

Key Information

Name: Chris Brooks

Age: ?

Current Cabin: 76

Date of Interview: March 24, 2015

Interviewer: Ellica Spjut (University of Puget Sound)

Ethnographic Preface

I went over to Chris's house down at Salmon Beach in the early evening. He welcomed me in and we went to the second floor sitting room of his house and we sat down to talk about Salmon Beach's history. My goal was to learn about what Chris had witnessed in his time at Salmon Beach and get a better feel for what it's like to live at Salmon Beach. We talked about Chris's time spent at Salmon Beach and his insights into the community and the changes at Salmon Beach over the past 20 years.

Because of Chris's work as a carpenter and more over the past decades, he has an enormous amount of knowledge about all of the cabins. Some of the cabins mentioned in this interview include 38, 39, 53, 54, 56, 64 ½, 87, and 76. He talks quite a bit about some of the early history of Salmon Beach, and about life in a disaster-prone zone. He also has insightful things to say about the community ethos at the beach.

He describes his firsthand experience with the landslide of 1996, which he witnessed, and about rescuing the individual whose house floated out into Commencement Bay. He also briefly describes the earthquake of 2000 or 2001. He also has a bit to say about the Prohibition era and some of the moonshining activity that went on at Salmon Beach in that period.

Transcription

[Brief conclusion of introductory conversation.]

ES: I wanted to talk a little bit about Salmon Beach's history, if that's alright.

Chris: Okay, yeah. We do have a historian down here who could probably address the history way better than I could, but ...

ES: That's okay. It'll be interesting to have more than one perspective on it.

Chris: I do have the history book I could refer to if ... So nothing I say is, um, fact.

ES: That's totally okay.

Chris: [laughing] Okay.

ES: How long have you been at Salmon Beach?

Chris: I've been here since '94?

ES: Okay, cool.

Chris: So about just over 20 years. Yeah, actually, '95 I moved down here when I was a senior in college.

ES: Okay, so did—how did you find out about Salmon Beach?

Chris: I came to a party down here — it was a couple of UPS students were having a Super Bowl Party.

ES: Cool!

Chris: Yeah, I think that's how most people get here the first time, dating back to the '70s or even the '60. You run into people and they find out you're from Salmon Beach, and they say, "Oh I've been to a party there."

ES: Cool. And then what? You moved down your senior year at UPS?

Chris: I did. I moved down into Cabin 38 with two other UPS students. Since then I've lived in, let's see ... 38, 39, 53, 54, 64 $\frac{1}{2}$, 87, and 76.

ES: Cool

Chris: They say you don't move off the beach, you move down the beach.

ES: It's cool. What was it like when you first came?

Chris: Back then there were a lot more students down here. I think that's because there were more rentals, so there was lots of UPS people. There were crazy college parties, and stuff like that. But it seems like over the years, the rentals have mostly gone away. I think there's only maybe 3 or 4 rentals left on the beach. Most of the houses are owner occupied, and I think it's kind of mellowed out because of that.

ES: So you came '94 and then ...

Chris: '95, I think.

ES: '95

Chris: I think it was '95. It was the first semester of my senior year. But it was a rough year! We were in Cabin 38, and we had a big ice storm that year. We lost power for 2 weeks, and when the power

goes out you lose water. It froze, and all our pipes were frozen. There was a time, I think it was during finals, and we didn't have water and we didn't have power for weeks. We were making spaghetti in seawater. Fortunately one of the neighbors we hadn't met came and brought over a big roll of pipe, so we were able to get our water back running, which was really nice. He helped us melt the ice out of our pipes and he redid the plumbing, so we had some water. That was good.

ES: Yeah, I'd imagine.

Chris: We also didn't—the only way we could heat the house was with firewood. And we didn't have a boat, we had a canoe, so the only way we could get firewood was to paddle out in the canoe, get floating logs and drag them home. So that was quite a spectacle. And then we didn't have a chainsaw either, so we landed these big logs and then we had to figure out how to saw them up. We had to borrow a chainsaw from someone—we were college students, you know, so we didn't really have everything you need—we weren't really prepared. But those days are gone now. Living down here is a lot easier now. — more modern.

ES: Is that partially because you're no longer a poor college student?

Chris: It might be. I think that's mostly why. There's a few cabins down here that are still rustic, but now I think everybody ... yeah everybody has electricity and water. The north side of the beach has wells that are drilled horizontally into the hillside, that's how everybody gets their water down there. And then this half of the beach, the south half, has city water. So we rarely have problems with the city water. The north end still has a lot of problems when it gets real cold with freezing — freezing water.

ES: What was it about Salmon Beach that made you stay?

Chris: It was just kind of funky, and it was secluded, and I liked the idea of being in a place that seems so far away from Tacoma but it's really really close. And just by having that hill there with the stairs, it keeps a lot of people out, so that was something I liked. I like the seclusion, I like the community. Most people who you talk to down here say the thing they like most about Salmon Beach is the other people who live here. It's just a really tight community, which is nice. Of course there's some people who don't get along, but for the most part everybody's really close. Everybody helps each other out, so the community's really nice. And it's like being at summer camp every day of the year. How can you not like that?

ES: Nice [pause] So Salmon Beach has become more modern, like technology-wise?

Chris: No. I mean of course it has over the course of history. In the time I've been here I don't know if I'd say it's gotten more modern but the houses have definitely gotten bigger. There was a time — it's still happening — people buying up small cabins and tearing them down, buying two of them and tearing them down to build a giant house. Or in one case someone bought three houses and built a giant house. But now ... even just this week we've had new problems with the building department, so I think there's going to be a halt to all new construction down here. So I don't know if Salmon Beach is gonna grow anymore, but it certainly has. The size of the houses has grown significantly in the past 20 years. Yeah, there's only, there's only a handful of small single story houses. They all used to be just little one

room cabins—tent platforms, and then just little one room cabins. and then a little bit bigger. Now most of the houses ... well, almost all of them are two stories and a lot of them are three stories tall.

ES: Wow.

Chris: I think this is the biggest one on the beach. It's actually taller than the city height ordinance, which we like to forget.

ES: How tall is your house?

Chris: I have no idea. It's too tall, that's all I know.

ES: Is it three stories then?

Chris: It's three and then a little bit and then there's like a loft up top. So yeah, it's pretty big, it's pretty tall.

ES: Okay, cool.

Chris: It's got a high center of gravity, being up on stilts, you know?

ES: Yeah. [long pause] How else do you think Salmon Beach's changed over the years?

Chris: Since I've been here or just like over the years?

ES: Either way.

Chris: Either way? Well, Salmon Beach started off as a place where people would come and have fishing camps. And then during the Depression and whatnot. People who couldn't afford to really live in town lived down here. So it's always kind of been a place ... there were bootleggers and that kind of stuff going on, so it's always had that weird kind of frontier mentality. I think over the years it's just, you know, it's waterfront, and there's not a lot of waterfront in Tacoma. It's desirable, so it's gotten a lot more gentrified over the years. And like I was saying before, the small cabins were turning into big houses, and it's a high risk place to live. People now are spending lots of money on these big houses, but at any time they could be destroyed by land or sea. We kind of live on the edge of disaster, looming at any time. I think in the time I've been here I've seen probably five houses get destroyed by one way or another — either by fire or by landslides. So it is a risk, and I think it takes a certain type of person to wanna take that risk. You can't get insurance really. But for us who live down here, the quality of life I think is more important. It's worth the risk.

ES: [pause] What is the community like here?

Chris: What's it like? The people range from doctors and lawyers all the way down to unemployed drunks. Actually, there aren't so many unemployed drunks anymore. One of the cool things about this community is that it ranges from people in their 80s all the way down to young kids — families with lots of young kids. So you're always interacting with people who aren't necessarily your age. I mean you go

to a party or a potluck or something and you're hanging out with multi-generations worth of people, which is really cool. I think a lot of people don't really do that, you know. They go and hang out with people their age and that's it. So that's one cool thing about the community – just the diversity of people.

Everyone down here is really – most people are really interesting. They do interesting things and have interesting lives, so it's fun to talk to people and hear about what their story is and what they're doing. People are pretty handy – most people, you know, fix their own houses and build their own houses, or to some extent do something, work on their own houses, you know? These houses are always falling apart. There's always work to do, so if you're gonna live down here you have to be somewhat handy; either that or have deep pockets so you can pay someone to do everything for you. But that doesn't really happen much. So, it's an interesting community.

So, I heard someone say it's like a hundred underachievers [laughter] living together at sea level. I mean there are ... there's a lot of highly educated people here. There's a lot of people who I've known for 20 years and I still don't really know what they do. They're always just kind of around – lots of retired people. Yeah, and college professors – I think there's 2 or 3 of those down here now. There's always been some UPS professors down here. In fact, UPS has always had a real connection with Salmon Beach. There's probably 20 people down here, at least, who are alumni and a lot more that have different connections with UPS – who lived here as students or are married to UPS alumni, or teach there, or work there, or whatever. Yeah, it's an interesting community – an interesting group of people.

ES: Is there anything that brings the community together?

Chris: Disasters.

ES: Okay ...

Chris: Even if you hate somebody down here, and there are people who don't get along and who've not gotten along for decades, but if something ever happens, and it does – you know, like a landslide taking out the trail or high tides causing damage to the boardwalks or whatever – people always come together and work together and make things better, so we put all of our personal issues aside. That really brings people together. Other than that, parties bring people together. The Fourth of July is the big one – the Fourth of July and New Year's are the big events down here. We have a rowboat race on the Fourth of July which starts at one end of the beach and goes to the other end. I don't even think there are any rowboats in it anymore. Now it's mostly kayaks and paddleboards and kinetic sculptures and people floating in survival suits and stuff like that, but that's a good time. Everybody dresses up and there are a lot of kids, and it's barbecues and bands and kegs. So, that's a good one. Oh, I'm spilling my coffee all over! Um ... New Year's Eve is another good one where we have a progressive party that starts at one end of the beach, goes to four or five houses, and then ends at some house where there's like the final party, so that's a good one too.

ES: Cool.

Chris: So it's good to get people together. There was a lot of ... in the last 20, 30 years, there's been ... Salmon Beach has really been divided between the North beach and South beach. I don't know if

you're aware of that. There was a lawsuit and some of the real old-timers down here still hold grudges about that. So it's nice you know that on the Fourth of July and New Year's and stuff, or whenever there are issues, people forget about that stuff and we work together or hang out together, which is nice.

ES: What caused the divide between the north and the south? The lawsuit, but ...

Chris: A number of things. Some of it had to do with water. I told you that the north end has wells, and the south end has city water, so at the time the north end didn't wanna invest in the city water. That was an issue. There were some property ownership issues. I think mostly it was personality conflicts, and most of the people now ... there's still two or three of them who are lingering on and still hold grudges about that, but most of them have died now. I mean this has been going on since the '70s. So just now we have two boards of directors, one for the south end and one for the north end, but just now we're starting to combine our boards again and work together as a unified beach. Our hope is to actually have one home owner's association again instead of having two, so we can be one unified, historic community instead of two separate communities. I mean we're all in the same boat, you know?

ES: [long pause] Uh, you said earlier that people don't move away they just move down the beach.

Chris: A lot of people, yeah. A lot of people start off renting down here, and again – there aren't that many rentals left, but most of the people who I know who live down here started off renting a house and then, maybe their lease ends, or ended, so they got another house, and then another house, and eventually bought a house. But you know, it's really hard to get stuff down here, so once you're down here it's, it's hard to leave. Not just because of stuff, but just because it's a really nice place to be.

I've been here for 20 years, I've traveled all over the world, I travel a ton with my work and I go to cool places everywhere but, I always come back here. You know, I think there's no other place I'd feel comfortable living. Well, that might not be true but, it's a great place to be! I like it. So yeah, I've definitely moved down the beach a lot, and there are a lot of people who are in that phase right now where they're kind of jumping between rentals, hoping to buy a place. But the houses now are so expensive down here that it's really hard, especially for such a risky property. It's hard to become an owner. And now with the new troubles we're having with the city and the fact that we might not be able to ever get building permits again, it just makes the property, either that much more valuable or that much more risky, depending on how you look at it. So, yeah, it's a challenge. It's a difficult place to be, but again, I wouldn't trade it for anything.

ES: For you was it mostly moving down the beach because of the rental things, or ...

Chris: I just didn't wanna live anywhere else. I mean I, once I moved down here I was just like, why would I ever wanna live in the city when I can, especially if I'm in Tacoma? You know, if Salmon Beach – I hate to say it – but if Salmon Beach wasn't here I probably wouldn't live in Tacoma anymore, you know? So, I would find somewhere like Salmon Beach, maybe somewhere else. So yeah, when my lease ran out or for some reason or another if I had to leave my rental, I would just try to find another place down here, and sometimes that meant like, a few months on the couch or something, or you know, crashing someone's house until I could find a new place to live. And that's kinda what people do, you know? People who wanna stay down here find a way to make it happen.

ES: And I assume that works because there is such a close community?

Chris: Yeah, I mean everybody knows everybody and when people have to move out for one reason or another, I think a lot of people – especially if they've been here for a while – a lot of people are sympathetic to their cause and try to help people out. We've got a bulletin board up there, so often times you'll see a note that says like, "Oh, we, I have to move out, uh you know, I don't wanna leave this community. Somebody, can anybody, you know help me find a place?" And it seems like it always works out.

ES: That's really cool.

Chris: Yeah, yeah.

ES: [pause] We kinda touched on this earlier, who's been moving into Salmon Beach?

Chris: Lately?

ES: Yeah.

Chris: It seems like more houses have sold in the last 2 years than in the last 10 or 15 years before. You know, there was a period of time where houses were really cheap, and then we had that period where the price of houses went through the roof and nothing sold for a long time. Then, just in the last couple years, prices've been coming down and it seems like most of the new people here are like young couples, some with kids—young families, which is really nice. I mean old people don't really move here. In fact, all the old people who are here have been here a long, long, long time, and plan to die here, you know? So I'd say most of the new people here are younger people who are slightly ambitious, and some of them ... just trying to think of some of the new people ... like, for example, the house next door. A couple bought it, I think 2 years ago now, and she's a professor at UPS [Emelie Peine] and he's an emergency room nurse [Jack Sasser] at Tacoma General, and they're a relatively young couple. Two or three other couples about their age [as well]. It's interesting. A lot of people now ... I told you that there are so many different age groups here, which is really awesome, but it seems like all the new people – most of the people coming here now are all kind of in the same age group, which is, you know, in their 30s. So I'd probably say that's the biggest demographic right now, at least of new people coming in. And some of them are coming, you know they move here, their house is for sale, and they're from Tennessee or something, and they see it on Craigslist and they just move right in. Other people have been renting here for years, or have been living up in town and have been waiting for a place to come up for sale. So, it's kind of all over the board.

ES: [pause] How do you think most people find Salmon Beach?

Chris: How do they arrive here?

ES: Yeah.

Chris: They come to a party!

ES: That's right. We talked about this, I remember now. Sorry.

Chris: Right, yeah. Most people come to a party. Other people – a lot of people arrive here on accident now because of the dog park. There's a new dog park here, so their dogs get loose and they wander down here, and it's funny because a lot of people who've lived in Tacoma their whole lives don't even know Salmon Beach exists, and they come down here and they're like "Oh my God, where am I? We're at Popeyes! What's going on?" So, it's funny, but most people who arrive here come to a party, they're friends of friends.

ES: [long pause] What do you think is the biggest thing that's happened at Salmon Beach since you've been here?

Chris: The biggest thing? Like the biggest change, or the biggest event, biggest single event?

ES: Uh, let's go with event, we'll start there.

Chris: The most catastrophic event that happened since I've been here happened in 1996 when there was a big landslide that crushed 3 houses, and I actually saw the landslide happen and saw the houses buckle into the water. I went out in the boat – in a canoe, actually – this is when I had the canoe, and I tried to fish people out of their houses. We didn't know if there were people home or not, because the houses were crushed and the water was up high. So one house, in the first house there was a guy home, and he was able to get out. He had a broken arm. With the second house the roof was all the way down to the water, so most of the house was underwater, and we didn't know if anyone was home. We broke through a skylight on the roof to look for somebody in there and found out later that nobody was there, which was really fortunate because they probably wouldn't be around anymore if they were. And then the other house, it was just a bunch of cats, and most of 'em got out and ran wild. There's still a population of feral cats in the woods today. But that night – one of the houses, the smaller one, with the guy who had broken his arm, [the house] broke free at high tide and floated away.

ES: Oh wow.

Chris: ... floated out into Commencement Bay. I went out there the next day and helped the guy salvage his stuff. It was all floating around. But that was a big blow, I think. I mean, one of the houses was brand new. The couple had just built the house. It was like their dream house and it got crushed. [Pause]

Yeah, and then there was the earthquake in 2000 or 2001 which caused a huge slide, and destroyed two houses and damaged a few other ones. That was also a big deal. FEMA was here, all kinds of government aid people here. But like I said, when stuff like that happens everybody comes together. We get it cleaned up, people rebuild their houses, and it's like business as usual. Now you walk down there and you can't even tell it happened. To my knowledge nobody's ever died down here in a landslide, but I'd have to check on that. I don't think anyone's ever died down here. People have died down here, but I don't think from a landslide. There was a woman, Jean Shank, who lived here for 70-something years – her whole life in this little cabin, and she died down here a few years ago, right where she wanted to be. So now I think the oldest person down here now is probably Joan Rutherford down in Cabin 1, and she's in her 80s. She's a real interesting woman, too. If you want some interesting stories you should go talk to her.

ES: [pause] It was Joan Rutherford?

Chris: Joan Rutherford. She's like everyone's grandma.

ES: [pause] Okay. What do you think is the biggest change since you've been here?

Chris: Just probably the building, the size of the houses. Again, the size of the houses and the dominant age group of the people. Less rentals, less younger people, bigger houses – I think more people in their 30s. That's probably the biggest single change. I think that another big change is our relationship with the city, the county, and the state – environmental regulations and stuff. I think a lot is gonna start changing a lot more fast in the next couple of years. But, you know, for forever people didn't get building permits down here, they just did what they wanted, and I think now that's gonna start changing.

[At this point his cat entered the room and was walking all around.]

Daisy! Hope you're not allergic to cats.

ES: Only mildly, I'll be fine.

Chris: Oh really? Come here.

ES: She's fine.

Chris: Come here. Come 'ere. [Chris got up to pick Daisy up from the couch I was sitting on] Only mildly?

ES: Yeah, it's fine. What else did I wanna talk about? What a pretty cat!

Chris: Thanks. She was abandoned down here. Her people left and left her behind so I took her in. She adopted me. So is this your first time down at Salmon Beach?

ES: Yeah.

Chris: Really?

ES: Yeah.

Chris: Oh my gosh. You'll have to go for a walk down here and check out the place.

ES: It's really cool.

Chris: Yeah. [pause] Yeah it's, it's a pretty cool place.

ES: [long pause] What direction do you think Salmon Beach is going to go in? We've talked about it a little bit, but ...

Chris: I think Salmon Beach is gonna be phased out, unfortunately. I think eventually the state has come up with a shoreline management act and part of their idea is to stop any further development on any of the shorelines. I think their hope is to bring most of the shorelines back to a natural state. Sp my fear is that, in the coming decades, Salmon Beach is ... it's gonna start off slow, and people are gonna just be denied building permits, and then, you know, eventually houses won't be rebuilt, and then, I think, maybe it'll all go away. Who knows? But it's tough to say. I mean, Salmon Beach isn't gonna get any bigger, that's for sure, but it might get smaller. [long pause, then whispering to Daisy] Cat food breath – you have cat food breath. Echh. [normal volume] Her name is Daisy Cooter Tennessee Tompther.

ES: Very good name for a cat.

Chris: Yeah, I just call her Daisy.

ES: [pause] How long have you lived in this cabin?

Chris: Um, for about four years now?

ES: Okay, cool.

Chris: Yeah, it was a foreclosure. This cabin was built by a guy named Harry Donovan. Well, he didn't build it – he had some people build it, and he got into some trouble, and the house really never got finished. He ended up in jail in like Morocco or something, but he came back, eventually sold the house, and it was just kind of gutted. Pigeons – it was full of pigeons for years. It was called the Pigeon Palace. And then some other guy bought it and did some work on it, and then he got foreclosed on by the bank. He wasn't paying his bills, I guess. A friend of mine down here and I bought it as a partnership about five years ago. Yep. Daisy, come on! [picking Daisy back up] You're gonna, you're gonna cause allergic reactions!

ES: It's really okay. I'm not that allergic to cats.

Chris: My mom is like deathly allergic. Her throat swells up. [long pause]

ES: Cool. So, um, so you and a friend bought the house?

Chris: Yeah, he owns another house down here, and we just wanted a project, pretty much. So, he and his wife own Cabin 56. And there's a little apartment downstairs [of 76] that they stay in sometimes, and I think they're gonna rent out 56 and stay here on a more permanent basis in the apartment. They also have a house up by UPS that they live in. So they're all over the place, so it's nice to have somebody else around to work on projects. There's always projects going on here. Right now we're redoing the bathroom upstairs.

ES: [long pause] So you've been here about 20 years.

Chris: Yeah

ES: What were the first 10 years like versus the last 10 years?

Chris: The first 10 years, for me I was renting, so ... I'm a carpenter ... well, I do other work, but I've worked on probably almost all of the houses down here – most of them, at least – in one manner or another. But, so I was renting .. I lived in four or five different houses down here so, I didn't have really too much of a sense of permanence for the first 10 years I lived here. More than that – for the first 15 years, maybe. I also came and went. I was in the Peace Corps, so I left for a couple years and then came back. Before I left, a house down here burned down, and myself and two other people who live down here rebuilt the house, and then I left for the Peace Corps. When I came back, I moved to that house and lived there for about seven years. I rented that house for about 7 years. That house just recently sold to a young couple. It's called the Long House. Nice place, number 56—er, 54.

ES: Do a lot of the cabins have names?

Chris: A lot of them do, yes. They all did at one point. I don't know what this cabin's name was, but when you walk around you'll see, there are signs up. The house next door ... well, there's Camp Pickeroon down there, and I think the house next door is actually called Watch'yer Noggin [laughter], oddly enough. But there's the Long House, there's one called the Boxcar. Yeah, I don't know, but they all did. There's Flapjack Lodge, Camp Alder – yeah a number of them all had names, and then over the years they've been rebuilt and lost their names. But I'm trying to bring back the names. I like it when houses have names.

ES: When did the names come about?

Chris: I think way back – back when they were tent platforms and fishing cabins. That's when they had names. And some of 'em stuck for a hundred years, and some of the oldest houses down here have been here a hundred years. [pause] So there was a great history of moonshining down here during the Prohibition. There was one house in particular that had a trap door in the floor so when the Feds came they could dump all the moonshine into a boat and cruise outta here. That one's kind of a classic story. I think there was also some sort of a warning system they had – they raised different flags or something to warn people if someone was coming. But yeah, there were a number of stills down here during Prohibition, so people came to make their booze. Sometimes when we're remodeling some of the older houses you find remnants of those days – old newspapers or whatever. We tore a wall off of Cabin 39, which is one of the oldest houses down here, and in big letters written on the inside of the wall it said Bootleggers Paradise.

ES: That's cool. So you get to see a lot of the cabins?

Chris: Yeah, yeah. I've been in all of them and I've worked on most of them. Actually I think there's maybe one or two I haven't been in, but I think I've pretty much been in all of them.

ES: That's really cool.

Chris: Yeah.

ES: [long pause] Do you think you're gonna live here as long as you possibly can?

Chris: Probably, until my knees go out, and I can't come down the stairs anymore. I don't really have any plans of leaving. I think I'll be here for a while.

ES: [pause] Probably my closing question: is there anything that stands out to you as really significant about Salmon Beach?

Chris: I think Salmon Beach has a really colorful history and I'm afraid – like I've said a few times – that we're ... we've had a lot of problems with the city, and with permitting and everything, and there's a lot of people down here that are really concerned that Salmon Beach might go away, so I think it's really important, like what you're doing and what some of the other UPS students are doing – archiving this history is really important. It used to be like this all over Puget Sound and Tacoma's a very maritime city, and there are very few places where people are actually in touch with that. I mean we live – I could tell you what time high tide is today – we live really closely with the ocean here, and it's a lifestyle that I think a lot of people have forgotten. I think it needs to be preserved, and at least archived in a way so it's not totally forgotten. It would be great if we could. There's one house down here that's on the National Historic Register, and I think it's our goal. I'm on the Board of Directors for the south side of the beach, and right now one of the things that we're trying to do is get the whole community categorized as a historic community so, so we can keep that history alive.

ES: That's really cool.

Chris: Yeah.

ES: Alright, thank you.

Chris: Thank you, it's been a pleasure.