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## **Oral History Interview: Falcon River**

Interviewee: Falcon River

Interviewer: Doris Malkmus

Date: November 28, 2004

Transcribed by: Teresa Bergen

Doris M. This is Doris Malkmus interviewing Falcon River on November 28 at her home in Evansville, Wisconsin. Thank you so much, Falcon, for agreeing to share your story with us. I'm wondering if you could tell us a little bit about yourself.

Falcon R. Sure. I was born October 5, 1952, in Columbus, Ohio. And I lived in, my parents, my mother was originally from southern Ohio and my father's from West Virginia. And somewhere in the middle of about the fourth or fifth grade, I've forgotten, we moved from Ohio down to West Virginia. And that was a very significant event in my life because I, my father's family, I like to say I come from a long a proud line of moon-shiners and thieves. My grandfather made liquor, my father made liquor, and my uncle Kenneth made liquor. And my first paying job was actually when I was twelve years old, to haul liquor in my grandfather's old Model-A Ford truck and make deliveries for him. My grandfather was such a good machinist that he actually manufactured stills for other people. And he even built himself a railroad boiler engine that he used, then, to kind of pirate the B&O Railroad lines. He delivered liquor all through the mountains. And I got to ride with him. Needless to say, he was very careful about knowing what the railroad schedules were. Otherwise, I wouldn't be here speaking to you. (laughs) Cause we would have been run off. But anyway, the two most significant people in my life as a child were not really my parents. My uncle Herschel, my father's brother, was what I think of as. . . [pause]. I don't

know quite how to describe Uncle Herschel. But he would disappear for weeks at a time into the woods with nothing but a buck knife and his shotgun. And come out, you know, several weeks later, hale and healthy and ready to go on a good drunk. And he taught me most of what I came to know about the woods. He could read the forest floor like other people read a newspaper. He could tell you who had been there, when they had been there, what they had been doing, even, probably, what they had been thinking, simply by the way they moved through the forest. And he . . . spending time with him is really where I honed what I believe are many of my most valuable psychic skills, and especially my skills of observation. The other person who was most influential in my life was my Aunt Beulah, who was married to my Uncle Kenneth, my father's brother Kenneth. And she was what one might call, kind of the, oh, the village wise woman. The town where we lived, the nearest, at the time, the nearest doctor was sixty-five miles away over a one-lane mountain road. The nearest hospital was a hundred thirty-five. Needless to say, if you got hurt, you were pretty much on your own. So Aunt Beulah was the one that people called to birth the babies. She was also the person you'd go to if you needed a love charm. Or if you were mad at your neighbor and wanted to make sure that your neighbor's cow didn't milk anymore. She considered herself to be a good Christian woman. If you had called her a witch, she would have smacked you upside the head with her cane. But the truth of the matter is, is that I really think that that's what she was. I loved going to her house because it smelled of all kinds of scents of plants and herbs and spices and who knows what. And I especially loved going to her house because on her porch she had arranged several shelves. And she was too poor to afford pots. So she collected old shoes. And she'd fill them with dirt. And so she had all of these plants growing out of every kind of shoe you can imagine, from the fanciest high heel to the raggediest sneaker, to old hiking boots. There they were, row upon row, stacked six shelves high, with these plants just—every kind of plant you could imagine—just gloriously blossoming and growing. So that's my forever

image of my Aunt Beulah. But she took me on pretty early in what I consider to be an apprenticeship. And so she would take me with her and ask me to stand watch as she would go to a certain place in the woods and gather a certain plant to do a certain charm. Or one thing in particular that stands out in my mind is one time a young woman came to her who was about to give birth. And this young woman was concerned that her husband would not give her adequate time to heal after the birthing of the child before he wanted to have sexual relations. And so my Aunt Beulah asked her to bring, asked the young woman to bring her a pair of her husband's underwear. Which the young woman did. And I went with Aunt Beulah while she gathered plants in different places in parts of the forest. Specific plants which I am honor-bound not to reveal to you what they were. And then I watched her, and I stood watch for this, as she found a young sapling, a strong young sapling, and spent hours gently coaxing it and bending it over. And prior to that, she had taken the plants she had gathered and cooked them into a gooey, syrupy like thing—consistency. She took that young sapling, she bent it over, she staked it down, and on it, as she staked it down, there were certain words that she spoke, and she tied knots in a very specific way, in a very specific sequence. She bound that young man's underwear to it, and then she smeared the whole thing with these plants that she had gathered. Time passed. She helped the young woman birth her baby. And when the young woman was again ready to receive her husband, Aunt Beulah went back out, spent another whole afternoon very gently releasing that young tree and guiding it back upright. Now, she certainly did not explain to me what it was that she was doing. However, anybody, I think, who's listening to this story, might get the gist of it. And if you don't, you can come talk to me later. So I spent a lot of time with Aunt Beulah. And she took me to the place where young women would bring their babies to pass them, pass them around the rock. Or she took me, she actually blindfolded me one time and took me to a particular large rock that she called the wailing rock. And she left me there to listen to the stone and to know what I was made of. Because in fact that

stone did wail. But I made it through that test. And so I think that she, between her and my Uncle Herschel, I got a pretty good training in the Craft, long before I ever even heard the word. But I was stupid. And I was young. And I didn't pay enough attention. And I was wild. And when I was about, oh, fifteen, sixteen, I stuck out my thumb and I hitch-hiked out of there. Because I knew, the whole time I was growing up, that even though I was of those people, I did not belong there. And you asked me early on to speak about when did I know I was a lesbian? I knew I was a lesbian when I was in kindergarten. And I got a crush on my kindergarten teacher. And I got really mad when she brought her husband to visit us. Really mad. So I got so mad that I went out and caught a little garter snake and turned it loose on his shoe. I thought the man was going to pee his pants. (laughter) So I knew then. And I knew all the way coming up through school, all the developmental stages that children go through. When all the little girls were getting boy crazy, I was, you know, I was falling in love with the little girls. I remember in second grade, Susan Mathias. Susan, are you out there? Susan Mathias came, tears streaming down her face, because David McGill was getting beat up on the playground. And she came to me and she said, "They're going to kill him! Won't you do something?" So I went out and I pulled like two or three bullies off of David McGill, pounded the living shit out of them, picked David up, and took him over to Susan and gave him to Susan. Did I get any thanks? No! But I still remember Susan McGill [Mathias], just, just beautiful blond hair and deep brown eyes you could just fall into. So, that was my first crush. I did have relationships with men. My attitude was, all these women are, you know, having sex or making love with men, there's got to be something to it. So I gave it my best try. And it certainly wasn't that I didn't like men. They're just, it was just boring. Just boring. So I came out when I was just past sixteen. At that time, I was in California. I had actually kidnapped my mother and drove her to California, because I was trying to get her away from my father, who was very abusive. That's a whole other story, but anyway, one of my. . . we were living

with a family of my cousins. And my oldest cousin, Sharon, who was 26 at the time, she looked at me and she said, “Hmm. Little butch. Okay, I know what we got to do here.” So my cousin Sharon took me to a gay bar in Long Beach, California. And I’ll never forget the moment we walked in. To my right were several of the most beautiful women I had ever laid eyes on with their hair done just so and their makeup just so, and their glasses of wine and the way they held their cigarettes between their perfectly manicured nails. And I just thought my knees were going to buckle. And then to my left was a big honking pool table. And these women, the likes of which—I had never seen them, either. You know, women in perfectly pressed pants and men’s shirts and their sleeves rolled up and their cigarettes rolled into the sleeves of their shirts, and their perfect D.A. swept back Elvis style haircuts that was the sign of the times. And it was, it would have been 1968. And my friend Sharon, who was a high femme herself, I’d come to understand the term later, she motioned to one of the women at the pool table. And she just basically looked at her and curled her finger. (Curling her index finger slowly and emphatically) like a come hither. Now. Which the woman like just dropped her pool cue, it clattered on the table. And she comes over and she says, “Here. Take care of her. Teach her what she needs to know.” So the woman, whose name turned out to be Al, just basically looked me up and down and said, “Come on, kid.” And took me over and introduced me to all the rest of the women at the pool table. And from then on began my education about how one becomes a proper butch. And I got education from the gals at the pool table. And I also got *plenty* of education from the other gals sitting around holding their drinks just so. But that education came a little later. Not much later, but a little later. So I came out, in, directly into the bar scene. And got very clear, in those days, in the bars, you were either butch or femme or, heaven forbid, you were kiki.

Doris M.      What’s that?

Falcon R. Kiki is neither. Kiki would be what most, this is going to offend somebody, but kiki would be what most lesbian feminists evolved into. And kiki women would, you know, are the women who do not embrace either butch or a lesbian, femme identity, yet would consider themselves lesbian. Kiki could also be somebody who was butch until they met somebody butcher, or femme until they met somebody less femme. In other words, the term that I like to use for kiki women is flexible. You know? But again, we're talking about the times. So we'll move on from there to 19--, so I spent from 1968 to 1975 being a butch woman. I was a drag king, I'm proud to say. I was Mr. Roanoke, 1973, '74.

Doris M. Was that in Virginia?

Falcon R. Yeah. And the only reason I'm proud to say that is that I really do a lot of work these days in trying to educate women about our Herstory. And I carry it with me into my present work. I don't embrace the—hopefully I have continued to grow. I've certainly tried to continue to grow—but I will not deny my Herstory. So, you know, fast forward, and I do mean fast forward, to 1975. And I moved to Louisville, Kentucky to be with a woman [Jade River] that I had actually met in Girl Scout camp when I was fourteen, she was sixteen. And went there and confessed my undying love, and she confessed hers. And the next thing I knew, she'd left her husband and we were together. And together, we began to, in the process of looking for a lawyer to help her with her divorce proceedings, we ran smack into a group of women who were in the process of founding an organization called the Lesbian Feminist Union. (barking) That's my dog Lucy. And we joined the Lesbian Feminist Union. Became, in fact, officers on the board. And I also had the odd experience of going to, or at least attempting to go to, a NOW [National Organization of Women] meeting. And I mention this because it was significant to me in that I was met at the door by a man who told me that I was not welcome, and that I could not come in. And he said, and I pretty

much quote, he said, “We don’t need women like you.” And I looked him up and down and I said, “Well, this is a woman’s organization, right? And I am a woman.” [short silence] And I was about to like snatch him by the collar, and a friend of mine, I believe it was my partner, actually, just kind of took me by the elbow and said, “No. Not now.” That was the only time that I’ve ever even thought of going to a NOW meeting. So I have never gone back. My experience with NOW is that, the National Organization for Women, in Kentucky, at that time, and also with the Women’s Reproductive Freedom League, and the League of Women’s Voters, is that they all wanted us to raise money for them, but none of them would publish, when they were publishing in their programs where they got donations from, none of them would say that they’d got money from the Lesbian Feminist Union. Not a single one. We also started a bar. It was called Mother’s Brew. And I believe that it was a woman’s, excuse me, a woman-only bar. We had an art gallery, we had a lending, a feminist lending library. We had a safe room in the back for battered women. I honestly think that we probably provided the first space for battered women in Louisville, Kentucky. And we sure didn’t make a difference between whether a woman was a lesbian or what her situation was. If we could give her shelter, we did. I remember one instance in particular where, this was during the time when we were trying to get the Equal Rights Amendment passed, and we were asked to be peacekeeping marshals at the Equal Rights parade, or demonstration. And I’ll never forget looking up and down a line of NOW women, feminists, who were marching in support of the ERA, and then there were us, the bar dykes and the radical lesbian feminists, forming a human barrier between these feminist women and members of the American Nazi Party, the Ku Klux Klan, and the police, who were there in force with dogs. And you asked me earlier, you know, where did my guardian consciousness come from. Right there. Actually, before that. But right there. Because I knew that I couldn’t actually join the NOW women. First of all, they didn’t want us. But also, they were right in a sense that my presence would not have helped the cause. But

I was willing to lay my life on the line to make damn sure it happened. And so, fortunately I didn't have to. But I did have many, many, *many* run-ins with the Ku Klux Klan in the course of living in West Virginia and Kentucky and being an out lesbian. Many.

My first involvement, my first encounter with the Goddess movement, came when I attended the Michigan Women's Music Festival. And I actually was fortunate enough to attend the very first one, in 1975. In fact, I've still got my little mimeographed flier to prove it. Which I'd like to go into some sort of Herstorical archives somewhere. But I think it was probably at the second festival where I got my hands on this little yellow book. *The Holy Book of Women's Mysteries*. I think that's right.

Ruth Barrett *Feminist Book of Lights and Shadows*.

Falcon R. *Feminist Book of Lights and Shadows*. Written by Z Budapest. And when I opened that book and read it, everything that I had ever done in my life before and come to believe in, it just all jelled. My Uncle Herschel, my Aunt Beulah, my feelings about Christianity, my feminism and my love of the woods and nature and the outdoors. And being out alone at night. It's like, it just, everything came together, and I just went, Yes! This is it! This is it! And I have been a witch from that moment on. For most of the years, you know, I mean we immediately went home from that festival and began organizing women's moon circles in Kentucky. And then moved up here in 1983. As soon as we, my partner and I, moved up here, we began organizing women's spirituality discussion groups and classes and circles again. And then, our relationship had been rocky for some time, on again, off again. And so we broke up shortly after coming here, about a year after coming here. But she continued to practice and organize in the Goddess community and went on to found an organization called Re-Formed Congregation of the Goddess. And I, then, became primarily a solitary. I went to massage

school and spent many, many years in private practice, following a healing path. And for all of those years, the Goddess was always kind of tapping me on the shoulder saying, “I want something more out of you. Yeah, this healer path, this is okay, but there’s something else you got to do.” And all the time I’m going, “Nah, no, I don’t think so. Don’t want to, don’t want to, go away. No, don’t want to! No, no thank you!” And you know, with the Goddess tapping me on the shoulder, there were also oftentimes people coming up and asking me, “Well would you please teach a class about telepathy? Would you please consider teaching a class on woodworking? On tree lore?” I’ve been a woodworker for many years. That was also the way that I made a living when I lived in Kentucky. I was a woodworker. So I finally got tired of saying no. And I said, to the Goddess and to the people who were asking, “Okay, okay, okay. I’ll teach a class in tree lore.” Or, “I’ll teach a class about shape shifting.” Or, “I’ll teach a class about inter-species communication.” So I began, gradually, to teach at some of the gatherings of RCGI [Re-formed Congregation of the Goddess International]. And it was at one of those gatherings that I met Ruth Barrett, who is my current partner. I was teaching a class on inter-species communication, and she was teaching a class on energetics. She went to my workshop. I went to hers. And that was pretty much all she wrote. We’ve been together ever since. (tape stops and starts)

So Doris, you had specifically asked me about the evolution of the guardian path. And what I wanted to say is that as part of agreeing to teach some classes, saying yes to the Goddess and saying yes to women who were asking, some several months before I actually met Ruth, I had begun meeting with a group of women: Firehawk, Vicki Tree, Gigi Vail, and I did not meet with Shawn, but another woman, Shawn Wade, was also involved in this process. But Firehawk, Gigi, Vicki and myself had been meeting at the RCGI mother house to give some sort of, to begin to discuss and to give some sort of form of a path of service that we were all aware of that had not really been talked about. It’s one of those truths, one of those mysteries that’s hidden in plain sight, and has been there

all along. In the Goddess movement, per se, but in Dianic tradition in particular. And initially, I think, out of our own really unexamined sexism, it's true we did kind of target it towards women who might be more identified, and/or self-identified, as butch women. But as we worked together, as we struggled together, there were a lot of struggles over a process of several years. What has evolved is that the guardian women, the women who identify as guardians, have always been present in Goddess circles, have always been present in Dianic ritual. They are the women who offer their service not necessarily at center, but more as the supporting cast. We attend to more to the setup and take down of the ritual space. We attend to the maintenance of the cast circle. We attend to the energetics of the ritual intention in such a way that we actually provide energetic support to the people who are the major facilitators of the ritual enactments. And women like me have always been around. We just never had a clearly articulated, I call it "name it and claim it" role. And as, over the last five years, as Ruth and I, especially, although Firehawk and Vicki and other women have been also very important in bringing this work forward, as we have begun to name it and articulate it, hundreds and thousands of women have gone, "Yes! That's it! That's what I do. Thank you so much. Now I know what I am! Yes!" And the ongoing dialogue has always been, well, pretty much up to this point, well. . . Is a guardian an identity, or is it a job? To me, it's a job. I am a priestess of Diana. I took ordination, after twenty-five years of saying no. I took ordination, and I am ordained as a priestess. I am, and in Dianic tradition, it is your responsibility. It's not just your option, to clearly name and define your path of service, your ministry. So my path of service is that I am a priestess of the guardian path. And in taking ordination, it is also your responsibility to be able to articulate it clearly enough that you can then pass it on. So this is now my life's work, to articulate this path of service, and to find a way that I can articulate it clearly enough that I can teach others who are interested in following in also providing this type of service in our community and in our tradition. So, I am a priestess. And I am a priestess who serves in a

guardian capacity. There are others in the pagan movement and in the Goddess movement who would not define guardianship in the way I do.

Doris M. Can you be more specific?

Falcon R. I can be more specific in that, as I said, when Firehawk and Vicki and Gigi and Shawn and I first began to have our discussions, we were very much of the same school as those folks who still think that only a butch lesbian can be a guardian. And it didn't take very long for me, and I think for the other women as well, to go, "Oh, wait a minute. We're being just as oppressive as those who oppress us. Isn't this interesting? Patriarchy is everywhere, even in the middle of our own gut. Huh. Guess it's an opportunity for us to grow." So I name that and I claim that. I apologize for it. And yet I think that it was a very fortunate process to go through. Because I tell you, some of the finest guardian work that I have ever seen done is done consistently by women who are heterosexual, extremely. . . choose to attire themselves in very traditionally feminine ways, and they are women that I proudly serve with at any time. And feel really happy when they're by my side.

Doris M. How do guardians speak with each other and develop their skills? Because they work, it seems to me they work as teams sometimes.

Falcon R. Well, the idea is certainly, and Ruth and I have an educational program that we teach. It's called the Spiral Door. It's a four-year program. And one of the foundation texts that we actually ask women to read is a couple of, actually there are a couple of, there are many books. But we refer specifically to the work of Riane Eisler. And Riane Eisler has done quite a bit of work deconstructing patriarchy and helping people reconstruct a vision of a possible world wherein we work in partnership. That we take apart the dominant paradigm, which is a society that's built on a dominator model, wherein one person is active and one person is

passive, and one is over the other. Rather than conceiving of a world where people can actually have, instead of a hierarchy of domination, we can build hierarchies of what she calls actualization. Which is working, recognizing and respecting areas of expertise and learning how to work in partnership where all people are respected for their various abilities and supported to grow. So what we strive for in our work is teaching women how to give and how to receive support. In every possible way. And we spend four years doing that, and don't even come close to teaching all the things that we'd like to pass along. So I really feel that my job, when I am working in a guardian capacity, is: to be able to be fully present, fully centered, and able to support the intention of the ritual; to be able to support the participants; to be able to move in five or six directions at once; to be cognizant—rationally cognizant—and also be in telepathic communication with the other participants; to attend to the weather, if necessary. It's a very complex structure and I'm not doing a very good job, I don't think, of explaining it.

Doris M.        Hey, I think you're doing an excellent job. And I can't think of a better way to talk about the scenario of guardians without including that piece. And as I understand what you're saying, guardians learn the same. . . by going through the courses. They learn how to work together before they work together at a ritual.

Falcon R.        Yes. In fact, actually in our program, in our educational program, everyone gets the same training. Whether you choose eventually to specialize in one area or another, everyone gets the same training. So that, oh, let's put it this way. I'm a priestess of Diana. I'm a priestess of the Dianic tradition. I can work at center as well as everyone else. It's not my chosen specialty. However, if you go to, say, Catholic seminary, you are expected as a Catholic priest to be able to conduct the rites of the religion. You may choose as a specialty to become a scholar. You may choose to do missionary work. You may choose to do any number of things. I can't really speak to the Catholic tradition, because I don't know it that well. But

what I know is true is that when you go to seminary, everybody gets the same training. The same is true of ours. Should I be called upon to serve, to invoke a direction, to facilitate an enactment in the ritual at center, of course I can do that. And I'm good at it. And I enjoy it. And I am more than willing to serve. And, my particular specialty is the guardian path.

Doris M. Just to make sure this is cleared off the table, I'm wondering if there ever was a time when a woman who self-identified or had acquired the identity of being butch, felt uncomfortable at the center.

Falcon R. Yes. Just as I was denied entrance to the NOW meeting, I can tell you that, for example, the first time I showed up at a ritual at Circle of Aradia, a Dianic organization that had been in place for thirty years, I knew the moment that I stepped in that I was way too butch looking. And this from women who were certain they had done all the work, the inner work about homophobia that they needed to do. And I love to just go up and say, "Hi, look at me. Yes, I don't look like you. Isn't that wonderful? Isn't it great that we have a community that can embrace us all? And if you're not going to, eventually you will, because I'm not going away. And I'm not going to change. And let's figure out how we can build upon this. Let's figure out how we can do that. Because I'm pretty sure we can." And so I . . . I make sure that because I was denied entrance to that NOW meeting, and because I know that those wonderful women who embraced me at that pool table so long ago disappeared, they disappeared, because there was no place for them in the feminist movement. And for sure there was no place for them in a Goddess movement. And for sure, up until just very recently, there was no place for them in the Dianic circles that I have been to. I make sure that my presence, I know that every time I step forward and I be fully who I am, and I be fully visible, I create an opening for those women who might choose to come

along, either behind me or before me. I'm very aware of that. And I carry that.  
And I consider that another part of my service.

(End Side A. End Interview.)