briefly when I went to New York for an immigration hearing. I saw Bob and he was teaching at the New School and he was wearing an elegant bow tie and a jacket and he explained he was off to Philadelphia because he had a class there. I thought this was a courageous thing to do, because as we talk about these painters there were, you might say, enemy painters like Walter Stumpfing from Philadelphia. I'd always say how can anyone paint with a name like Stumpfing, which is not a nice way to characterize anybody. But now Robert was teaching there, and this was a great change. And he did seem different. He was wearing a collar and tie and what have you, which is not demanded of people teaching at the New School. He was no longer living in condemned buildings, and he didn't have this Bohemian patina of being unshaven, but now was well-dressed. And I thought, well, I won't be seeing you again—that's how it is, I'll see you in your work.

A few years after this meeting, Patti and I were in Paris on our honeymoon, and we ran into Dodi Miller, who's the wife of Young Muller. This is the guy whose painting was rescued by Nelson Rockefeller, while he ignored the Ensor.

And she said, "God I'm glad you're here because I've got De Niro up in my studio. You've got to help me with him. He's just out of it."

I was familiar with his being "out of it", and I said, "Don't worry we'll come up there."

It was on Montparnasse, and we went up there and here he is. I never knew what circumstances brought him there. They were horrible to say the least. It's carrying flagellation a

bit too far. He was totally out of it, glassy-eyed, and an arm which he held above him in the bed—I forget what that condition is called. Mental patients have it when –

(Catatonic?)

Yeah. I had never seen him like that before. All I could do was sit there and talk to him and say, come on, Bob. Little Bobby will be here soon—that's what we called his son. And his eyes flickered for the first time. I continued with this—we've got to shape because little Bobby's going to be here. And we have to leave for Rome. I asked him, what happened here? I had seen him sort of like this in the past during or after an opening. I mean, that Greta Garbo thing—it was just pure suffering. That was terrible, but I'd never seen anything like this. What's his arm doing stuck up in the air like that?

Then Dodi explained that he was involved in a murder. And it seemed that he had a homosexual lover. This would mean that he was in the closet, but he was in the closet from me for 10 years you see. We used to have a joke that we walked on the heterosexual side of the street. And we knew homosexuals who would merit respect, like Frank O'Hara. We loved that great. He was a poet and a great one. He was our friend. But there was no sign of this. But somehow this little Frenchman—I don't know what happened. Somehow he took him to his home, he lived in some poverty-stricken rural village with earth floors and he said, if you don't do this or don't do that, you have a son who's famous and I want money and so forth. Otherwise I'm going to burn myself to death. Whereupon this French lover, which I find hard to believe, poured gasoline on himself and through some bizarre accident set fire to himself. So Robert was arrested as someone who had formulated this thing. His son came over and got him out of there. He had other things to do, and Dodi was taking care of him. So that was the last time I saw him. I think I was visiting my cousin who's a dentist in Seattle, and picking up Time Magazine in the

TAPE 14. Page 13 of 13

waiting room, there was a picture of Bob who just died. But I don't think he ever got the respect that he merited during his lifetime. I think he's the sort of fellow whose work is just timeless and will come to the fore. It's a mystery to me that we don't see his work in shows. I suspect that his son may have sequestered all of his paintings for some reason. Whenever you see the notation "from the collection of the artist" you always see a horrible painting, because a guy's painting away and the landlord turns up and says, forget about the rent, you don't owe me anything and the painting becomes a notation.