

**Transcription: Grand Canyon Historical Society**

**Interviewee:** Keturah Pennington (KP)

**Interviewer:** Tom Martin (TM)

**Subject:** Recounting her childhood leading up to college, her husband, and early outdoor activities

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TM: Today is Sunday, April 14, 2019. This is a Grand Canyon Oral History interview with Keturah Pennington. Good afternoon, Keturah. This is a wonderful afternoon. Thank you so much for letting us interview you. How are you today?

KP: Very good, thank you.

TM: Great. May we have your permission to interview you over the phone?

KP: Certainly.

TM: Thank you. Keturah, what year were you born?

KP: 1939.

TM: Okay. Where were you born?

KP: Novinger, Missouri in my grandmother's bedroom. It's near Kirksville, in the far northeast corner of Missouri.

TM: What were your parents doing there?

KP: I know what they were doing there, but the why is sometimes a bit of a mystery to me, too. Novinger was the family home of four brothers who immigrated there. My grandmother's maiden name was Novinger. The family had a farm there and I was told, though I'm not sure of the truth of this, and since my parents and everybody are gone now I can't be absolutely certain that I believe them, but back in those days, tuberculosis was very prominent. My father had tuberculosis when he was a child and he had spots on his lungs. I was told that the Army rejected him, but they required that he should go and help maintain the family farm during the war. He had been a teacher first in Brashear, Iowa, and then in Moravia, Iowa, which were in southern Iowa not very far from Novinger. But anyway, we were living in Moravia at the time. My father said he needed to supervise the basketball game at the school where he was. He and my mother were expecting guests for supper. Though I was probably near due time, he sent her over to get the guests at Kirksville. She got there and kept right on driving over to Novinger and ended up having me the following morning in Grandma's bedroom.

My father was furious. (TM laughs) I came on Friday, the 13th. And although he professes not to be superstitious, Mom said he was just hopping mad that I couldn't have waited one more day. (TM laughs) But, since Dad's father was the village doctor, why, I was well cared for. We moved back to Moravia then and Dad finished his school term there. At Christmastime we moved to the farm because his brothers—Dad's brothers—had been drafted. The doctor couldn't work the farm so we moved back.

And I was never sure if the military insisted that he move back there or not, but anyway, we did. It was most interesting.

TM: So did you help with milking and butchering and all the other things that go on with farm life?

KP: As much as we could. In '41, I was...

TM: Three.

KP: (laughs) Uh, yeah. Well, in '41, I was still 2 in '41 when Pearl Harbor happened. I remember it very well.

TM: How so?

KP: Well, in those days, you know, communication wasn't as good as it is now. The way our family got most of its war news... I couldn't read, so I didn't get it out of the paper, but I suppose my parents did. But we did go to the movies and in those days, there was always a newsreel before the movies.

TM: Yes.

KP: Are you old enough to remember that?

TM: Well, I'm into history, so I'm well aware of those.

KP: Oh, well, anyway, I knew what was going on in France. I didn't know what was going on in Germany. I didn't even *really* know where France and Germany were. But I knew about the war. And then, suddenly, everything was different. The war had been over there, and now, we were having blackouts and air raid practices, air raid wardens. Dad couldn't be a warden because he had to teach all day, and if he were up all night, he wouldn't be able to manage the kids. People like shopkeepers or whatever, who could have a nap during the day, were the air raid wardens. We had blackout, and Dad was fairly *laissez-faire* about blackout. He figured if it was pretty good, it was okay. But he put the blackout up and then went out to check it. He said, "Its fine," and Mom says, "I'm going to look." She went out and says, "It's not fine. (TM laughs) I see a crack right along the bottom of the window." So she made him get more, I think it was towels, but it might have been blankets, and put up more blackout 'til there was no cracks.

I volunteered to watch the sky at night. I knew very well I could see a plane if it were up there. Mom said I could when I could stay up past 7 o'clock. So I did not get to volunteer as a night watch warden. But things changed for us in many ways. One way it changed was... This was a tiny, tiny, probably population measured in the hundreds and maybe under 500 people, so it was very rural. We had a cow and a barn out behind. The instructions we got were that if we do have an air raid, the sirens will go off and you should get in a ditch if you can, or behind a fence, and put your hands over your head. Well, I was almost 3 by then, and I was a very good girl, and I did my best to follow instructions, but the only ditch anywhere near our house was the drainage ditch. We called them graiger(?) ditches then. It was to take water off the road.

And it was about 6 or 7 inches deep. I know that I was more than 6 or 7 inches thick, so I couldn't really see how lying in that ditch was going to protect me at all. So I looked to the fences. We had two kinds of fences: woven-wire fences and barbed-wire fences. I knew very well that things as big as baseballs could easily fly through any of those fences. The fences they were talking about, of course, were the hedge fences in Europe and so forth. But, you know, I was really confused, and my mother didn't really want to talk about it at all. (laughs) So I spent the first year of the United States being in war being really confused. I'm not sure how I got off on that, even.

TM: Huh. Well, it's interesting because did you have older brothers or sisters and/or younger brothers and sisters?

KP: At that time, I had one younger brother. That was another thing. The news reels informed me that big children took care of the little children and in my family, I was the big child. My brother, by the time we moved from Moravia, he was old enough to walk but he wasn't old enough to run. I had figured that if we had an air raid, I had to run out to the far edge of the pasture and hide in the bushes out there. But how was I going to take care of the baby? Back in those days, nobody had strollers. But I had a doll buggy and the baby would fit in the doll buggy, I thought. But I figured I'd better try it and make sure.

If I was going to depend on saving his life and mine, I'd better make sure I could do it. So I stuffed him in my doll buggy, and he howled like mad. (laughs) Mom came out and scolded me. I wouldn't tell her what I was doing, I just said I wanted to see if he would fit. She finally let it go at that. But after that, I was confident that I could stuff him in the doll buggy and wheel him out to the bushes and we would be safe.

TM: And head for the hills if you needed it.

KP: Absolutely.

TM: Yeah. Did you learn how to swim on the farm, then?

KP: Mmm. No, I don't think one could say that, really. I learned how to not drown in the farm pond.

TM: That's good!

KP: Eventually, when I was in school, I was given swimming lessons and I finally learned how to swim. (laughs) I was never one to like to go the old swimming hole and just muck around. I was the kind who would swim across the pond and back or up the river and then back down, and so forth. Swimming has never been an amusement for me, but I became a very strong swimmer really quickly so that I could feel very safe and fairly sure that I could look after anybody who was with me.

TM: Nice. Okay. Did your parents take you camping at all? Was that something in the consciousness of theirs that was important to do at all?

KP: When we lived in Moravia, we went camping one summer for a week because Dad was a teacher and in the summer he wasn't working. But while we lived on the farm, he had to be in the barn in the morning and again 12 hours later. So, no, we didn't go camping when we lived on the farm.

TM: Okay.

KP: After the war, we moved to Iowa and we did take one camping trip to the West. But, mostly, my family didn't camp. If we traveled, we camped. We never stayed in hotels. We couldn't afford it. So I wasn't a stranger to camping, but we didn't do it very much, either.

TM: Okay. You mentioned, though, after the war, you did take one camping trip and you went west. Where did you go?

KP: Well, let's see. That was from when we lived in Cresco, so we'd already moved to Brooklyn after the war. As soon as Dad could get away from the farm, he did. As soon as his brothers got out of the military and were back home to help Grandma, why, Dad got out of there. He would rather teach than farm, although he was an excellent farmer. He improved that farm no end.

TM: Nice.

KP: But we lived in Brooklyn for a while and then we moved to Cresco in northern Iowa. Oh, I think Devils Tower was probably about as far west, the Black Hills. We just took the car and rambled and had a real nice week of it.

TM: Okay. What were your thoughts of that? That was your first trip west. Did you have any... Devils Postpile is an amazing geologic feature of a volcanic vent coming up through the land there. Did you enjoy that trip? Was it interesting and inspiring in any way?

KP: Oh, it was very interesting. I'm like the dog. If the car door opens and I hear it, I'm right there, ready to get in.

TM: (laugh) Okay.

KP: I loved going anywhere. When we lived in Cresco, my father was teaching improved farming methods to disabled veterans who had been discharged and were starting over with farming. I loved to ride around with him in the summertime. He had a circuit that he made, I think it was every two weeks. He had a whole bunch of farms that he would visit and advise them on how they could improve this or that or the other. I just loved to go. So I had a blast on that trip out there, and I climbed everything I came to. I remember at Devils Tower I was climbing fairly high. I wasn't to the vertical wall yet quite. But I was almost, and the ranger saw me and yelled at me to come down. I pretended that I didn't hear him. (TM laughs) So he must have yelled at my mother to get me. (laughs) I heard her say, "Oh, she'll be all right." Because Mom knew I wouldn't climb anything that I would fall out of. I had been climbing trees ever since... I have to stop and think where we were living when I was in the cherry tree. Ever since I was 2, I had been climbing trees and any rocks that I could come upon. But, finally, the ranger made me come down. Yeah, it was... I didn't have a good way of learning as much as I should have from there. I read all the pamphlets and everything. But nobody explained things to me, so if I didn't teach myself, why, I didn't learn. But, yeah, I had a good time on that trip.

TM: Nice. Did you enjoy high school? Was that...?

KP: I suspect I was a bit of a stinker in high school when you get right down to it.

TM: How so?

KP: I had gotten a really good start in school in Missouri and then we moved to Iowa. It was the middle of third grade when we moved to Iowa. We were doing long division in Missouri, and I found out that my class in Iowa was just learning their multiplication tables.

TM: Oh, wow.

KP: (laughs) So I coasted. I coasted right on through the rest of it, too. Right on through high school. One time I realized that on any test, no matter what grade I got, I wasn't going to want to talk about it, because if I got an A, which I essentially always did, I felt it wasn't fair to make it known. Particularly because everybody had worked probably harder than I had to get whatever grade they got. So it was not polite to say, "Oh, yeah, I got an A." But if I got B, I would be so angry at myself. (laughs) You know, I wasn't fit to be around for several hours.

TM: Interesting. Okay.

KP: So I found that high school was kind of a problem. But, anyway, I got in to college.

TM: What were you thinking of your choices for college? Where did you go? And what interested you about the kind of college track that you chose?

KP: That was serendipity. I went to Iowa State because it was, sort of like Phil, it was the biggest school around and probably where I was going to get the best education unless I wanted a medical education, then Iowa U would have been a better choice. If I'd gone to Grinnell, for example, I would have been really close to home. It was a small school and offered a lot of social things and so forth. I got a scholarship and it was good at Iowa State, so that's where I went. From then on, it was just luck. I can't *believe* how lucky I was.

TM: How so?

KP: Iowa State is the only college I've ever encountered that, for incoming freshmen, made up your class schedule for you for the first quarter. And after the second... Well, (laughs) we all took the same things. We took English, math, some sort of social studies, and some sort of science. It turned out to be 12 hours, 12 credit hours. After, I don't know, about two weeks, we got called in to a group adviser and said we should start thinking about what we wanted to take next semester. It happened that that group adviser was from the botany department.

When he said, "What do you want to major in?" Math, history, languages, so forth and so on. I said, "Botany," and, boy, from then on, I could do no wrong. Before the end of the quarter, I had a job in the department. The botany department was fairly small. There were, I think seven majors besides me when I joined up. So I made number 8. We all worked for not very much money, but excellent experience in the botany department. And with the scholarship I had, it made enough to keep me in school without my doing anything else. I didn't have to depend on my parents or whatever. It was a job that would keep me in close contact with all of the professors there. They had a very good botany club. (laughs) Eight majors got together off and on and planned summer trips together. We just had a great time.

TM: Nice.

KP: And while I now realize that probably if they'd had an anthropology department, I should have majored in anthropology. But they had, I think, two courses in anthropology. That was their whole anthropology department. I just learned so much in the botany department and found that school was real easy. I think the only quarter I ever took 12 hours again was the summer I went to the summer botany camp up on Clear Lake. That was all you could take. You went all day, every day, for 12 hours. But, mostly, I ended up taking 20 or more.

TM: Where did you go, that was Clear Lake? Is that still in Iowa?

KP: Yeah, mmm-hmm. Well, the northwest quadrant. It's not clear in the northwest corner. They have a rather nice summer resident camp up there.

TM: I'm from the desert, so I'm thinking cactus and desert plants, and know nothing about the diversity of the plants that could be in northwestern Iowa, but I'm assuming it would have been very rich.

KP: Oh, absolutely! We had a fen, sort of a hanging bog, up there on one of the hillsides that had some unusual diatoms in them. My job while I was there was identifying diatoms. Sit all evening counting little striations on these little glass boxes. Most interesting. I did algae one term. What did I do the other term? Can't even remember, but the algae was terrific. Once again, I found it very easy. Two of the graduate students who were in the botany department at the same time I was up there, and they were just having an awful time with it. They were grass people. (laughs) Not go for algae. (TM laughs) But, anyway, yeah, northern Iowa... Oh, you don't want me to rattle on about northern Iowa.

TM: Did you graduate, then, with a degree in botany? How did that work out?

KP: Yeah. I had a degree in botany.

TM: Okay. Had you been further west than Devils Postpile by that time? Because I'm assuming in botany, at one point, somebody might have said, "Hey, we should do a field trip to a more desert-like environment to look at those types of plants." Had that happened?

KP: You mean, after I got away from home?

TM: No, this would be in your college years.

KP: After I left home, I could go anywhere I wanted, but my parents would have never thought of going to the desert on a family trip. No, our botany field trips were midwestern. I don't think anybody... I was about to say "my major professor," but he wasn't then, he was my boss...was the head honcho on grasses for the Midwest. He wrote the book, and so forth and so on. No, he would not have urged a desert trip. I can't think of anybody there. But, once we got into the desert, boy, Phil and I just had a blast.

TM: Well, let's back up a bit because we're not quite there yet. What year did you graduate from college?

KP: Actually, I graduated early because I'd been taking 20-plus credits and wanted to finish off. I graduated in December of 1960. I got then a full-time job in the botany department for the next quarter and the next summer and didn't go out to Cal until September of '61.

TM: How did that happen that you ended up going out to Cal? I mean, that's just like, I don't know, to me it's a sort of a, you know, I stepped on a box of dynamite, I got thrown across the country. That's a huge change. How did that happen?

KP: I never intended to go to Cal, but everybody in the department—my boss and my adviser and everybody else—says, "Oh, you have to go to Cal."

TM: Really?

KP: I applied at Oregon U and also at Cal. Cal offered me a TA-ship and Oregon U didn't have any money. I went to Cal. And, once again, serendipity. But, boy, was I lucky!

TM: So with the teaching assistant, the TA position, did that reduce your tuition that you needed to pay, then, to go to Cal?

KP: I think either it was waived or I got in-state tuition.

TM: Which would have been a big financial savings.

KP: Yeah. Right. Although, as I recall, at that time, Cal let all graduate students claim to be residents there unless they had a residence somewhere else that they wanted to claim. If I'd said I wanted to claim my parents' residence, I probably could have. Yeah, it was just barely enough to get by on, but they had it pretty well calculated. And housing for students was pretty well organized out there, so you could find something you could afford.

TM: Okay. Were you thinking, I'm going get a master's or a Ph.D. in botany? What were you thinking in which department you were going to be in out there at Cal?

KP: Well, it was the botany department that offered me the TA-ship, so, yeah, it was going to be in botany.

TM: So were you thinking of a master's or a Ph.D.? Where were you going at that time?

KP: I was not totally decided. I was still thinking that anthropology or maybe archaeology would probably be a better thing. But I didn't have a TA-ship in those departments so I figured I'd better get an education and then see if I could work it around a little.

TM: Hmm. Okay.

KP: But then I ended up getting married after my master's degree, so it didn't matter one way or the other.

TM: Who did you meet that would become your future husband, and how did that meeting happen?

KP: First thing I did was go all over the campus so I could learn the various routes to and from the apartment I had rented. On Sather Gate there was a notice that the botany club would be meeting at this place at this time. Excuse me, not the botany club, the hiking club. I thought, hmm, yes, I gotta go to that one.

TM: Oh! Okay.

KP: So I did. At that time, the hiking club—jeez, I can't even remember the name of the building—but they had two rooms in the basement of a semi-abandoned building where the hiking club tended to hang out. Oh, no. No. The notice I saw on Sather Gate wasn't of a meeting, it was of a slide show and it was the first boat trip. No. Ah, I've got to get my head clear. It was the first trip down into the Glen Canyon area. I went and I was so disappointed. How could they possibly have gone to such a terrific place before I even got there! (TM laughs) Well, that was pretty much what they thought, too. So, over the winter...

TM: This would have been Phil, Phil Pennington. Did you meet Phil at that hiking club meeting?

KP: Boy, I met so many people and I really don't know. I didn't get to *know* very many of the people there. But I sure spent a lot of time that first year with the hiking club.

TM: So that would have been the spring of 1961?

KP: No, this was September of '61.

TM: Okay, so fall.

KP: Yeah.

TM: So, that trip that they did through Glen Canyon, had that happened that summer, in the summer of '61?

KP: It wasn't through Glen Canyon. It was a long... It was a hiking trip.

TM: Okay. So maybe they hiked into Rainbow Bridge?

KP: No, they were on the other side of the river from that.

TM: Wow. That's very ambitious.

KP: They were at Hole-in-the-Rock, as I recall. I started to tell you that a trip leader in the hiking club had a very definite function, but it wasn't to lead the trip. The trip leader got an idea of where he or she wanted to go, so they posted a note that said, "I'm going to this place, on this day. These are the

amenities it has, these are the difficulties. It'll be about so long, and so much elevation, and so forth." And any other problems there would be like no water and things like that. Then people would sign up their names. And, as they signed, put down name, phone number, either have a car and can take X passengers, or need a ride. The trip leader's duty was to match up "need a ride" with "have X places." And from there on, everybody was on their own.

The people who had cars and the people who needed places had to see to it that they contacted each other, arranged to meet up, and so forth and so on. Everybody who was going had to have everything he or she needed, including matches and toilet paper because nobody was planning to share with you. I mean, they would in an emergency. Nobody was stingy but everybody was expected to be self-sufficient, I guess is a good way to put it.

And the trip would take off. That first trip, which had happened before I got there, went in a VW bus, which I believe was a 12-passenger, and it had gone in June of '62, '61, excuse me, June of '61. And then there was one car. Anyway, they had an extra space or two because one of the people had to leave the trip early. He had to go back and take a bar exam. Eventually he became governor of Colorado.

TM: Oh my gosh.

KP: But the van went down and parked on a really—I have seen it now—as they described it to me, a really nice, flat, cleared-off piece of land up there at the top of the mesa and got ready to go hiking. (laughs) A plane came over and somebody with a megaphone yelled, "Get the hell off the runway!"

TM: (laughs) Oh my gosh!

KP: It was one of the primitive runways that the pilots had out there. Anyway, they hiked and went down/up several of the canyons and so forth. Eventually everybody was ready to walk back up to the cars. Hmm, I'm looking at the map to... Oh, cripes, I just lost it. Anyway, everybody was ready to back up to the cars. And Phil, who had the only map of the area, had left it where they'd sat down to eat or drink or whatever and hollered back to somebody else, "Will you pick up the map for me?" So, everybody except the guy who now had the map, and his girlfriend, were back up on top. But they didn't show up.

Supper time came and they didn't show up. It got to be night and the group disconnected the wires from all but one terribly small light on the car so they wouldn't run the battery totally down. Left one light on. There'd been a discussion before the group left that there were no dwellings anywhere, *anywhere* near. So they figured they'd see the light and they'll know we're up here and get themselves up here. Might wait 'til morning, but get up here. Came morning and nobody showed up.

Eventually (laughs) the airplane came by, yelled at them to get off the runway, and they managed to indicate that they needed some help. Help came out from the town of Escalante in the form of several rangers with horse trailers. There was a discussion about where the people might be. The plane returned and offered to fly somebody. Since it was generally acknowledged that Phil was best at both map reading and route finding, that he would go up with the pilot. So they went up and flew all over. Phil looked down and figured that he was going to have to be back there sooner or later. Sooner, preferably. So that's when the Glen Canyon boat trips got started. He came back and spent a good deal of the winter of the school year '61-'62 in the library poring over the maps and marked his map up with all of the salvage sites that had been dug because Glen Canyon was about to be flooded.

TM: Right.

KP: Of course, the archaeologists came in and did what salvage they could.



TM: Hey, Keturah, hang on a second. Don't leave that poor couple out there, lost in the wilderness. What happened to them?

KP: Oh! (laughs) Eventually, they were... One was spotted from the air. The guy was spotted from the air wandering along the road. The sheriffs took off at a really rapid pace and caught up with him and brought him back. He was heading the wrong way. One of them said to Phil, "You know, he's acting a little flaky. I wonder if he hit his head or something." And Phil says, "He always acts a little flaky. I've talked to him and he's okay." He was able to tell them where he'd left the girl. She was in the shade, under an overhang. He was able to describe it well enough that they said, "Oh, yeah. I know where that is." They took off and got her real quickly, too.

TM: Okay. Great.

KP: Oh, there is... No, I don't know if should tell that one.

TM: Yeah, you're in the driver's seat here. (laughs) Don't ever forget that. Great. So they went out for an adventure. They did some hiking. Did they get down...? Did they actually hike, on that fall 1961 hiking trip, down to the river through the Hole-in-the-Rock route?

KP: No. Now as I'm thinking about it, I'm not sure that Hole-in-the-Rock was their parking lot. They went down another way. They went down into the Escalante River. You know where the Escalante River is?

TM: Just a bit.

KP: Yeah. Well, there was a route that had had pack teams up and down it. It was an easy way into the Escalante and they hiked up several of those canyons. I think they discovered Cathedral in the Desert on that trip. It used to be I could tell you everybody who was on the trip and all the details of it. I wasn't on that one and I just don't remember the stories I've heard from everybody.

TM: Right. It would have been a long, long walk to go down the Escalante all the way to the river. But there's a bunch of magical, wonderful country north of the Colorado River there in Escalante watershed that would have kept them very busy for a long time.

KP: Well, let's see. They did Hansen Creek, Clear Creek... Boy, I'm going to have to think about that. You know, I should be able to remember better than that.

TM: No worries. Like you say, you weren't even on the trip. So (laughs) you have an excuse.

KP: I wasn't on that trip. So I suspect that I'm wrong about that they parked at Hole-in-the-Rock. Because there are a lot of those little feral airstrips that had been bulldozed here and there for various reasons. But what got Phil going was his view from the air as they were flying him around, hunting for that person. He just knew he had to get down there. When he did, he thought he was going to make one more trip and it was going to be by river, even if he couldn't swim.

TM: Hmm. Okay.

KP: I don't know how soon you want to move along.

TM: Well, let's... I'm curious, when did you and Phil start spending time together, as friends on the campus there? Was that in the fall of '61 or in the spring of '62?

KP: I was really, really enjoying the hiking club. I loved caving, even when the only cave that I had ever been in, besides commercial caves (laughs), was on the old mine around our farm there in Missouri.

TM: Oh, so those would have been the lead mines.

KP: No, coal.

TM: Coal. Oh, that's even... Wow.

KP: Oh, there are some stories about those. But not here.

TM: Okay.

KP: I essentially went on every caving trip there was. I liked hiking, but if it was a choice between hiking or caving, I went caving. Another guy and I started going to some whitewater meetings of people who made their own kayaks. Back in those days, you couldn't buy a commercial kayak.

TM: Right.

KP: You made it yourself or you didn't have one. He and I started wanting kayaks so we got together a small group of three. He and I and another girl made ourselves kayaks that winter.

TM: Did you have folboats then? Did anybody have folboats and were using those at all?

KP: I had heard of them and seen pictures of them, but I'd never seen one. And this group were very, very good at whitewatering and made their own boats.

TM: Okay. The fiberglass was definitely much more durable than the folboat, with canvas-on-a-stick frame, and they were all the rage at the time.

KP: In '61?

TM: Yeah. The fiberglass was a cutting-edge kind of deal. To make it...

KP: Yeah, it was.

TM: ...into kayaks. So I can appreciate that that would have been the thing to do.

KP: Well, the Sierra Club had a mold and the guy that... He had a car and I hated to be stuck in town so (laughs) I was most interested in what he might have to do.

TM: Where did you go?

KP: With our boats?

TM: Yeah!

KP: Well, we didn't get them made until jolly near the end of the year. It took me awhile to get acquainted with everybody and...

TM: Okay. So this would have been the end of '62?

KP: No, no. The beginning of '62. The winter of '61/'62 I got acquainted with all these other neat activities.

TM: Okay. Got it.

KP: And Sam and I started going to these whitewater club meetings. It just looked like terrific something, so we found out how to get hold of the Sierra Club mold and we made ourselves three kayaks for \$150 each. They were not colored and not fancy, and so forth. But, oh, they were fun.

TM: Did you make your own spray skirt? Did anybody understand the concept of spray skirts to keep water from getting into the boat itself?

KP: Oh, this whitewater club were very good, and yes they certainly did. We could have done better. (laughs)

TM: How do you mean?

KP: I made ours out of an old poncho and some elastic.

TM: Okay!

KP: So that tells you quite a bit.

TM: Well, it sounds... I mean, for simple splashing that sounds like it would have worked okay. I wouldn't want to roll in that, and I wouldn't want to take a big wave, but at least you could keep a *little* dry.

KP: We *did* roll in them. We practiced in a swimming pool.

TM: With the poncho and elastic?

KP: Well, it wasn't a poncho thrown over it with elastic around our waist. I took a poncho and cut it up. Let's see, as I recall, I had elastic around the outer edge of it that would fit under my coaming.

TM: Yep, yep, yep.

KP: And then elastic around my waist, so when I stood up, I would pull it out from under the coaming and it would hang like an apron from my waist. But, you know, the poncho was perfectly waterproof.

TM: Wow. Very good.

KP: That was back in the days of army surplus stores. I think we got the ponchos for a dollar and you could make two spray sheets out of it.

TM: What did you use for a seat?

KP: Everybody had their own idea. I used a parachute seat that I bought at the army surplus store.

TM: How did that work?

KP: Very well. I really liked it. It was removable. I had space behind my back where I put my lunch every day which turned out to be a disaster once. (laughs) And then I'd put a piece of sponge behind my back to keep the lunch in. It worked very well. Phil molded himself one when he... He wasn't in the first kayak-making group. I think he wasn't real sure of his boating skills at that time.

TM: Well, yeah, the poor man couldn't swim real well.

KP: He couldn't swim period.

TM: (laughs) He was pretty bold to make a kayak...

KP: He was the only person I've ever known who couldn't dog paddle.

TM: Oh my gosh.

KP: I have no idea why. I think someone must have frightened him when he was a very small child. And I can imagine that he had relatives who might have done that when he was a very little boy. Maybe even too young to remember.

TM: Keturah, were these boats something like 14 feet long, roughly?

KP: Essentially, exactly 14 feet. 162 inches, I think.

TM: So, really long. Did you get them out on the bay at all—San Francisco Bay—or were they strictly for downriver sort of things?

KP: I should make you aware that the story is very, very long. And, at this time, Phil didn't have one. Eventually, he and I both had them. And there's quite a...well, anyway. Yes, when he and I both had them, especially after we were married and he had been down the river in his a few times, we got out on the bay.

TM: Okay. Yeah, I just... and that's good. We'll hold that thought because I was trying...

KP: They were very... Well, no, I'd better not say that. Mine was very, very stable because I could handle it really quite well. Phil never (laughs)...that's true...Phil never tipped over in his.

TM: Phil was terrified! I don't blame him. (laughs)

KP: Yeah. But I did tip over.

TM: Did you go to roll practice? Did you learn how to roll then?

KP: When we had kayaks, we went down to a swimming pool, which was rented by the kayaking club for roll practice. We were given a demonstration. And this, again, is serendipity. I've been just jolly lucky all life. Except this time I didn't feel all that lucky. It was two guys and me, so they said, "Okay, ladies first."

TM: Okay. (laughs) Oh, that's...

KP: I got in and tipped over and rolled right back up.

TM: No way.

KP: "Oh, that's good! Now it's my turn." And I didn't get another chance to roll. (laughs) But we all did pretty well.

TM: Okay. And this was in the 1961/'62 winter?

KP: No, '61/'62 winter Phil spent in the library marking his map with archaeological sites and another guy and I spent our winter learning how to kayak.

TM: Right. So that's what I mean, that you guys were building your boats and doing roll practice, that kind of stuff, in the winter of '61/'62.

KP: Yeah. I think it was... We didn't start making kayaks until spring of '62. But we had them made by the time school was out. I had a chance to go to Mexico that spring for two weeks at a biology camp down there.

TM: Where did you go?

KS: It was outside of a village called Placapulpon(?). It was somewhat inland from Veracruz, but I really don't know where it was. I didn't drive at the time.

TM: So far enough south to start getting into the jungle vegetation of Central America.

KP: Yes, it was!

TM: That would have just sent a botanist just over the moon.

KP: Well, the guy and his family, he and his wife and their baby, were going down there for the whole summer. They said I could ride down with them and spend two weeks at the summer camp and then I'd have to get myself back home. He was a zoologist, actually, an etymologist. He collected insects and he thought that I would enhance his information-gathering by the plants that I collected. He and his wife and I spent a real nice time going down, camping all the way. A nice time at the summer camp/biology camp for a couple of weeks. I did not go on the river trip that spring. I think had I really known then what I know now, I'd have probably given up the Mexican trip. But Phil and I ended up with a whole bunch of trips anyway, so I think I probably got most of it.

TM: What was your take on that journey? Because I'm assuming you would have had to cross the desert before you started south on Highway 1 there down into Mexico, and then you would have seen a continual transition of vegetation.

KP: Oh, yeah! Eventually, as you say, we got down into the rainforest, the jungle. I didn't have really any assignments or even any classes while I was there, so I was pretty free to wander around. I'm up a tree looking at some ant borings. They had hollowed themselves out little homes in the thorns of the large tree, which I couldn't identify. They were obviously protecting the tree from other pests that might have eaten the tree's leaves, and all the ants wanted was a home/protection. I was just sitting up there thinking about it, and I heard a rustling coming down through the leaves on the ground. I looked down and there was this really fat boa constrictor crawling under me. (TM laughs) Fortunately, I was up the tree. I don't know if they can heat-sense or smell or what, but, anyway, he just slid right on by me and I just sat up there, barely breathing.

TM: Did you have a plant press? Were you collecting for...

KP: Oh, yeah.

TM: ...UC Berkeley. Okay.

KP: Well, no, I was collecting for me. Ever since I was first-quarter undergrad I had a plant press wherever I was. So, yeah. In addition to a plant press, it's also nice if you have some keys and I didn't have any tropical keys.

KP: Right.

KP: But, anyway, where shall we pick up?

TM: You know what, we've been happily chatting way now for about an hour. Maybe this is a good time to end what we will call Part 1 of this interview series. Maybe next time, we could pick up and you could tell me a little more about Phil.

KP: Fine.

TM: Before we wrap up this interview, is there anything else you want to tell me about this trip to Mexico, though, that we shouldn't leave out.

KP: No. That was just a side trip.

TM: Well, I think it's important because as a botanist, you would have just seen some incredible changes in plants that maybe you'd never experienced before, so I think that's just fascinating.

KP: (laughs) Plants and insects.

TM: That, too. (laughs)

KP: The etymologist I was with put his nightlight out every night. Boy I don't know he could go out there. I went outside (TM laughs) when he'd say, "Oh, have this or that, you really need to come see it." But the air was just thick with insects coming to his nightlight. He had a drape, which they would fly into and then fly down to the bottom so he could scoop them up and sort out the ones he wanted. That's a fantastic environment. But during the day, it was very pleasant. It wasn't like there were a lot of biting gnats or mosquitos or anything. So I can see why those folks enjoy their climate.

TM: Yeah, yeah. Of course.

KP: Of course, it's a poor climate. They say in a rainforest 90 percent of the nutrients are standing aboveground...

TM: Right.

KP: ...and only 10 percent are in the soil.

TM: Up in the sky, yeah.

KP: Well, yeah. The oxygen and nitrogen and so forth. But the soil is not rich in a rainforest. You'd think it would be because here's all this stuff on the ground. It decomposes fast and gets taken up by the roots fast...

TM: Right. And right up into the overstory.

KP: Yeah.

TM: Fascinating.

KP: Yeah, well, that was a nice experience.

TM: Nice. Okay. Well...

KP: Let us look at our respective calendars. Have you turned your machine off?

TM: No, I haven't. So let's wrap this up. Hang on for a second. Hold the line. Today is Sunday, April 14th, 2019. This concludes Part 1 of an Oral History Grand Canyon interview with Keturah Pennington. My name is Tom Martin. Keturah, thank you very much.

KP: Thank you.