

COFFEE WITH ROB FISHER

August 12, 2026

Rob: Welcome! This is pretty touching, to see so many people who I've known here for so long. Welcome to my home here at the Panorama Ranch, at the front door of our beloved Polebridge. I see it all go by. All of you rushing to town, hurrying back. It's a great spot to live. It's not the first place I've lived in the North Fork, but it's the most touching. And all the things I see. How about the Pacific Northwest Trail folks? You see them with their backpacks on, going by. They're heading down to Hay Creek and up over the Whitefish Divide, all the way to the Pacific Ocean. I occasionally get a chance to stop and say, "Hey! Who are you and where are you from?" That's a fun part of living here. Or being a single guy living alone, I need a daily thing, so I go down to the Merc and talk to whoever's there, and I tell them my story. They say, "Oh, wow! How do you do that?" Well, I'm going to tell you today. I'm honored.

I know we're all hungry to hear stories that I might have to tell about my time here in the North Fork. But I'm also hungry to tell you about my stories before I got here. Because how did we all get here? And how have we stayed so long? And why have we stayed so long? What's the common thread that we all have? I hope some of my stories remind you of some of your stories, your past and how you got here. I want this to also be an audience participatory-type talk. If at any point you need to ask a question or add something, just say "Whoa, Hoss!" And then if later in my talk it starts to get a little long and you feel the need to say, "Hey, giddy up, Hoss, I need to pee," I'll speed it up.

You're looking at a man who has lived a life he could only have dreamed of living, but somehow has. How have I done that? I've lived a life of adventure, stepped on six continents, climbed to 20,000 feet in South America, cruised the Greek islands, stepped in the Atlas mountains of North Africa, seen Europe and America and my beloved Mexico. I've been pretty blessed, and I'm blessed to still be doing it.

Like many families after World War II, my family came from Illinois. They headed west on Route 66, out to the West Coast, where jobs were plentiful and homes were being built. What a time to be born, as I was in 1948, in Compton, California. It makes my nose run, just thinking about it. Us baby boomers—some of us aren't, but most of us are. After World War II the prosperity, all of what was given to our generation—be it education, be it opportunities, health-wise, knowledge of exercise being good for you, all those things. They led us down a path that opened a lot of doors. People say "born in Compton" and they think of the gangs and all of that. But I'm old enough that in the 1950s, when I was biking around Southern California, there were open bamboo fields, beautiful beaches, no freeways. I could bike to the beach 10 miles this way and 10 miles to the beach that way. Ten-speed bikes were just coming out, and wow—they got you there. My mom would just say, "Be home for dinner." So, I went out and peddled, peddled, peddled.

At age 12, I wanted to bike across America. My mom, said, "Nuh uh, you're too young, Robert." But at 19, a buddy and I hitchhiked across America, all the way from L.A. to New York, up to Montreal for Expo 67, back to New York to see it one more time, then all the way back to L.A. Five weeks, 71 rides. We had \$200 apiece. 1967 was eventually called the Summer of Love. As we hitchhiked east, all these folks were going west to San Francisco. The Monterrey Pop Festival was happening that year. The whole counterculture thing overlaid our generation, especially in

Southern California where I was experiencing it all. I couldn't be more blessed in where I was born and when I was born. It led me to all of the things that I've done.

One of the last things I did in Southern California was finish college. The previous year I'd been on active duty in the Army Reserves. I found myself jumping out of airplanes and helicopters. It wasn't my idea of what reservists did. I thought they were clerk typists. I had joined the reserves to get out of being drafted and going to Vietnam, where I had already lost many classmates in the two years since high school graduation. When I went into the recruiter's office and he gave me the application to fill out, one of the questions was, "Do you like adventure?" Sure! Who doesn't? A little further down it asked, "Would you jump out of an airplane?" Hell, no! This application must be for the real Army. I'm gonna check Yes anyway.

That led to being accepted into the 12th Special Forces reserve unit at San Pedro, California. Wings on my chest and a beret on my head. That was my next adventure, after my road trip across America, going into the military for about 10 months. I got back and got married to my high school sweetheart the next day. Took off the beret and put on a suit and tie, and I joined the Mormon church. My wife was a Mormon, and her father was a bishop. I was willing to be a Mormon husband. Back to college I went. We lived on this side of the freeway—there were freeways by then—and the campus was on this side. So, on this side I was the Mormon husband, and on this side I was the student and counterculture wannabe hippie. I was studying film making. I was going to be a documentary film maker. It was the perfect time. The environmental movement was happening, and I wanted to do films about environmental issues.

But I was commuting from Mom and Dad's, after I broke up with my wife, and I was in bumper-to-bumper traffic each day. And what was the number one song in the summer of 1972? John Denver's Rocky Mountain High. I heard it every 20 minutes on the radio, and I kept saying, "Wow." Because what was my life going to be? Here in the smog and the freeway traffic, or is it going to be where the eagles fly high? Where there are friends around the campfire and everybody is getting high? Rocky Mountain high.

Upon graduation, I left with three Ds—a Discharge as a conscientious objector, a Diploma, and a Divorce. And I had a Volkswagen bus that was taking me to Denver, Colorado, because that was where John said to go. I was the wannabe film maker who walked around in a suit and tie, with an attaché case with my resume and some films, telling them I was from Southern California and I really knew what was happening in film. But that song was bringing everyone to the mountains, especially Denver. One thing led to another. I heard there was some construction going on. I needed some tools. I kind of had some background, because my dad made trailers when I was younger, so I knew how to hammer things and stuff like that. I went down to the hardware store and bought a bunch of tools and leather pouches. I took them down to the Platte River that runs through Denver, threw them in and got them all wet and dirty, beat up the wood handle on the hammer to make it look used, then went out to a job site and said, "I'm from California. I'm a framer, and I think I can catch on to how you do it here in a couple of days." I didn't know nothin' then. Now after 45 years of being a carpenter, I know quite a bit. As my sign says, "Rob Fisher, Builder, from cabinets to cabins, craftsmanship with built-in quality." That's what I've sold myself on.

John Stone: What was the first job they gave you at that job site?

Rob: This was a stand-up concrete apartment building. They were putting in wood doors and windows, and they needed someone to set doors. When I showed up and they saw how tall I was, they said, "Perfect! We'll have him be the door setter." Luckily, there was an old man on the

crew. I went up to him and said, "I don't quite know how to do this." He taught me the importance of how you set a door. Not to bore you, but the very first thing you do when you set the jamb of a door is to put a level right where the door is going to be. It has to be level, or those jambs have to be higher or lower than the other to make up for the difference, because you have to be square with the door when you're all done. Once I knew that, it was pretty easy. So, doors after doors after doors. Eventually, I became a carpenter there. I headed up to Steamboat Springs one weekend to see what that was all about. I met a guy walking down the street who was a high school buddy. He needed a roommate, and all of a sudden I found myself living in Steamboat Springs.

The electric saw on the table here cut my leg. That was the beginning of having some time off from being a carpenter. I flew home to L.A. to be with my parents. My brothers and I had all left California. Why would we stay in Los Angeles? We all had degrees, and we all took off for different spots. After being bored in L.A. my mom said, "Why don't you go visit your brother Bruce in Eugene, Oregon?" I was already a beginning hippie, and I'd heard about Eugene. We called it "Used Jeans," once I got there. I fell in love with it, and my brother invited me to live with him until I got healed. Then I found work in Eugene, and for a whole decade I was a hippie carpenter in Eugene, Oregon.

In the late 70s and the recession that we all remember, with lines at the gasoline stations, being a framer outside in the wet Eugene winters I was ready for something new. I was ready for my next adventure. I sold my pickup that only got five miles to the gallon. That gave me enough money to buy a ticket to New Zealand and Australia. For the first time I went south of the equator. I went back to summer! Remember the surfing film *Endless Summer*, about guys who surfed all around the world? That was the beginning of my realizing that you can go to where it's summer. What a concept!

On that trip I took some tools. I took the basics and found myself some work in New Zealand. When I came back I had \$1000 in my pocket, after being gone for four months. So, I thought, "This is how you do it. You work on your vacations a little and make the seed money for your next vacation." When I came back to Eugene there still wasn't a lot of work, but a buddy needed a greenhouse built. I was building the greenhouse when the phone call came. Dick Vander Schaff, the buddy I was building for, had been to a place called Glacier Park. The year before he had hiked the Highline Trail and had come down through either Bowman or Kintla to this little town called Polebridge. His mom lived in Whitefish, and when he got on the train to go back to Eugene he said to his mother, "If you ever hear of any property for sale up the North Fork, call me."

So, as I was building the greenhouse the phone call came. He got off the phone, leaned out the window, and said, "Do you want to go to Montana and buy some property?" I'd never been to Montana, but I wanted to go see it. In May of 1980, just after Mt. St. Helen's had blown its top, we rented a Datsun B-210, because we didn't have a vehicle that could get here. We came up the North Fork on a May 1980 day with a realtor. I kept asking, "Would you please stop so I can get some pictures?" One thing led to another, and we bought 20 acres on the top of Vance Hill, next to John and Tami Stone's place. Before I left that summer, I put in an application with the Forest Service, thinking "I want to work back here in the summer. I can get a job as a carpenter, fixing campgrounds." I went back to Oregon, and the following spring I got a phone call from the Forest Service. They said, "We've got a job for you." I said, "Good! As a carpenter?" They said, "No, as a firefighter." I said, "I've never done that." And they said, "We'll teach you."

I drove to Montana, and I was based at Big Creek. That was my first year fighting fires, which I did for the next nine years, seven of them on the Flathead Hot Shot crew, and the last year I went up to Alaska and worked for the Bureau of Land Management there. I called it quits with firefighting in 1990. I could tell you stories about that forever. Talk about adventure! Being helicoptered up to mountaintops, getting a fire call up here at 1:30 in the morning saying, "You need to be at the Kalispell airport in an hour and a half, or you've missed the plane." Getting a fire call and getting in my car and driving down there to get on a plane and land in Reno, Nevada at 4:00 in the morning. They fed us and helicoptered us up to a fire. It was pretty amazing. But, I was 42 years old when I gave up firefighting.

You might wonder where I got my nickname Hoss. My first year on the Hotshot crew I was 32. Everybody else was 19 or 20. I was the old man, and I was the one who always said, "If I can do it, you can do it." So, they started calling me "Boss Hoss." That led to Hoss. Then when I started going down to Mexico, where I have a place in Baja California, I became Baja Hoss. So, now you know the names. I started as Robert, then went to Bobby, then to Rob, then to Hoss, and then to Baja Hoss. My neighbors in Mexico, when I started going down there asked what my name was. I'd say "Hoss." They thought I was saying Horse, so they called me Caballo. Or because I'm tall, they would call me Kilometro.

That's pretty much my story before here, how I got here. One touching story that brings tears to my eyes as I talk about it, was the Red Bench Fire of 1988. I was fighting fire as a strike team leader. I was on a 100-acre fire in the Scapegoat Wilderness. We were mopping up on the fire and were due to be helicoptered out that morning. On Sunday of Labor Day weekend 1988 I heard a call on the radio from Kalispell Dispatch that there was report of a small fire up the North Fork. Would somebody please respond and try to find it. Half an hour later an out-of-breath voice said, "Yes, I found it. It's up on Red Meadow, about five acres, mid-slope, southern exposure." To me, hearing it from a distance, that sounded like "watch out." Mid-slope, going to heat up on the south side. This fire has potential.

They called in some retardant from Kalispell. Two bombers, with a lead plane in front showing them the path and how they wanted it laid in. Two hours later the lead plane called Kalispell and said, "We're going to pull off this fire. It's going to do what it wants to do. It's already 700 acres, and it's running to the river." By nightfall, it crossed the river and spotted up at McFarland's on Big Prairie. The evening breeze brought it down the river to Polebridge. I wasn't here, but I could hear it all. That was a 40 mph wind event of about three days over the whole Pacific Northwest. Yellowstone was having a major conflagration. We finally got helicoptered off, and when I went to Dispatch she said, "I know you lost your place." I already knew that. "We know you might want some time off, but if you don't need time off we can send you down to a fire in the Bitterroot. We have a spot where we need you." I said, "I want to go up to that fire in Polebridge that just burned me to the ground." I cleaned my clothes, packed my fire pack, put my boots on, and headed up here. The fire camp was down at Moran Creek, and for five weeks I lived in the fire camp. I'd drive by my place, kind of seeing what was left of it from the road. I wasn't able to go in, because it was still too hot, and they weren't allowing people to come back to their properties.

The TV station from Missoula came up and wanted to do a story on the fire. They heard, "There's a firefighter in camp who just lost everything to this fire while he was elsewhere on a fire." Once the fire cooled off, they got permission to have me and the film crew and a safety officer to go into my ruins. They asked how it felt and what it was like to see the place burned to the ground. I stared at it and said, "I'm glad I wasn't a married man with a family out of a home.

I'm glad I didn't have a dog on a chain waiting for me to come back from my fire call. All I want to do is see the wildflowers bloom one more time."

That winter—one of the few winters I've spent up the North Fork—I was dating a lady at the time who had a place up on Trail Creek [Diane Boyd], and she let me live there. I looked around, snowshoeing and skiing, searching for a new piece of property. I didn't want to live in the black. My partner had a young family, and he could see generations ahead. I didn't want to live in the black. So that winter I found a nice half-acre parcel up on the hairpin turn just north of Moose Creek. I bought that for \$10,000. My partner could only give me \$5,000 for what I had paid for the eight years of owning the property together, but it was the beginning of my next step, where I was going to live in the North Fork.

Lorna Rittenburg: Do you think you could have saved the cabin if you'd been there?

Rob: No. It was a crown fire. It roared to the river. We had all built our cabins on nice spots where we could view Rainbow Peak and the other peaks, and they were built on ravines, at the top of a ravine. The fire came down the North Fork, and it came up those ravines. And because they were steep ravines, that fire just roared up and burned our cabins to the ground—just everything. I had an aluminum ladder, a big tall one that I used to get to the top of my A-frame cabin. It was just a trickle of aluminum down the hill. Everybody who built on those ravines lost their structures. There might be an exception or two.

Lois Walker: The Costellos were able to save their place.

Jerry Costello: My house and Jim Hale's house and Ralph Brown's house—there was nobody at their houses, but we watered. Sally and I watered for a couple of days. Dave Wedum was up taking pictures and watching fire balls shoot into Big Prairie. He said, "Put that sprinkler up there. It's time to go." I came back at 6:00 in the morning, and said, "Whoa, there's my house." Everything else was on fire. Bill's house next door to me burned to the ground. He didn't water. You being a firefighter, we used to sit on our deck, while you were down below putting in erosion barriers, and we were drinking beer. Do you remember that?

Rob: What project was that?

Jerry: After the 1988 fire, right below the bench you were putting logs sideways to slow erosion.

Rob: Yes, restoration after the fire.

Jerry: Then a helicopter would come by while we were sitting there, right at eye level.

Rob: That was the latter part of the five weeks of restoration of the burned areas.

Jerry: Another thing about the fire, about the black. Not knowing anything about forest fires, it was devastating. It was like my world ended, but after you learn about fires you see that things do come back. We had horses that we moved out. But when we brought them back, the girls would go riding down below and find all the old dumps where the old-timers threw their cans and bottles. They were picking through the junk, and I have a bunch of it up there. I keep saying, "What are you going to do with that junk?" She says, "Don't worry about it." But they were pretty devastating times. Everything came back, though, and the next step now is do we need to worry about a fire in our area again. I'm more prepared now, knowing stuff. But when you see fire balls shooting into Big Prairie, it's crazy.

Rob: I mentioned about those being 40 mph winds. That used to be the biggest winds we had on fires, but nowadays it's increased into the 60-80 mph range, depending on weather conditions. That's scary stuff.

Jerry: All you can do is leave your hoses and leave the generator running until the gasoline runs out.

Rob: Fire is a part of living up here. I try to keep this place mowed away from the structures and irrigated to minimize the problems if it gets close to here. The Red Bench fire did come through this back area, but they were able to save the main cabin and this one. Across the road it pretty much burned. You could see the Polebridge Merc from here.

Jerry: I think all of Frank Evans' property across the road burned, didn't it?

Rob: Some of the trees survived. It didn't kill them all.

Jerry: It's like that by us. You can go down the road and some of the big, tall trees are still there.

Rob: Does anybody else have Red Bench stories?

Bonnie Hankey: My brother, John Frederick, stayed at the hostel.

Rob: Jack, were you in Big Prairie when it came through?

Jack McFarland: I was not there. I only heard about it. But yes, the fire balls spotted over there. They brought a bulldozer in and bulldozed our driveway to make that the fire line. In the spring everything to the right was burned. There were beautiful flowers. Where it didn't burn was just ugly sagebrush.

Rob: That's the tail end of my fire stories. From 1990 I was a builder. I had a choice—I could be a carpenter in Portland, Oregon, or I could be a carpenter in Polebridge. Because I was gone for so many years, a lot of people didn't know me here, since I was gone so much during the summers, and I wasn't here in the winters. So, I put out a flyer introducing myself, with my sign on the flyer. "If you have any projects, I'd like to be a part of it, if you need somebody." That led to the beginning of being a builder. Each year I took pictures of my projects, and the next spring I would make a flyer with pictures of the previous year, to show people what we did. That was just the beginning of being able to keep doing it here. And firefighting had gotten me into the seasonal lifestyle. During the years of firefighting, a lot of time I was off traveling the world in the winters. And I was kind of ready to keep doing that. Why would I want to be a carpenter in the winter up here? Or in Portland or Eugene, Oregon.

The Schepes were one of my first customers. They needed a little porch with a tub, kind of a bathroom. I have a list of all my customers. A lot of you have been my customers. John Stone is a long-time customer. McFarlands, Jackie Graham. Ed Neneman wasn't a customer, but we built together. We worked on the Evans' main cabin, when they moved it onto the new foundation. They wanted to beef up the second floor, because it had a little bounce. We needed to put in a support beam. My plan was to come in with two pieces and notch them over a post. Ed said, "I think we can just cut a hole in the building and push a log in." I said, "Push it in?!" So, we built scaffolds with 2x4's and then 8-foot pipes. We just pushed it and pushed, and they rolled it in. We already had a notch where it was going to go. It's a beautiful piece of work, and it shows Ed Neneman's thought process. Make it simple. Why cut it? Why have to put it back together? No, just push it in.

We also worked on Gerry Stearns and Richard Wackrow's house. Keith Longtin was the third person who helped. That's a fun story. They were from Chicago, and Richard wanted a contract. Ed and Keith and I said, "You know, here in Montana we just shake hands. We don't do contracts." Richard was looking pretty nervous about it. The epilogue to all that was on the final night when we were having a party and getting ready to be paid. We were drinking pretty heavily. Richard wrote one check to Keith Longtin, and then he couldn't write anymore. He said, "Write your own." Supposedly, the one he gave Keith the bank wouldn't accept because they couldn't read it. So, that was a memorable project. But it was a lovely spot to work and great folks to work for.

Lois: Did you build the cabin at the hairpin turn?

Rob: No, the one you see at the hairpin was my neighbor's cabin. The initial 5½ acres I bought after the fire had a cabin already on it. I remodeled that cabin over the next ten years. Then I had paid off the land and I had a funky cabin. I wanted a bathroom, and people started saying, "Hoss, why don't you just build yourself a new house?" That one wasn't even on a foundation. So, I refinanced my property, put in a well, had Ed come and put in a septic system, and I designed a 2½ story lodge. I had the foundation put in. I put the floor on, with a root cellar underneath. I covered it with black plastic for the winter and drove to Baja for one of my first years. On the way back I said to myself, "Hoss, why are you building this thing up there? Mexico is where you want to be. Cold isn't your thing." So, I came back and one thing led to another.

I did what they called a boundary adjustment on the three lots I had—maybe I didn't tell you about the two other lots I bought from the sister. But I had 16½ acres. I reconfigured the internal lines and sold off the best 10 acres, my cabin, the well, and the septic system, and that foundation with 18 corners. It had kick-outs on all four sides. A couple from Whitefish bought it in the late fall. Nobody had even come up to inquire about it, and here came a guy late in the fall. He saw the peaks underneath my trussed arch as you drive up to the property. He asked, "How long has this property been for sale?" I should have understood what he was asking—why hasn't somebody bought this? He bought it, and I moved to the back. I sold that in 1998 and moved to the back of the property. I started clearing it with a buddy. We had a sawmill come in, and we milled up 10,000 feet of rough-sawn timber.

I built a small cabin. But at the same time, the Evans family had just moved their cabin to the new foundation, and they wanted to add an addition onto the back. So, they hired me in 1998 to do the addition for them. At the same time, they had a falling out with the caretaker here, and they offered to me to be the caretaker at the same time I needed a place to stay. Back then, I had an answering machine in Kalispell in case anybody called with work. Way up on Moose Creek, it was seven miles each way just to go check my answering machine. But from here, I was able to walk a quarter of a mile to the store, to the phones that used to be on the porch, to check my answering machine. That was a good switch for me to move here, and the Evans family has been great to work for. As a kid I loved mowing grass, and I get to do it here.

There would be times during my latter years, when I was working for Jim & Jan Rogers down the road, when I'd drive home and I'd say to myself, "Hoss, you got a choice. You can turn left and go cook your dinner, or you can turn right and go down to the Saloon and offer Heather Kauffman to do dishes, if I could have a dinner (and a beer probably, too). That's how I got attached to the Saloon, doing voluntary dishwashing. That led to working with Wendy Upton and John O'Hara making your pizzas on Friday nights back in the kitchen. Sometimes we did 150 pizzas, and I got to go out and socialize with the customers. That was pretty cool. When John and

Joyce O'Hara and Bob and Kathy Reiswig were the owners, I was a waiter at the Saloon. Most of the tables were outside. All night I was taking orders and going back and forth. Your hours go by so quickly that way. But I'm so tall, and my hearing wasn't so good, and I had to get down to take the orders, and people were tripping over my feet. But I did like waitering. That was pretty cool.

Now I'm a dishwasher one night a week at Home Ranch Bottoms. That's pretty nice, too, socializing one night a week. I've always got tomorrow off. And I get a smashburger and a drink, and they pay me pretty good. And I get to be the old-timer who comes out. I wear an apron usually. They all think I'm the cook. No, I'm just the dishwasher.

Ray Brown: Do you know the history of the old cabin on the hill at the hairpin? Whose cabin was that?

Rob: It was a family from Lakeside, religious in nature. It was a retreat for many years. When I first opened the door, it hadn't been lived in for a decade. It was packrat piss, and the packrats had chewed it up. There was a thing in our childhood called Pringles potato chips.

Lorna: They still have them.

Rob: Do they?

Audience member: You need to get to town more!

Rob: In this cabin were all the round cylinders that Pringles came in. They were all full of apricot seeds. Back then, there was something healthy people said that you could extract from apricot seeds. But the packrats had gotten into all of them. So, I built a big fire pit outside the cabin and tossed in beds and everything. It was a retreat for people from Lakeside to come on the weekends and maybe have a religious ceremony of some kind. But the two lots that I bought next to that, I wasn't going to buy because I'd just come back from Alaska, and I'd lost everything the summer before. I said to myself, "I need a cabin more than I need more acres." When she wrote me a letter, I said, "I need a cabin. Thank you for inquiring." But then I looked on the plat map when I went down to Kalispell a month later, and those two lots were the last two private properties before a thousand feet of Forest Service, and I said I'd be a fool not to buy those. I ended up buying them. For me, being a property owner, it's kind of all by happenstance. Like coming up the road to see Montana and getting into 20 acres. I've never been in a position to buy anything on my own. My place in Baja that I have, I started with an old windsurfing buddy. With two of us paying the price I was able to get into everything that I've gotten into. It's always been a partnership. Luckily, I have firefighting buddies that never bought anything. Now they're living in Redding, or wherever, trying to live on their pensions as their rents go up, and they've got no assets to pull on.

Ray Brown: Another question. Are you still a Mormon?

Rob: Well, officially yes. You know, I was brought up in the new neighborhood of Compton, where everybody was a different religion. My father came from a Jewish background. My grandfather came from Romania. We weren't a religious family, but we were encouraged to go to the different religions. We had Catholics across the street, and I'd go to catechism with them, to see what that was all about. Methodists. Once in awhile we'd go to church on Sunday. My mom liked to sing, so she was in the choir at the Methodist church. I sometimes said, "Mom, I like mowing lawns more than I like going to church. Can I not just kind of commune with nature by mowing the lawn today?"

Getting back to whether I'm still a Mormon, when I got out of the Army and was married to the lady I got engaged to ten months earlier when I went in, I was willing to be that guy. But as the counterculture thing kind of happened, and I was over on this side of the freeway trying to be that guy—you know Mormon men, you don't just go to church on Sundays. You have families you go see a couple of times a month. I liked that part of it. They're there to see if there's anything you can do to help. Can the church help you in any way? But when I would ask questions like, "How come the black man can't hold the priesthood in the Mormon church?" This was in 1971, and the civil rights movement was still pretty strong. And my wife would go to the library in her head of what she'd been told, and she would say, "The church says it's not their time yet." I was a young man, just trying to get out of childhood. I was 19 or 20, picking my direction. The other thing I didn't like about the Mormon church was they say that they're the true church. Does that mean everybody else is wrong? So, it was me having a problem with that.

Here I was, a special forces Green Beret, airborne dude, just trying to stay out of Vietnam, but I was losing buddies every year. I eventually walked away from that marriage in the spring of 1971. I called my commanding officer and said, "Sir, I'm going through some difficult times right now. Can I just go away and not have to do war games in the summer and come each month? Can I just go away?" He said, "Son, you've got a six-year military obligation, and we're going to hold you to it." I said, "Thank you, Sir." I then went to the travel office on my campus and bought a ticket to Europe. Before I bought that ticket, I called Mom. "Mom, I've left Claudia, and I just need to get away." She said, "We'll haul the trailer up to Yosemite, and you can stay up there for the summer." I said, "No, Mom, I really need to get away." So, I bought a ticket to Europe, a four-month charter, and I couldn't come home for four months. Off to the airport I went; a friend took me. I got on the plane with \$125. My dad said, "I know you don't have much money, so wire me and I'll send you some money if need be."

When they closed the door on the airplane and started backing up, I started hyperventilating. I was walking away from my marriage, I was AWOL from the Army reserves, I had \$125 in my pocket and my Boy Scout rucksack on my back. What am I doing? But that night we landed in London. I got a bed and breakfast, and that night during my sleep I had a dream that I was in Europe. When I woke up in London, I said, "Wow, it's not a dream." You hear stories like that, and you know those are tough decisions to make. But back then they were easy, because it was what I wanted and needed, and it was the direction I wanted to go. And it all got me to here. I haven't mentioned John Denver's song have I? I did a little bit. There was one lyric in it, and maybe I'll close on this. There was one lyric that I kind of kept trying to wrap my mind around. It was "Come on home to a place I've never been." What does that look like? It looks like that.

That's kind of the essence of my happiness, having gone with my desires, no matter how stupid the decision might be at that time. But it ended up getting me to here and living amongst such people as all of you. What more can we ask for.

I might talk just a little bit about the things I have on display here. Carpentry tools, obviously. The saw that cut me, way back when. The Pulaski, my firefighting tool, for digging and cutting roots. A draw knife to smooth out those handrails that I make out of pine poles, take the skin off first. The radio. I don't know what you guys listen to, but I listen to CKUA, a 99-year-old station out of Edmonton, Alberta. If you've never listened to it, for me living up here it's everything. A lot of people down in Polebridge don't get it, because they're too close to the mountains. But here, with aluminum foil, I get it. For a guy who lives by himself, you hit the radio and you've got something.

Jack McFarland: Is there a John Denver tape in that thing?

Rob: I wish there were. I could play it for you, if you guys would like to hear that song. I was going to play it, but then I thought “Giddy up, Hoss.” It’s a great song. All his songs were great. But that one, talk about why are they tearing down two mountains and putting up two more? Colorado was supposed to have the 1976 Olympics, but they put a referendum on the ballot and people said, “No no no, we don’t want to tear down two mountains and put up two more.” But there was carpenter work. In Steamboat, when I showed up in the 1972, they were building the resort pretty heavy. There was work, but they eventually backed out of the whole thing.

Ray: You can stream CKUA on your phone.

Rob: The Uncle Sam hat—you know I’ve been that guy forever. Before I was Uncle Sam some of those firefighters, if we were in town, would have a float in the 4th of July parade. One year we did the Polebridge Ghetto Blasters. We all carried ghetto blasters. We had the Neil Young song Freedom, and we all had to punch in at the same time. We’d go “Five-four-three-two-one...” My firefighting pack was always ready—boots.



Rob in the 4th of July parade, 2024

One of my fun things here, I do my laundry down by the creek, but this is my laundry tub. I see people driving by and they slow down. They see me out there sloshing with my tub. I can hear them say, “He does it the old-fashioned way.” But, for a guy who lives off the grid I have the creek here to get my water. I have a clothes line to hang my clothes. It’s how I do that part of my life. Here are my snowshoes. After the 1988 fire when I stayed the winter up here I used them. They’re nice ones. They’re made in Columbia Falls, and you can see how the curvature is. It really captures the snow when you step in it, versus the flatter ones, so they were very supportive when I would get into fresh snow.

Ray Brown: Is that a bicycle tire they’re made of?

Rob: Maybe not a bike tire but a car tire it's made out of. It has the thickness of a car tire. But they were really fun to use. Here's bear spray, of course. This is my latest thing—my mosquito zapper. I told you we took road trips from LA to Chicago. We had a 1954 Ford station wagon. My brothers and I were in the back seat. Mom and Dad were in the front. One of my early memories of adventure is once in a while one of us would get to sit up in the shotgun seat as we drove on Route 66. Now 100 years old, the Mother Road of America. The one I hitchhiked in 1967.

I remember when I was like 8 or 10 and got to ride in the shotgun seat, the Ford had a big dashboard. I remember resting my elbows and looking out that window, seeing all this just going by. My dad would say, "Robert, keep an eye out for Indians over those ridges." This was like in New Mexico. What I didn't realize at the time, and on my bicycle I didn't get this, but driving I got what I called the blurred peripheral. It's a subliminal thing. When I feel it, it means I'm going that way. That's the adventure in me. I want to go out and see it. So, when I'm on my road trips to Baja over the past 30 years, and I see this, it's like I'm going, and I like going. And we have cars that get you there. You just sit there and take it all in.

When we'd get to Illinois where my grandparents lived, we went up to Chicago. [Looking at 76 soda bottle] My uncle had a soda beverage company called The Spirit of 76. It was only in the Midwest. We didn't have it in California. So, when we were ready to go back to California my uncle would give us a big case of 76. This was just when Bubble Up and Sprite were coming out. This is one of the oldest artifacts that I own.

This plaque is the special forces insignia. My father was so proud of the son that got his beret and the wings on his chest, so he carved this for me, and he put my photo in his wallet. But when I became a conscientious objector the photo came out of the wallet. But you know, we can talk about politics, and we can talk about wars. What was that war [Vietnam] all about? And why were we having situations like the My Lai massacre? To be part of an organization that was doing that was something I just couldn't suffer, even though I was so proud of what I had gone through, because I didn't want to go through it. I didn't want to jump out of airplanes. My eyes were always closed. My first jump, eyes closed, out I went from the C-130. You open your eyes and what do you see? The land is going that way, and you and the plane are going this way, but he starts to pull away from you. That's the first thing I remember about jumping.

Anyway, my cabin will be open for people to come in after I finish my talk. You'll see many carvings on the wall. My dad was a carver and loved to do it. It's still pretty precious, even though it was kind of the beginning of him and I going different directions.

Audience member: What's with the tequila and the spoons?

Rob: And what's with the Mexican dude in the background. That's Baja Hoss, just keeping an eye on me on this side of the border, wanting to see how we do things here, and making sure we get back there.

Last night was the first night I could hear critters wanting to come in. It's that time of year, a little cool. It sounded bigger than a mouse, like a packrat, ripping away at some insulation up in the roof. So, this trap was the last prop that I put on display. Tonight I'll bait it.

Bonnie Hankey: They love peanut butter.

Rob: It's just a part of living here. This cabin is the old Ben Maes cabin. It was built by Ben Maes in 1909 over in Hidden Meadow in the Park. He was 32 years old when he came here from the Netherlands. I was 32 when I showed up in Polebridge, so as I read his history I kind of relate

to him. In your young 30s you should be out doing some exciting things. New places. But Frank Evans and Floyd Luke, one of his boys, tore the cabin apart in 1968 or 1969 and brought it over here. The front piece that is the kitchen was added on 1979. The foundation was poured in 1972. So, it sat out here as a pile of logs for a number of years before they put it up. It's the essence of our North Fork life—off the grid.

The ghetto blaster, over there in my solar chair—I have lights that are solar lights. There's little thing that I can use to charge my phone and my tablet and my other apparatuses.

Ray Brown: Didn't you have an episode, I think it was in Peru, where you got all your stuff stolen?

Rob: In 1987, I went down to Peru. I had met this beautiful lady where I was camped down by the airport. I finally started staying in that campground that's on LaSalle Road that's still there. Because I was missing fire calls from up here. In the fall I had a letter from this lady saying, "Would you like to go to Quito and study Spanish together?" I got out the map of Mexico, looking for Quito, but then I saw it was in South America. Wow! I've never been there, and it was always where I wanted to go. We rendezvoused in Quito, at 9500 feet. We studied Spanish for a month, and then we went up to Colombia and saw everything. When we got back to Quito she wanted to go see jungles. But I wanted to stay in the Andes. The year before I had gone to Asia, and I had seen jungles. I was ready for the Andes. So, we went our different ways at that point.

As I headed down to Peru from Ecuador, everybody was telling me to be careful. They're going to rip you off so easily down there. Be careful. The first night the bus got to the seaport town in Peru, I got a hotel room. The next day I was going to take a bus up into the Andes to a town called Huaraz. It's in the northern Cordillera Blanca, they call it. Peaks up to 20,000 feet. Waiting to catch the bus the next morning I was sitting on my pack, with my bedroll over my shoulder. When the bus came people were throwing their packs up onto the top of the bus. I wasn't wanting mine on top. So, I got off my pack just for a few seconds and looked into the windows of the bus to see how much room there was at the feet. There was room for my pack, but when I turned around my pack was gone.

People were pointing, so I ran a block one way—nobody. I ran a block that way, nothing. So, I realized I had lost it, and I wasn't going to get it back. I could either get a hotel and go down to one of the second-hand stores to see if somebody had sold it and buy it back, or I could get on the bus and go up to the Andes. Up to the Andes I went. I had my bedroll, my Nikon camera, and my little fanny pack. I got to Huaraz, and I was buying t-shirts, toothbrushes, hairbrushes, all that stuff. You could buy alpaca sweaters for \$5. Now I had duffle bags, and I was buying sweaters for everybody.

I left Huaraz a week later, and I was headed to Lima to catch a flight to go see Machu Pichu. As I got off the bus in Lima I was walking with duffle bags, with a pack on my back and my fanny pack and my camera. I walked by a couple of men sitting on a seat in a park. They had suits and ties and attaché cases. As I walked by, they pulled in behind me. I walked down a block, wondering why they pulled in behind me. I stepped to the side, looking at my guidebook or something. They walked by, and I thought I was just being paranoid. You just got ripped off a couple of weeks ago, and you're paranoid. I then got to Huaral, Peru. I went in, took off all my stuff and put it against the wall. Red fanny pack with my Nikon on top. I went and sat at the table where the lady was going to help me with my ticket. I looked back a few minutes later, and I saw the guy who was sitting on the bench now standing next to my stuff. I'm thinking wow, what a

coincidence. A few seconds later I hear the front door open. I look under my arm, and I see the color red. Under his arm was my fanny pack and my Nikon.

In slow motion, I pushed back and turned. He saw me, and he knew that I saw him. I chased him down the street about two blocks. Finally, he dropped it and just let it go. Now, I've got it. I was tired of being ripped off. I started growing a beard, trying to look unfriendly. "Don't screw with me!"

Anyway, South America was a challenge. You can be at 16,000 feet and the snow level is still above you. And you know, Ecuador is called that because the equator passes through there. The peak I climbed at 19,970 feet, called Cotopaxi, was pretty much a walk-up with snowshoes and crampons and a little bit of rope work at the top. But things have changed in South America. Now you read all about Peru and Ecuador and Colombia, and the drug cartels and violence. As I said earlier, timing is everything. That was also the time to go, when it was safe. Or bicycling in Los Angeles and being told to come home by dinner. It was a safe time to be doing such stuff. To be born at that time, in that place, and to live all these stories that I've now finished telling you, thank you for coming.

Jack McFarland: You don't get off that easy. Can you please connect the dots between getting on a plane and going AWOL in Europe and getting the big D for discharge?

Rob: Yes. Briefly, I was in Spain, almost out of money. I sent my dad a wire, "Send some money, Dad." He wired back, "Son, before I send you some money, please read this letter." It was a letter from my commanding officer. It was to my father, and it said, "Mr. Fisher, if your son is not back within two weeks, we're going to activate him and send him to Vietnam." That was the threat. I had a 16-week charter, and this was only week 5. I wasn't going to go home. I told him, "I just got here. I'm not coming home. Send me some money."

One thing led to another, from Gibraltar you can look across and see the Atlas mountains of another continent. Luck had it that I met these two U.S. discharged service members who had gotten discharged in Stuttgart, Germany. They bought a Volkswagen bus, and they were cruising down the coast of Spain. They were going to go over to Morocco, and I said, "Wow, I would love to come." They said, "Chip in on gas, hop in."

So, off to the province where the ferry comes ashore. Morocco is right next door. I had a little bit of long hair at the time, and they didn't want to let me come in. But I rearranged some money in my wallet, and that was the end of that. It was a counterculture time. I was into smoking some stuff at that time. Morocco was a place where it was easy to get. We bought a big knob of hash and went down to the beach and just smoked and smoked. We tried to use it up before we headed east, because we were going to go across the Atlas mountains all the way to Tunisia. That's what we did, in about four weeks' time.

Before I got to Spain I met this beautiful lady named Neliga up in Holland. I told her, "When I come back from Spain I want to spend some time with you." Once we got to Tunisia, we took the ferry to Sicily. Those guys went off to Hungary or Yugoslavia, and I hitchhiked back to Holland and found Neliga. We lived together for two months up in Rotterdam. She was the one. She was going to come back to America with me eventually, not right then but soon after I got back. So, I came back. I called my commanding officer and said, "Sir, I'm back, but I'm a different person than I was when I left, and I'd like to apply for a conscientious objector discharge." He said, "Okay, we'll help you, but you have to go through the process."

You first have to see an Army psychiatrist. They want to know if you're crazy. He said, "Hell, no! The ones who want to stay in; they're the crazy ones." That's what he said. Then you go to an Army chaplain, and he wants to know your religious convictions—do you hunt, do you fish, etc.? Then you meet with a board of officers that fire questions at you. One of them was, "What would you have done if Hitler had invaded the West Coast?" I said, "If I was a married man, I would have headed to high ground until I couldn't go any higher. Then I would turn around and defend myself." That was the beginning of them accepting that this guy was a conscientious objector. That's how I left Southern California, with three big Ds. Does that answer your question? I'm proud to wear it 60 years later. I just couldn't be a part of that lore.

Jack: Yes. Hoss, when Lois writes your story it should be entitled *The Beautiful Women I Have Known*.

Lois: Another question: Did you know Frank Evans? What's your history with the family?

Rob: My time knowing Frank was minimal. I bought in 1980, but really came in 1981. He departed us in 1982. I didn't have much time, and I had no connection with the Panorama Ranch at that time.

Audience member: Wasn't Kent Johnson here, before you?

Rob: He was, and he was the one who they didn't want to have anymore. I hadn't met him, I don't think, in the year that I had been here.

Lois: From Frank's columns in the newspapers, I have his story of the buildings that he brought and put on the property. And here are some photos of the Quinn cabin that burned in 1977. I'll pass them around. Frank says, "People collect all sorts of things. I've collected cabins, but I guess I didn't start soon enough. The cabins of the homesteaders are a piece of yesterday that have stood so many years, and one hates to see them sink into the ground, but it is still better to see them decay in dignity than to see them destroyed by fire.

"I have several originals. I live in the cabin that Chauncey Beebe built; it's roomy and well made. It was built in 1916. [Actually, it is the cabin that was rebuilt after the original Beebe cabin burned down in 1916, and the neighbors came and helped rebuild. Frank was living in the rebuilt cabin.] My boys and I moved and reconstructed the Quinn cabin that [Fred] Big Nose Johnson built. [He lived out at the end of Trail Creek Road.] It burned down several years ago. Then Floyd and I moved the Maes cabin (built in 1909) when the Park was going to destroy it. Last fall I moved and reconstructed the Fisher barn from up Moose Creek, but it is yet without shakes and the Maes cabin has not been completed. Then last fall I bought the border cabin built by Austin Weikert in the 1930s. My log tool shed was built by Tom Peterson, and I have another small building that was built by Archibald Hanes. They are all on foundations now and should last many years. The combined age of the four big cabins is almost 250 years. They deserve to stand as a tribute to the old timers that came to this beautiful, but cruel valley. They knew hardship, but maybe didn't recognize it because they hadn't experienced our present lifestyle. It has been a privilege to have known some of those folks."

Jerry, you and Sally lived in the Quinn cabin.

Jerry: Yes, in 1974. That was our first winter up here. You could see through the ceiling. We had twin down sleeping bags we zipped together.

Lois: And in the evening Frank would imbibe and come over to visit.

Jerry: He always came over at dinner time, and he always had the buzz.

Lois: So, yes, there's a lot of history to this property.

Ray: The barn that's at Ray Hart's place now, that was the Fisher barn, right?

Lois: Yes.

Ray: Jerry, do you remember, there was a little cabin behind, back in the woods, that he would rent out?

Lois: Wasn't that where Marie Price Peterson lived after her husband died? She lived in a little cabin on the road going down toward the Merc. I don't know whether Frank bought it or built it.

Audience member: What happened to the border cabin that Austin Weikert built?

Ray: It's at Ray Hart's place, too.

John Stone: I have another question. I know you've been talking for a long time. You've told me a lot of stories about your dad, and you are your father's son. It's a story about your family, because your whole family was involved in the RV business, and your dad was a very creative and genius guy. I always loved hearing about that part of your childhood.

Rob: Yes, my father, among other jobs—we loved camping, and we were all tall, and we couldn't get a trailer that we could stand in. So, he created a trailer called The Tall Texan. He was born in Brownsville, Texas. In our backyard we built the first one. The roof went up, and it was all screened in. The sides opened up to be double beds on both sides, cantilevered out over the wheel well. You pulled the roof up, the bed down, the sides out, and then the last went up like that. He met a guy who had money and liked the idea, so he got a factory going, the O.K. Fisher Trailer Company. My brothers and I would set up a booth every year at the state fair in Pomona. And he got into building campers, because folks were just starting to buy campers for their pickups in the 1960s. My brothers and I wore cowboy boots, bolo ties, Stetson hats, and we had flyers for The Tall Texan. We'd walk around passing them out.

Lois: You just had two brothers?

Rob: Yes, two older brothers, both still alive. Bruce, the oldest at 84, and Dick at 82. I'm still in my 70s. I was supposed to be Roberta. Back then you couldn't tell ahead of time, so when I showed up in Compton and had that thing dangling down between my legs, they said, "I guess that's not Roberta." My dad's name was Oscar, and he hadn't named his boys Oscar Jr., so he thought this was his last chance. My mom said, "No, no, no. Roberta will be Robert." But I've often thought, I could have been O.J.

My parents eventually sold real estate. My dad was a broker, and my mom was a salesperson. O.K. Fisher Realty. My dad was a talker; my brothers are talkers. We're all talkers. When I went to college to do film my mom said, "Robert, it doesn't matter what you're studying. You're a Fisher, and you're going to be a salesman." And in some ways I have been. But a suit and tie and all of that is why the John Denver song appealed. I didn't want to do the suit and tie and freeway traffic thing.

Lois: When you were a firefighter, did you ever have any serious burns, or lung damage from smoke inhalation?

Rob: No, but you know I've had lung X-rays, just to kind of keep on top of that. Everything looks good, but I know how prevalent that is. Especially for people who are in the interface area where communities burn, and there are so many more chemicals present when structures are burning, and we're exposed to that.

Lois: Yes, like in Spokane this year. Can you imagine?

Rob: I think that's probably the end of my story. Thanks, everyone! I look forward to Larry Wilson's session on September 2nd, and hope to see you all there. Feel free to come in and go through the cabin. I'll show you whatever you want to see.