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Fishtown Oral History Program**

Bo Miller

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This interview was conducted by Paul Piper with Bo Miller, on August 27, 2014, in Bellingham, Washington.

PP: My name is Paul Piper, and I'm interviewing Bo Miller about Fishtown. The date is August 27, 2014.

Bo, I want to begin with just kind of a general question. Could you talk—actually many of these will be general. Could you just talk about what your life was like before Fishtown, and then kind of maybe leading into how you met the people there and initially became involved in living there yourself.

BM: Well, I grew up in Bellevue and graduated from Bellevue High School in '62, and went to the University of Washington to study architecture and construction management, two degrees. I only got one of them. Because I had two majors, I got behind a year, and that put me in a difficult situation with my draft board. In 1966, I joined the ROTC on campus. When I graduated in August of '68, I was commissioned as an army second lieutenant. I went on active duty in the Spring of 1969 and spent the first year in Indianapolis, which was then as foreign place as you could get. And the second year I was in Seoul, Korea.

While I was in Korea, I took advantage of military flights and met an old friend in India, and decided I wanted to go back. So when I got out of the Army, which is an interesting story that involves Robert

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Sund, and I looked up a bunch of old friends that were living in a house north of the University District. After two or three days of living there, I sensed there was another person living in the house, and lo and behold, it was Robert Sund. He lived in the basement, and he didn't really come up to the main floor until maybe 11 at night when he'd build a little fire in the fireplace, and have the night to himself. Robert and I just kind of fell into a friendship, and he said, "Do you want to go out to Shi Shi Beach?" So he and I waded through the mud with a candle, in the Spring of '71 I guess, and spent the Summer out there, and hung out with two UW grad students—a fellow named Art Greeno, who was working on an organic chemistry Ph.D., and a woman who was studying psychology, teaching psychology at the University, Jenny Beaton. Well, they later got married and hung out with the poets and Trungpa in Boulder and they owned the Family Table Restaurant. They were interesting people that way.

In the fall, I left the beach and headed for India. Oh, meanwhile, going through Turkey, I met a woman from Istanbul and I ended up marrying her. But I went on alone and I was living on a rooftop in New Delhi for a while, and Charlie showed up one day. He was looking for something to smoke. So Charlie and I travelled for a couple weeks, hung out with Ram Das and lived on a houseboat in Banaras.

So when I got home from India in the Spring of 1972, I looked up some more friends at another house in Seattle. I think it was the first night I was home, and lo and behold, Charlie was there, and he asked if I wanted to go to La Conner? Did I want to go to Fishtown?' And I said, 'Well, yeah.'

And so we hopped a Greyhound bus and hitchhiked over to La Conner. Those were the years of the 1890s Tavern, which was sort of like a Star Wars bar. And I think for a brief flicker of time, that might have been the most hippest place on the West Coast. It was a pretty wild and crazy scene, and it suited me just fine. I lived in Charlie's studio for part of the summer, and then he said, 'Well, you've got to get your own place,' and I did.

Robert took me out to Shi Shi, and Charlie took me to Fishtown, and those were real diversions of my life. I was kind of headed toward marrying—becoming an architect and living down in Washington Park in Seattle or something, a completely different scene that didn't have any particular lure for me, so I guess when Charlie kind of said, 'Let's go,' that sounded fine. I think probably because of the two years in the Army and the travelling, I took a year to go around the world, I was definitely headed a different way. I wasn't doing what my parents wanted me to do. And they were very disappointed in me living in

Fishtown, living in a shack, when, you know, they were upwardly mobile, upper middle class, and this was kind of, I think, unthinkable for them, that this is where I would end up, their only son and that.

PP: Had you been in touch with Ibsen Nelsen at that time?

BM: I had. I had worked for Ibsen for a little while, not in the architectural side but in the putting up a lattice ceiling in a church he did out in the Greek row area. I didn't get in on any of the great parties and the social cultural scene that was around their house on Capitol Hill. I did hang out there a little bit much later, but was not involved in the great stories with Lorenzo Milam and General Franco. But yeah, I was kind of a pal of Ibsen's. He was trying to kind of get me to stick around and go to work in his office downtown, which all my architecture buddies had been doing. They all apprenticed to somebody, and that was my opportunity, but I was apprenticing with Charlie (chuckles) so I didn't.

I'm not much of a city person, so going back to Seattle, and leaving what— I had just found this whole new world—there was so many people that came into the Skagit Valley in the early '70s from all over. A lot of Midwest folks and some Boston and New York, Brooklyn people, and a few California people. And a lot of us are still here it seems. And we're all old now, but it was a flourishing time. I think a lot people left the cities in the late sixties, early seventies, I mean, going upcountry. And everybody seemed to be going back to the country, so there was nothing in the city for me. I'd had a fair enough time there—through the '60s when I was at the university. But after that, it -- And I'd grown up in Bellevue, so I'd kind of seen it. I sometimes wonder about what if I had gone to work for Ibsen, married well and lived in Washington Park.

PP: Now you were a builder already, or at least—

BM: I was handy.

PP: You were handy.

BM: Yeah. I used to build forts and stuff when I was a kid. I grew up in Bellevue in the '50s, and there was always lumber and nails around the housing developments, and I'd help myself to the scraps and pick the nails off the floor. And I've always been a builder. I still am. I like to work with my hands and kind of figure things out that way, but obviously-- Well, I even was a contractor for a while and thought

I'd-- I always wanted to design and build, but that's a couple of too many hats, and I'm not much of a businessman.

PP: When you went to Fishtown, did you see your role as getting more involved in kind of rehabilitating places or keeping the boardwalk up, that sort of thing?

BM: Well, that's what I get credited with. I built my cabin and studio and maintained boardwalks for my own use, if for no one else's. My Turkish woman, Gul, came to live with me, with her two-year-old daughter, Sara, so yeah, I kept the boardwalks up. So I guess I had that role. But I didn't beautify Fishtown or anything. I mean, I took care of my own stuff.

Charlie was the successful artist. And Paul had success with his Chinese translations and had studied with a Chinese Dharma master in California. And Steve had the Id Bookstore, and was a calligrapher, a noted calligrapher that studied at Reed with Lloyd Reynolds and sort of revived calligraphy. So I'm around these guys that had a notch or two on their belts already, and I was trying to figure where I fit in, and sculpting's where I fit in, wood sculpting. That's where my interest was, and much of my time in Fishtown was sculpting. Then another child came along, and I moved—we all left Fishtown, so I had to find a way of making some money, so I got back into architecture.

PP: What year did you leave? Do you remember?

BM: '78.

PP: '78.

BM: The fall of '78 was when I -- the family had left for town six months before. I didn't get along with my wife too well, but yeah, I finally moved to town as well. Then I let other people use the cabin and eventually sold it. But it was kind of hard giving it up because there were a lot of extraordinary experiences. Saturday mornings I'd leave La Conner and go back out to the river and reminisce about what a Saturday morning might have been like back then. Those were bittersweet years. Not that I really wanted to still be there, but it was such an idyllic Huck Finn grad school for me. Being around painters and Chinese poetry and just Charlie and Steve, great conversations. Whatever you wanted to

talk about. So when we had the Fishtown show back in 2010, it dawned on me that for me it had been a graduate school in the arts. It was a real blessing for me.

PP: You talk about it as being a graduate school for the arts and getting involved in sculpting. Had you been inclined to do anything artistic really before that, other than, you were building? Or was the exposure to these people, did it just kind of open up some—

BM: I think a little of both. No, I hadn't thought too much about art previously. I took art in high school, and studied watercolor with Alden Mason at University of Washington. Hanging out with Robert at Shi Shi, because he was painting and writing poetry, I got a real exposure. And I saw books come out of those times. Robert knew his art, he was a mentor for me. We had a falling out at a certain point, as many people did with Robert. Robert educated me about what art is and what it might mean and how I might-- He didn't teach me how I might fit in, but I could kind of see what it was all about. And the people he knew. He knew everybody in Seattle, the Hatches and the Haubergs, all the big names. He knew them and he sold to them. He was giving readings at the Seattle Art Museum. He was the biggest poet in the state then. That's what's kind of interesting about the people I met. They were very good at what they did. Robert was the undesignated poet laureate of the state. He taught poetry in the schools and for communities. He just lived it. He lived the life of a poet, and it wasn't easy. There was no money in it.

But these people I met were my connection to art history, to the teachings of Edward Conze, Lloyd Reynolds and Theodore Roethke. And Morris Graves, Tobey, and Callahan though I never met him. I never met Graves either. But one of the benefits of being an artist in LaConner was being around Guy Anderson. I was a light friend of Guy's. His essence was painting and art, piano playing. I'd run into him at the post office, and he'd regale me about an obscure piano piece that he's listening to or working on. So there was always this kind of stimulation of something bigger around. So I think I was blessed with what turned out to be my grad school. Maybe that's what grad school did. Opened everything up. You know, it was a blessing that way, for the rest of my life. The spirituality of the people, the Buddhism that runs through it, although Charlie's a little more on the Hindu side. Kumbh Mela every 12 years, and he's done that since we were in India.

PP: Could you just kind of imagine back and talk about what an average day in Fishtown would be like from the minute you got up to the minute you went to bed?

BM: Well, when I first got there, it was all men, and no children. But then I had a wife and a child, and that changed things. And then soon everyone else had a woman there, and that changed—I'm kind of digressing here, but it was interesting because before Gul came, if I wanted to know what Charlie was doing, I would go over to his house. Once the women were there, I'd ask Gul, because she had talked to Ivory, and that would be the information.

But part of it was waking up and maybe hearing the neighbor chopping wood for the morning fire for coffee. So sometimes we'd go and have coffee, go visit, have a smoke, coffee, and talk, and then, I think we were all fairly diligent about getting on with whatever it is we did. And, you know, leave Charlie to paint, and Paul to do his books, and Steve always had something going. But you couldn't call Fishtown a commune. It was communal, but it wasn't a commune, and Charlie was the mayor, but that's tongue in cheek, but real at the same time. I mean, it was kind of his scene, in a way, so he got always the last word. So I would probably get a little breakfast going. We all had our Corona mills and we'd grind some corn and make some pancakes and coffee, and then I'd probably go, depending on the season, to my studio, it was above a wood shed that I built, and get a fire going there. Probably just try to find the end of a string from the day before and kind of follow it. There might be some time in the boat on the river, maybe look for some firewood or maybe going down, going down visiting Robert. We did visit and hang out quite a bit.

We had kind of a group. We had, I don't know, maybe the other guys talked about this, poetry nights, where we'd get together in someone's cabin and have dinner and put a subject in the hat, a piece of paper, and draw it out, and then write poetry on the subject. And that would become an interesting evening. Lots of marijuana in the mix there.

I remember one morning when Gul was there, Charlie came over with his girlfriend, Ivory, and he had some bones and a hide over his head, and he was stoned on LSD. But his mission was to empty the outhouse, which was a big bucket, and that's kind of what we did when Charlie was stoned on acid. We cleaned up the outhouse. (laughs)

Once the women were there, we would have group dinners. There was an old net shed we called the Temple. It was a room a little bigger than this, and the front opened up right over the river, and swallows flew in and out. That's where I lived when Charlie told me I had to find my own place. And we'd have group dinners.

And on the river there was a lot of reading. Reading and sculpting and just puttering around with our hands, hands and mind and eye. It's kind of what I do. You would watch the river go by, or the tides swirl in, and of course the birds. Kind of a certain simplicity, a rustic simplicity. We were a long walk through the woods away from the road, so you really get to think just locally, absolutely locally, just a 1/4 mile radius -- that was your whole day. We did listen to KRAB radio. KRAB was big in that time, and lots of great programming. And we all had our radios, Charlie in particular had a nice Blaupunkt.

And we were always interested in what the other person was reading. And a good murder mystery or something. Paul had these Chinese murder mysteries. And there again, there was a lot reading because, well, Paul and Steve had had bookstores, so they had great libraries. Charlie spent gobs of time reading and had pretty credible, what would you call it, spiritual—a more mystical library. So a lot of time reading out there too, always reading. So then around the morning fire and the woodstove, a book and a cup of coffee.

PP: You'd mentioned the women and kind of the impact of when they came, and it certainly seemed like the early days were really male dominated out there.

BM: Totally.

PP: I've heard the name Aurora Jellybean. I haven't heard of—and I'd like to talk more about her, if you could. But I haven't heard the specific names of a lot of the other women. Did they become involved in the kind of artistic genesis that was going on there as well?

BM: Well, you mentioned Aurora Jellybean. She was an artist, through and through, true and true. She lived it, walked the walk, did it. No, none of the Fishtown women were artists in that sense. Paul's significant other, Elizabeth, was a real scholar. She used to read Proust and *Finnegans Wake*, and painted, kind of dabbled in it. She never showed her work. My wife Gul read a lot. Oh, she was kind of psychic and an incredible cook, a genius cook. That might have been her art form. Charlie was with this

woman named Ivory, who after they split up, was with a filmmaker in Seattle, and I think they went to Bhutan or Nepal, and did some really significant documentary work, and he was pretty big time, and then they were pretty big time, so she certainly—she certainly had an artistic bent. Interestingly, there's another woman, Jennifer Clarke. I don't know if you've heard of her.

PP: No.

BM: She came by Fishtown with Charlie.. She was finishing up a Ph.D. on the artistic mind, and she wanted to interview some artists (chuckles), and here she shows up with Charlie, and I thought, Whoa, that's a handful. She's been a long consort with Paul, still to this day. And she's a pretty brilliant psychologist, understands art I think, has really assisted Paul in getting his paintings together, getting them photographed. There might be a book. So she's artistic in that way.

Steve's wife, Jan Korchinsky, she was a seamstress, but that would be more of a craft I think.

So it's not that none of these women—none of them were full blown artists like Aurora Jellybean, but Aurora Jellybean did not live in Fishtown.

PP: Oh, she didn't?

BM: No, she didn't. There's some rumor that she did, and she may have been out there before my time, but it would have only been for a visit. But the irony is that about halfway through our stay in Fishtown, Art Jorgensen came to live in Fishtown, and they had been married. And Aurora Jellybean, she and I studied architecture together, our first year in design at the UW. I think she got out that year and went different directions, so I've known Virginia Shaw since, I think, 1963.

PP: And Virginia Shaw is Aurora Jellybean?

BM: Yeah, that's Aurora Jellybean, yeah. And she has passed. Kind of a tragic life. She just had some incredible, bizarre stories. But, I mean, she was a brilliant artist and, you know, kind of a wonderful, wonderful person. And Art Jorgensen was a brilliant artist as well. We were all kind of anti-authoritarian and love to push edges a little bit. Charlie really knew how to push edges.

PP: Could you mention a specific example of that? It doesn't have to be Charlie, but just something that you—

BM: I think it was 1975. Seattle Art Museum was doing a Skagit Valley show at their pavilion at Seattle Center. We thought our attendance should include some street theatre so we put on Indian robes, dropped some mescaline and Charlie grabbed a chain saw, and we headed to Seattle intent on sawing one of his paintings in half. That never happened but Robert did read his poem about the lizard-like feet of a parrot he likened to one of Seattle's greatest art patrons

So yeah, you asked an example of pushing. I guess it would be the psychedelics. Sitting around at a table with Steve Herold most of the night, just talking and seeing where things went. Really just stretching conversations.

I think the psychedelic drugs kind of clarified and focused maybe the brilliance of at least Paul and Steve and Charlie, of their minds and the places they could go. And Charlie's paintings. When Charlie wasn't there, I liked to let myself into his cabin and just sit in his studio with the paintings, because they were, well they were from somewhere else. He had a pen and ink, and it was a perfect circle that he'd drawn freehand. I mean, you kind of look at that stuff, and you go, 'Whoa, that's unexplainable.' Paul could get places with his Chinese and the translations and that were for me, unfathomable. And he's good friends with Red Pine and Bill Porter, over in Port Townsend.

So that's how things were kind of pushed too. And kind of through the psychedelic scholarliness of the group. When I met Hans, he and Joy were living together in the Nelson mansion up on Belmont in Seattle. They lived in his big bedroom up there, and he was, I think, a junior in high school, and he might have even been a year younger. I mean, that was a new one for me. He's not only living with his girlfriend, but it's in his parents' house, and it's absolutely cool with everybody. And I think the parties were famous for pushing things to the limit. One night Ibsen and Lorenzo Milam called General Franco in Spain

PP: No way.

BM: And they got through to his secretary, but Franco was unavailable. I guess the next morning they got a call back from his office. I don't know if Franco was on the phone, but his office called back, and

Ibsen couldn't quite remember making the phone call. But it was stuff like that Hans was raised around. And Charlie and Robert and Steve spent a lot of time up there.

PP: A quick question about, you know you've mentioned Callahan and Tobey, Morris Graves and Guy Anderson. Was there any affiliation with Fishtown for any of them? Did they come down there and visit?

BM: No, they were long gone by then. Morris and Guy had repurposed a burnt-out house in LaConner in the 1930s.

PP: Oh they were?

BM: And Guy never came out that I knew about. But the early '70s were—it was all kind of palsy-walsy around Guy's place. Chanel Nine came up once and did some filming. It would be interesting to see that. And Robert Sund was there, and it was all the local artists just hanging around.

PP: I don't know how you get that kind of footage but I'll check into it, but—

BM: No, I have no idea if it's still around but it was part of an archive of the next generation, and Guy kind of giving his blessing. Fishtown's not only us that were in Fishtown. It was the art scene in the valley, in the western part of the Skagit Valley, because there were a lot of other people in the show in 2010, Aurora Jellybean for example, that were basically Fishtown. Fishtown was a place but it also was a state of mind. We all had this state of mind and were – it was a commonality. This large group came to the Skagit Valley in the early 70s, and Fishtown kind of distilled what was happening. It seemed most of the newcomers had an artistic sensibility, whether they were carpenters or boatwrights or whatever.

It was an interesting and large group. I have no idea how many people that might have been, a hundred, a hundred and fifty—well, say a hundred. And we all partied together, at the 1890 again, on the weekends; it was just crazy hijinks. And that went on through the mid '70s. But I've been reading some stuff on the history of the '70s, because I kind of missed it, being out there. And it was really a watershed politically and socially. Things went—the music went. Everything kind of went through a change in the mid '70s, and they got kind of serious. I think that's when New Wave, punk, disco, all

came out, and I think everything kind of started going that way, kind of just spreading out. Political changes, the idealism, the hippie credo gone. It was a harder world and there were other fish to fry I guess.

PP: You mentioned that Charlie was mayor, you know, tongue in cheek, but really too. But was there any kind of overlying or underlying political feel to Fishtown?

BM: No. I remember sitting out on the boardwalk in front of Hans Nelsen's, listening to Nixon's resignation speech, but that—no. No, I don't think so. I mean, everybody was throwing their hands up about politics at that point in time.

I've been a social activist, but I'm not political. I basically don't believe much in the system as practiced. What's there to believe in, really? I mean, I believe in it ideally, but the more I read the more I know from the get-go that "We the people" was the 10% of the white men, plantation owners and slave owners. That's who "We the people" were in the documents.

No, we were not political. We were kind of art activists maybe, but not political activists. Steve tells some stories about himself during the political days. The Id Bookstore, I think, was a focal point for—well certainly for the University, but maybe the Seattle political scene. Well the political scene in Seattle in the late '60s was at the University, and the Red Robin Tavern, The Blue Moon and the Century Tavern were gathering points, and God, they were gathering points. I got a tremendous education hanging out at the Red Robin, basically at 20-21 years, just all the who's who, Paul Dorpat, Tom Gunn, Alfredo, everybody hung out there, and that's the way it was back then. But boy, after the mid-'70s, everybody kind of went their own way. And maybe that's part of what this whole Fishtown thing is. It's of a time when we were more of a like mind, and we tended to spend more time with each other, I think. And kind of sex, drugs, and rock-n-roll, in a loving, pot smoking way, I guess. Fishtown in '78, '79, '80, there was a bitter melancholy for, and I still get it for the earlier days that seemed better. I think in some sense that maybe they were better, in the sense that society, even though Nixon was getting impeached, or because of it, we all had some sense of hope. And it was real, before punk came in and everybody seemed to develop an edge, and more individualized ego, or something. Everything seems to be political today.

PP: I wanted to touch on a topic that we already covered a little bit, and that was the women that were down there when you would have poetry nights or something like that.

BM: Yeah.

PP: Were the women also—did they also come and were involved, or was that more of just the four or five of you?

BM: Five or six, maybe. Ralph Aeschliman and Robert would participate there. I remember one at our cabin -- I think Gul must have done the cooking. She was pretty good with words too.

Elizabeth would come, Paul's girlfriend. I can't say no, but it's not a big yes either. I think Robert had a handful of the poems that we'd written, and I thought Steve might have some, but I don't think there's any women's work in there, that I could say that they necessarily participated in the writing or art. They were not necessarily into the kind of crazy "wisdom" lifestyle that we were. That was sort of the early—the early Fishtown was sort of Chinese hermit monk, and they weren't buying it. I don't know if I've ever met a woman who maybe is into that.

PP: I don't really have anything else to ask. Is there anything I didn't touch on that you feel, you know, would be important to have down, anything else you may have?

BM: I guess I'm interested in what, where this is going. Does this go into a reference file someplace? You're not putting a book together or anything like that?

PP: No, no.

BM: Somebody else might use what you have.

PP: Yeah. I think, and I can talk to you more about this as we deal with the details of the consent form, but it's more came out of my interest and my colleague, Beth Joffrion. We are interested in art and Skagit art, and some Bellingham art. And I think my feeling was, when I encountered the Fishtown work, that it was really authentic work. It was very good. And that's just been reified by different people I've talked to about this. And so, and no one was really actively collecting, you know, the work or the ephemera and archives that went along with it.

BM: Yeah, yeah.

PP: And that Western could be potentially in a perfect place to do that because it's local for us.

BM: The Northwest art has not been looked at for a generation.

PP: Yeah. I'll talk to you more about the details afterwards.

PP: Well, I want to thank you very much for taking the time to drive up here and to participate in this, and it was great to meet you.

BM: Well, I was glad to do it, and thank you for being interested and providing a service that needs to be done, for documenting this. I mean, I think we're rushing into the future so fast, we don't seem to be looking back to and see what we've accomplished.

Slater said a couple of things, Bill Slater, years ago. He was a teacher, taught painting at Hunter College. He said that he feels sorry for younger artists today because they have not studied or put in their time. They haven't done the book work, they haven't done the museum work, they haven't done the hanging around work. So they don't have a pool or a reservoir to draw from. And the other thing he said is "Everything's been done."

PP: OK. I want to end the interview off at this point.

BM: Yeah, yeah.

PP: Because we can go on talking afterwards, but again, I want to thank you very much for this.

BM: Thank you, Paul. Thank you for your service and your interest.

(End of audio)

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