

Maureen and Mike

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**Oral History Number: 422-089**  
**Interviewee: Claudia Kux**  
**Interviewer: Suzanne Vernon**  
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Suzanne Vernon: —you were surprised when they told you.

Claudia Kux. I was very surprised. [laughs] Nobody had told me anything.

SV: All of a sudden it's 4th of July—

CK: And I'm at the end of the parade taking pictures for the parade, and suddenly they told me to take a picture of this next float that will be coming through which was Neil's truck. As I was focusing in on it, I saw my name there. That's when I knew they had done that. They told me to get on the float for the last 100 feet or whatever. [laughs] It was funny. They enjoyed that very much.

SV: Was it a good surprise, or were you just shocked.

CK: I was shocked. I was...I was, yeah, I was surprised that's all. I'm one of those people that likes to know what's going to happen, and so it just took me aback. But the thought was very, very nice and the work that they put into it was very, very nice. [laughs]

SV: How long have you been working for Swan Ecosystem Center [SEC] as a volunteer?

CK: I think I've been here since about 1997. The latter part of 1997. It was really as an extension of the Ad Hoc Committee that I had gone to a few of those meetings, and this really seemed like a good, good thing to me to try to bridge the gap between people in the valley and to try to get everyone on the same page or as close as we could to try to help [unintelligible].

SV: Tell me a little more about the Ad Hoc Committee, just briefly.

CK: My impressions of it? I wasn't one of the core members, but I would go to a meeting occasionally. You know, I honestly can't remember what meeting it was—what the topic was, unless it was in fact Swan Ecosystem Center that got me really interested—but I thought this was a very good way for people to be able to come and express their views. I was extremely impressed with Alan Taylor's (?) ability to keep people on an even keel so that we actually could be fruitful in our discussions. That impressed me a great deal. So it was something I wanted to be a part of.

SV: The Swan Ecosystem Center kind of grew out of that?

CK: I think so, yes. I think so, yeah.

SV: [unintelligible].

CK: I think so too. I mean it was some of the same people and wanting to somehow have a way to communicate with the Forest Service is my understanding. That the Forest Service was doing their thing and the people in the valley did their thing, and there wasn't much communication between them.

SV: Can you remember what the first project was that you worked on for Swan Ecosystem Center?

CK: No. I can't. I came in here with the idea of doing art because that was my major in college—art and art history—and I figured I would be doing some of the exhibits, which I did a couple and I helped on some, but I'm a person who likes to work alone on a lot of things. I thought I'd be doing art. I thought I could contribute that, and I thought maybe I could contribute some writing. I ended up on the people end of it and became very involved in the visitors center and, became the chairman of the visitor's center. It was a whole adjustment for me, which I liked. I mean I like that people, and I like being alone. [laughs] It's sometimes one and sometimes the other. I got involved very, seemed to me, very heavily right away, and then just kept doing it. So really my focus when I first came in was to try to do some projects with the emerging visitors center we wanted to do, and also to do things at the front desk. I probably started doing more things at the front desk and evolved into this section of it, which was really where I was more comfortable. I became much more interested in the workings of volunteerism, but have not been totally satisfied with the direction that's gone.

SV: Explain...What do you mean by [unintelligible]?

CK: When I volunteered, it was a very simple thing. You know, a person is interested in something they go and volunteer. I didn't think about anything else evolved around it. Then I started going to classes and various workshops from National Association of Interpreters and other groups, and the conversation kept coming up—the topic kept coming up—there was always a part in there about volunteerism and how you have to build...There's books on it. Volunteers—how you build a working group, how you encourage them, how you organize them. It's a whole art in itself, and it was just a real eye opener for me. It was like, oh my goodness, people don't just come in and volunteer and then you put them in. People need motivation, they need encouragement, they need appreciation, they need to be able to fit in where they feel the best. The thing I'm noticing the most, I think, is that there needs to be a continuation...Continuing program's not even the word I'm looking for. [pauses] I don't know what the word I'm looking for—

SV: Continuity.

CK: Continuity, where...yeah. So that they always know...There's an advocate for them. There needs to be somebody who's an advocate for the volunteers and someone who also organizes them and just gives them a base. There needs to be a feeling of community within volunteers. I'm not sure how to do that. I've kind of gotten away from that end of it.

SV: [unintelligible].

CK: Right and those were all...when you volunteer for church or you volunteer for teaching something at the school or you volunteer for any number of things which I've done—I used to help build cabins on the Appalachian Trail—it was different somehow but you still had this feeling...You had groups where you belonged and you felt part of it, and you were encouraged to feel a part of it. There were programs especially for you. That's something that they seem to emphasize. It's very interesting. You could you could definitely have a full time job in there, and people do have full-time jobs being volunteer coordinators and just coordinating.

SV: You seem to have a full-time job just volunteering. That seems to be the impression that we all get.

CK: Sometimes it seems that way more than others. Yeah, yeah. I spend a day here. Sometimes I spend more than a day here—a week. But it's never off my mind, and I'm doing things at home and I'm reading things at home and I'm typing up things at home. It is. It has become a very integral part of my life.

SV: Do you feel that you [unintelligible]?

CK: Oh yes. Oh definitely. [laughs]

SV: What's the best part?

CK: There's so many different ways I've benefited. One was learning more and more about the different parts of our community and the different people and getting to know them. When you sit down and talk to them and you are in programs together with them, you can't beat that experience. To understand more about the people you live with. On a professional level, I've been able to go to many workshops, and in fact was able to get my certificate for interpretive guide because of the Ecosystem Center and how that experience—be able to put some of it in action. So I've been able to test out some exhibit ideas and just do things on the trail. There's just been so many different things. Not to mention the programs themselves, like this history program we just went on. The bus tour. It's an incredible thing to learn an awful lot for someone like me who wasn't raised in this area and came in wanting to know.

SV: [unintelligible].

CK: Twenty-two years.

SV: Where did you live before and why did you come here?

CK: Why did I come to Montana? I lived in Washington, D.C. before working for National Wildlife Federation, and that's where I met Marty and we were both working on the same outdoor education program for a while. He had known Jim Busch, the owner of the Rustics Company—the maker of the Rustics Company. He had known him when he was a young person, was mowing his lawn back in New York. So when Marty would come out, part of our jobs with the National Wildlife was to have different large workshops around the country in the summer and one in the winter, and he would sometimes stop here then after one of the workshops in Colorado or California and visit with Jim and hike with Ed Foss and do all that. He loved the place, and he came back one year and just told me he had a job lined up and property bought and he'd be moving the next year. That was the first time I heard of Condon, Montana. [laughs] I'd been telling him to move west because I loved Arizona. That's where I'd been before Washington, D.C., and I was thinking warm—warm West. But I'd also had a secret longing in my heart for a long time to live in a log building in the woods, so turned out just fine, but it took us a while to get it all worked out.

SV: What a beautiful story. [unintelligible].

CK: Yeah, it does. Oh yeah.

SV: Why have you chosen to volunteer for Swan Ecosystem Center?

CK: I think two reasons...well, more than two reasons I'm sure. But first and foremost probably I'm very interested in the outdoors and the ecosystem and the workings of the naturalist end of it and the impacts. Maybe impacts...I don't like that word as much as influences. The influences that the land have on the people and that the people have on the land. Secondly, I have a very strong sense of community, of people together, whether it's an official community in a town or whether it's just the way that people work together. I just have a strong feeling that that's important. I wanted to be able to help that if possible.

SV: [unintelligible].

CK: At least for me to overlook the whole picture, I think it is. I personally felt there was a lot more division when I first came here in the different ways of life. I'm not sure. To be perfectly honest, I'm not sure if it's just as deep and people are just better at hiding it—not talking about it—or if people have really...I certainly have never felt any great hostility towards me, and I feel that people try very hard for the most part to listen. They may say what they feel about you when you're not there, but I find that people in the Swan Valley community are much more open to being good neighbors and trying to get along with each other than I've seen in other places. I think so. That's one thing that I really like about the Swan. Gives me hope. [laughs]

SV: Had you ever worked in [unintelligible]?

CK: Yes. Yeah. I lived in a very, very, very small town, a mining town, outside of Silver City, New Mexico for a while. That was my first experience with small towns, and they were in the depths of a mining strike and it was a real...I think that was the first time it made me want to not take different people for granted. I didn't want to take people for granted, but I wanted to get to see. I wanted to get to understand where other people were coming from. I'm fascinated by people—all people, all cultures. Everybody has something. I don't care who they are, how disagreeable they may be, everybody has something of worth and something that we can all gain from.

SV: You've been here since 1997 as a volunteer, putting a lot of [unintelligible].

CK: Especially when I got involved at the board. That was a lot more.

SV: When was that?

CK: I was on the board for [pauses] four years maybe, something like that, and I just left this last March.

SV: Do you think you could describe in your own words what your own vision for Swan Ecosystem Center is? Or maybe even...I don't know if I know how to ask this question, but I'm thinking that you feel so strongly about building community, and as a volunteer [unintelligible], what's your vision of what it could look like? What is it that you're working towards as a community? Is it relationships, is it tangible things? [unintelligible].

CK: For me, it's a combination. Personally, I'm probably as involved in relationships as I am, but I think relationships are the way and maybe the only way that you can really effectively accomplish tangible things. If you don't have respect for each other, if you don't care for each other, if you don't give a rip what your neighbor has or doesn't have or needs or doesn't need—and I think that's a big one. What do they need? What's important to them? If you don't care about that, then you're not going to reach a really healthy community in a tangible sense. I don't think. So I think that's the most important thing for me is just keeping people...not keeping people, helping people to be civil to each other, to really understand each other. I think it's very important, and I have seen that happening. People who move in, who don't know anything about logging are learning about logging and what it takes to log and why people do it and what they need to have a lifestyle. There are people here—and I give them a lot of credit because I don't know if I could be as generous in spirit—there are people who have lived here all their lives, or close to all their lives, who see all of us coming in clueless as to their way of life and they have been—many of them—very generous to teach us. I think Neil. Neil comes to the top of my mind because he's the one I've been involved with. There's so many people in this valley who, if you just ask and if you're sincerely interested, they will teach you, and they're willing to listen to us. Again, I'm sure they mumble and grumble sometimes, but they're willing

to see, well, maybe we have something to offer to. We wouldn't be here if we didn't have some common interests.

I don't want to see this community divided when there's so much of benefit. We have so much here. I think everyone should be required to go somewhere else for a year, and they would come back here and they would realize how blessed we are. We have so much here, and instead of fighting about it, I would like to see us making it a healthy place for everybody. [pauses] Isn't that a speech? [laughs] I need a soapbox.

SV: I think everybody who volunteers as much time as you do, and there several in the community [unintelligible]. [unintelligible section].

CK: Right, right. I do. Yeah, I do. Those other things.

SV: What motivates you?

CK: Wanting to give back to something that's given to me. If I can do anything to make things better, I'd like to make them better for either one individual or for a group. Feeling that that's important. That's the way I've been raised. That's what I believe, that we're here to not just be thinking about our own needs, but we're here to be helping other people. And not just people. In my case, I feel very strongly we're here to help. Well, we're supposed to be stewards of god's creation. That's what I feel. We're not just supposed to be users; we're supposed to be stewards. That that doesn't mean that you put it all in a box and don't ever touch it, but you use it wisely and you appreciate it and you give back where you can. That's how I feel. I'm very, very...I'm just very thankful to be here, and I'm always in awe of what God has given us here. It's amazing. And that's true anywhere you go. Every place you go it's just such an incredible gift. I don't want to waste it.

SV: You've been a keen observer of the natural world.

CK: I've loved it ever since I was old enough to walk. Yeah. I was always out...At the time when I was growing up, we were just in a new little sub division way outside of Chicago, and it was all prairie. Basically it was all prairie, and I was always in the prairie and climbing trees. My mother was always dismayed because I was always bringing home snakes in my pocket, and all the neighborhood kids gave me all the baby rabbits and birds they found. I was doing that from...She was trying to raise me to be a young lady, and I was out playing with the animals in the trees and just enjoying nature. That just never left me. That's where I'm most comfortable is just outside in nature. I have a great respect for it, and you can't—I don't think anyway—you can't study nature and not just become more and more amazed at the complexity and the detail. Just to have a little hummingbird in your hand, it's just incredible. They're such a work of art. I can't see ever getting tired of it, and I'd like to share that with other people. For me I feel like I'm a success if somebody can come in here to the ecosystem center and go away knowing something and seeing something that they hadn't seen before that's going to stay with them.

That to me is a success. You can get real excited with it. That's why it's always fun to work with kids because of course kids...Well, we learn as much from the kids as the kids learn from us, I'm sure.

SV: [unintelligible] working with a group?

CK: Oh yes. Oh yes. And we'll get that kind of thing. Jennifer gets that sort of feedback on her exhibits. I get that sort of feedback. "Wow! We didn't know that before." You get notes from people months later, and you get people that come back again. One thing that's made us very happy is that we have summer homes people and people who live here now bringing their relatives and their friends. That's kind of what it's all about. I guess for myself, I focus more on the naturalist end of it and the community end of it than the relationship between us and the Forest Service. I think that's important. I'm not saying that...That relationship is definitely important, but I'm focusing more on education and making it alive to the people that come through here or live here.

SV: What kinds of questions did you think I was going to ask you?

CK: Well, this seems pretty good to me. [laughs] What I've done, what I do. That's pretty much it.

SV: When you say your background in college was in New York?

CK: I had started out in art history and art—studio art. But while I was doing that, I got a job at the university to help pay for my college. First it was with water resources and hydrology department, and that moved into watershed management. While I was working there, I realized that what I was really interested in was with natural stuff. So I got involved in what was called the desert biome program there, which was not unlike what we do with some of our projects up here now, trying to get the larger ecosystem and all the things that work in it in the desert and how everything works and what's related to what and what affects what. There was no going back. I finished my degree in art history because I was too close to finishing, but I knew that's what I wanted to do. When the job opportunity came up for National Wildlife—

SV: You said that was in [unintelligible].

CK: Started out in information. Actually, I started out in the journalism end of it. I did write press releases and things like that, but it was more keeping track of news, keeping track of issues for the National Wildlife Federation and TV spots—working on TV spots and things like that. Then when the opportunity was open to work in what we call the conservation summit program, which was a family-oriented part of the outdoor education program, I snatched it because that really appealed to me. I don't think I've ever worked so hard in my life as I did in that program. We were working...During the times when the programs were being put together and when they were operating in the summer, you just didn't sleep. You just worked because it



was the before the day of computers and we had to do all of the scheduling by hand and make sure everybody's classes fit. We had to do all the registration and all that and get all the faculty lined up. We had somewhere between 400 and 700 people at each one of these conferences. It was great. It was probably one of the best experiences of my life. So I think it just sort of came naturally. I needed a break when it came out here, but then it came naturally to get back into that. Just to want to help people who were interested, to expand their knowledge and appreciation of what's around them.

SV: [unintelligible].

CK: I have for a long time. I'm kind of weaning myself away from that, but I've been a part-time employee—Fern's assistant—for, I would have to say, close to 15 years I think. That was great. I love to read. In fact, the worst problem with working in the library is that you find entirely too many books that you want to read that you were blissfully ignorant of before and all of a sudden you want to read all this stuff. But it's a wonderful job to have because you know what's available too and all the new things that come out.

SV: It's part of that information dissemination.

CK: Right. It is. It is, and it's part of sharing with people. So you're right. They aren't that dissimilar. In fact here, I do all the book ordering because I like that part of it too.

When I first moved here, my very first job when I moved here I was working with a brick mason. I was fresh out of the office. I'd had my office and secretary and all that, and I said, "I'm going to go out and be a woods woman," so I could do anything sort of attitude. I mean to tell you... [laughs] I worked with Reinhold Lindner (?) and his brother Waldie and their little crew, and my very first job was carrying all the blocks for the foundation for Tranquility—5,800-some blocks. I learned to have a great appreciation for the work that they do and that they can have it. I don't need to prove I'm so strong because it's about killed me, but I did it off and on for three years. It was a wonderful experience. That's what I found out about living here. You do what is available. I really should be doing something for money right now. I've been playing and I really need to do something, but there're so many opportunities—some of which you never would try, but that's what's here and so you do it. By golly, you find out you can, and everything you do gives you an appreciation for the people in that line of work or that way of life.

SV: There was something that I thought of as you were talking about...What did your friends and family think when you moved out here? [unintelligible].

CK: They thought to themselves, 'There she goes again.' [laughs] Because I left home as soon as I got out of high school and I went to college in various places, and I was always out for adventure. I always wanted to try new experiences so it was like, oh well, she's done it again.

SV: How important is volunteerism to the communities [unintelligible].

CK: I don't know if I'd put the label volunteerism...To me volunteerism is really an extension of the natural neighbor helping neighbor type of thing. That to me is what it is. It has more of a label now because it's more unusual that people are doing things not for pay. The community—our community is wonderful at people helping each other, which to me is volunteering to help. They're willing to help people without being asked. That's volunteerism. They're willing to go out of their way to do things for their neighbors, and you see that all the time here in this community. I think it's vital to it whether you give it a name or not. It's vital to it—again, that we care enough about each other to listen to each other and add to our neighbors' quality of life instead of detract from it if possible.

[Break in audio]

SV: —have you noticed any changes that have...in the natural world. I'm not talking about community now [unintelligible] natural.

CK: Well, you mean since I've lived here?

SV: Yes.

CK: Since I've lived here, I've noticed a difference in wildlife patterns of which I am a part I hate to admit. You come here thinking, 'oh goody, I'm going to be a part of the natural world,' and in doing so no matter how much you love it, you are going to affect it. When I first lived here it was totally common for bears to wander around—walk over our cars, come up on the porch. They never got into any trouble. They never did anything bad. It was obvious we were in their...we'd been where they had been living all their lives. I used to see a lot more of that, and now we hardly ever see one. If we do see a bear, it's usually one that's gonna get in trouble because of people leaving food out and other things. You worry if you see a bear. I used to love to see a bear. I still love to see the wildlife, but I worry more about them because the more contact they have with people, usually the worse it is for them—for the animals.

I've noticed not so much a change in birds; although, we got a lot more activity in our forest that hadn't been cut after all around us had been cut. That's not to say it's good or bad. It's just that these particular birds needed that particular habitat. So it's been great for me because I do bird counts with Jodi (?) and Audubon, and we have usually 25 to 32 species anytime we count so that's great. Certainly notice a difference in the change in habitat, which could come from any number of things and which probably happened in the past as things burned over. But there's a lot more open spaces, a lot more dust because we have a lot more traffic now. On our road, tremendous amount more dust and traffic than we used to have. And that affects all of us, wildlife included.

But on the whole, it seems to be a fairly steady pattern of the birds. The birds that come and go and when they come and go, when the deer go down to the valley and when they come up.

What type of wildlife we have. One thing I've noticed, we used to see martin, and I haven't seen a martin in years. It's just a different environment up there now. In some ways, it says interestingly the same. I think it's pretty well maintained.

Weather's changed, I think. The weather has gotten warmer, and whether that's just a cycle, no one knows. But we used to get calls from people...I remember Marty got a call from somebody from Arkansas. They would call us to find out what was normal up here if they were thinking of living up here or whatever, and well there is no...normal is changeable here, and you can't say this is what happened last October and therefore this is what's normal. Every year has been different. About the closest I see to something that remains somewhat constant is the August Singularity, and even that this year was weird. [laughs] But I think that is...there is no normalcy. It doesn't seem like it. It changes so much. Now people who've lived here for years and years and years may see a definite pattern that has happened before, but that's part of what's interesting for me is that it's so variable you cannot plan for five feet of snow in the winter or two feet of snow in the winter or a certain amount of rain in June. Just every year very different. Keeps you humble. [laughs] It keeps me humble anyway.

SV: Marty's been doing the weather since...

CK: 1981 I think is when John Stark gave it up. Somewhere in that vicinity. People tend to think that because Marty takes weather readings of what is happening and has happened that he can therefore predict the weather. He has always said, "I don't predict. I can report, but I can't predict."

SV: Is there anything that I should have asked? [unintelligible]

CK: The only thing I guess I would want to add is that how much I love music and like to tie music into almost anything I do. That is probably what touches me most and reaches me most, and as a result I like to use that to reach people. There's a wealth of music, and if I don't find something that is suitable, I make it up myself—for wildlife things, for naturalist type of. And in Montana, there's so much good Montana music that's historical and gives you a feel for the place. That's very important to me.

SV: How long have you been playing?

CK: Since I was 16. I was a great fan of folk music at that time and Joan Baez, and so I said, "I'm going to play guitar." So I taught myself how to play guitar. I don't do it as much now as I used to. I don't do it as much as I'd like to, but I enjoy it when I do it.

That's it.

[End of Interview]

