

Reminiscences of a spit rat
by David Little

If you found a decent map of Alaska you could find Homer on the left side of the Kenai Peninsula, a finger of land that runs along the Cook Inlet all the way from Anchorage. The Cook Inlet is named after our very own James Cook who sailed up there quite a long time ago. Maps, they are an other funny thing. Alaska usually shares half a page with Hawaii and Britain in the Same atlas is usually bigger. Alaska is vast thousands of miles of forest, mountains and glaciers, volcanoes, gold, oil, wildlife and a smattering of humans scratching its surface.

I could not do Alaska the injustice of saying 鑛 here I was on Homer Spit You see, there is a ferry that runs along the inside passage on the west coast of Canada and the Panhandle of Alaska. It terminates at Haines and Skagway, stopping off point for Klondike gold rushes in 1898. From here to travel up to the Alaska Highway. Klene, Tetlin, Tok Junktion, Glenallen, Valdez just names that trickle by, but so do the miles, over a thousand of them. I could tell stories all these towns and others.

Valdez, named after a Spanish explorer who also sailed up around these northern sounds, stands in a bay on the seaboard of the Mighty Wrangell mountains. Its the southern terminus of the Alaska pipeline that brings out over the tundra and through the Brooks Range, yet another great sore on the face of Alaska. Then through the forests of southern mainland Alaska to the ice free port. How anybody could envisage an engineering project of such monumental scale is beyond me. But there it is -a man-made snake laid from the northern oilfields of Prudoe Bay across the whole state to a small town where oil tankers can come in winter. The whole town was destroyed in a massive earthquake and tidal wave in 1969.

When I was there it rained non-stop for three weeks. Four foot, not inches, of rain fell and washed out over 70 miles of the highway from Glenallen, through the mountain passes of the Wrangells. The only way out was the ferry to Seward on the east side of the Kenai Peninsula. This little jaunt passes by the Columbia Ice field one of the biggest glaciers of the world. It pours straight into the sea from the mountains. Great icebergs crash its cliffs into the bay where the ferry stops so you can stand in awe for a while and stare, and watch the seals and humpback whales and porpoises that feed in the summer waters, rich in krill and plankton. But on the ferry goes, rolling as it crosses open sea. Not that I was in any hurry to get anywhere. Seaward another name plucked from the history books. Alaska used to belong to Russia and Seaward, an American, advised his government to purchase it from them. I can't remember how much the American government paid the Czar, some sum like \$18,000,000. Seward's Folly, it was called. But the coast of Alaska still shows many Russian influences. The old capital Sitka was a Russian settlement 100 years before Western Europeans or white Americans ever got there. Arcangel has been renamed. But of all the wonders of Russian Alaska, with its wooden domed orthodox churches, the most thrilling is to meet the descendants of Cossacks who still speak a 400 year old Russian dialect. To see their women working in the fish factories in traditional costume in vivid colours and 30 petticoats and headscarfs, singing their work songs. Or see two deckhands standing proud as their fishing boat docks. Dark haired with a dropping moustache and orange satin shirt and black trousers. These are the people of a settlement just north of Homer.

Like so many other scenes that are etched on my memory, I will never forget my first view of Homer. From a hilltop before the road descendants to the waters edge, the panorama is magnificent. To the west, across the Cook Inlet, huge mountains roll into the distant sea to Illisumya, a huge volcano 20 miles out to see. Eastwards, in the woods, in the

straggling community of Homer, and to the south, on the shores of Kachemak Bay, lies the small town centre then the spit, a strip of land a 100 yards or so wide, thrusting three miles out into the bay, with its harbour and canning factories. There's an old hotel and a general store. The old lighthouse made of hand-cut dove-tailed logs is now the Salty Dawn Saloon. Here you could meet deckhands and skippers and tourists and hippies all mixed together. This is spitrat territory. Across Kachemak Bay lay the Kenai Mountain, with glaciers pouring straight into the blue Arctic sea, Seldvia and English Bay beyond.

Every spring when the air warms and the days get longer there is a restlessness in the animal kingdom. The long trek to the north begins. Duck, geese, many types of birds, elk, caribou and wolf head north. Twenty four hours of sunlight causes an explosion of growth in the basis of food chain. Plant life, insects, plankton and crustacia multiple dramatically. The abundance of food in the sea causes many species to migrate to Alaska's Arctic waters. Wales, seals, walrus and probably the most spectacular of all, the mighty pacific salmon run. Millions of salmon choke the rivers, penetrating far inland to their birthplace. To mate and die. Spring also stirs in humans and I was one of the migrant workers who headed north to reap the sea's harvest. Spitrats, as they are known in Homer, are the people who live on the beach of Homer Spit for the summer. It's an strange mix of people from all over the world, all converging on this little town as well as many other similar towns on the Alaskan coast for a few weeks in summer. All have there own stories of their journey to this place.

Working an the salmon or crab fishing is such a tangle of emotions. The work is back-breaking, up to sixteen hours at a time of crazy slaughter. Your mind can become detached from your sour body and wander the immensity of the universe, zen and the art of salmon slaughter. Then, when it's over, to walk serenely back to your driftwood camp and watch the midnight sun and smile at understanding the insignificance of your scratching a grubby living on this planet. You can make a hell off a lot of money in a short time but it's laughable in comparison with the understanding you can gain.

I was there on Homer Spit and it was on the happiest times of my life. But it was only a small part of the total experience of Alaska and the north. I fished there. I've also seen a spectacular coloured sunset torn across the sky in fiery red, orange, yellow and purple, like the expression on a tormented painter's canvas. I've made love on the bank of one bank of one of this mighty rivers in searing heat and had my arse chewed off by horsefly. I've seen the winter roost of bald eagles and massive brown bears pulling salmon from a creek. I've felt the bitter cold of the first frost of winter in the interior and stood high on the slope of Denali; 'the great one' as the Indians named Alaska's biggest mountain. I've seen the northern lights flicker green and red and white across the autumn skies and eaten blueberries the size of grapes, and walked with inuits, and more and more.

How long does it take to get to Homer? Well it took me 18 years. I've others who took seventy years. The time was the youth and discovery. It feels like I didn't visit Alaska or simply earn a buck. I can't describe the experience or enlighten another man's soul this he must do for himself. But I think I truly lived.

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