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A Conversation with Joe Hayes . . . Seldovia's 2005 "Old Crab" by Damara Burnett

1976 was a memorable year for Joe Hayes. It was the year he first came to Seldovia with his wife, Diane, and found a bulletin board listing a house for sale on the slough. It was also the first year he was elected to the Alaska State House of Representatives. Joe Hayes bought the house on the slough and has been spending summers in Seldovia since that time; he has also continued to be an influential law-maker in Juneau. Mr. Hayes is currently Alaska's highest paid lobbyist and has worked for clients on issues ranging from mandatory seatbelt legislation to workers' compensation legislation.

In May, the Seldovia Chamber of Commerce selected Joe Hayes to be this year's "Old Crab" for the 4th of July festivities. I recently had the opportunity to speak with Mr. Hayes about Seldovia, his political career, and what it means to hold the distinctive title of "Old Crab."

When did you first come to Seldovia? What was it like back then?

I first started coming down in the late 1950's or early 1960's when I was doing engineering work in the Seldovia area. I was [engineering] water lines, sewer lines, all the stuff necessary for the processing of crab. I remember the boardwalks. There was quite a bit of activity on the waterfront and a lot of fishing going on.

How often do you visit now?

We come down quite a bit in the summertime. I'm in the Legislature from January to the middle May, so we normally try to come down in June and spend a week or two until the first of November. We're never there for more than a week or ten days at a time.

Why did you choose Seldovia? When did you start coming here on a regular, consistent basis?

In 1976-77 my wife and I stopped in [Seldovia] for lunch. We had been trying to get into Nanwalek, but there was a plane parked in the middle of the runway, so it wasn't a very good idea to land there. We flew on to Seldovia for lunch and while we were there - I think it was the first time my wife had been there - we walked over to the post office, just looking around. There was a For Sale sign on the bulletin board [for a house] so we got hold of the person who owned it. [The owner] was the Superintendent of the logging operation that was going on in the Jakalof Bay area. He and his wife were going back to Oregon so we bought it from them. It was just a set of circumstances that turned out to be very good for us. The house wasn't finished on the inside, so we finished it off. We've been there for a long time.

Do you consider Anchorage to be "home" now?

It's our primary residence. Our secondary residence, particularly in the summertime, has always

been Seldovia.

Where are you from originally?

Missouri. I've lived in Anchorage since 1946. My wife was born here.

How did you first get into politics?

Well, I was in the engineering business for a number of years. In 1976-77, I decided to run for the Legislature and was elected. I went into the House of Representatives and served for eight years; four of those years I was Speaker of the House. Then [I ran] for governor in 85-86, but was not successful. While I was in the Legislature there was a seatbelt issue, and in 1989 I was asked to try and help get that piece of legislation passed. I went down to Juneau, and it took a couple years to do it, [but I] got the legislation passed. During that time a lot of other people contacted me [to lobby] on other issues. Initially, I went with the mission to get the seatbelt legislation passed and wound up - 15 or 16 years later - lobbying.

Could you explain what you do as a lobbyist?

I represent companies or municipalities that have an interest in the legislative process in as much as it affects their businesses, lifestyle, or economic situation. I keep them [informed] of what's going on in the Legislature. Usually the client just wants to be advised of any legislation that might be introduced [which would] adversely - or beneficially - affect their business. Sometimes they want to get a bill passed to benefit them . . . so we'll introduce legislation for them and try to get it passed, work it through the process.

What do you enjoy about the work?

It's another side or part of the political process. There are the elected people, and so forth, who have a lot of influence on what happens. Then there are the lobbyists who have a lot of influence on what happens. It's very interesting and keeps you involved in the political process. It gives you a feeling of accomplishment. At the end of the day, or when the session adjourns in May, you leave with the feeling that you've accomplished something meaningful.

Do you ever find yourself in situations where you have to lobby for a client on an issue you don't particularly agree with them on?

No, I don't. I generally try to stay away from issues I don't [personally] support.

What do you feel are some of your important political accomplishments?

Over the years, I've been involved in getting a number of pieces of legislation passed. I can't single any one out in particular. The mandatory seatbelt law is one I felt good about because it saves lives. I also was successful in getting a joint resolution passed which put the question on the ballot to limit the [Legislative] session to 120 days. It went before the voters and it passed. People had been trying for twenty years prior to that to get it [on the ballot] and I was successful. Generally, I like to work on issues that are good public policies - that save lives and are good for health and safety.

What do you think of your "Old Crab" distinction?

(Laughs.) It's an honor to be honored as the Old Crab. It's some recognition by the community that you've tried to be a good member. I certainly look upon it as an honor to my wife and I. We're happy about it.

What are your plans for the 4th of July and spending time in Seldovia?



Joe Hayes

Photo courtesy of Carole Meyers

Well, we'll be coming down on Friday with some friends who will be spending the weekend with us. We always enjoy the parade and the food and games. We've lived there almost all our lives . . . it's a real fun day of activities and the opportunity to see old friends. It's a very "old-time" 4th of July. Socializing, friendship, good times and good food - that's what we like about it.

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