

## Chapter 11

### Tour Anyone?

Since you probably have no plans to spend time on Amchitka in the near future, perhaps you would like to know the island a little better. Not that there are many spots of interest, but the items noted here are not recognizable anywhere else in the world.

Eagles were sighted most any time we would look to the sky — sailing around in lazy circles — or sitting on any tall pole. An old World War II water tower seemed to be a favorite place for them. At times we might count ten or twelve flying around at one time. If you haven't watched eagles in the wild, you have missed quite a treat. (Of course, when you looked up, you might be looking directly at a sea gull — or a hundred sea gulls). That's another story.

On one occasion my new Industrial Property Assistant and I were walking down the road toward the bay — just looking around the island. As we turned a bend in the road we saw Col. Barwick hanging head down over the side of a ten foot bank along the side of the road. Holding his feet from the top of the bank was John Jacobsen, the Assistant Resident Engineer. At Col. Barwick's fingertips while stretched out full length, was an eagle, *also hanging head down*. His claws were entwined in a clump of tundra hanging over the side of the bank. You would have to see this to appreciate this sight. In a moment, the Colonel had pulled the reluctant eagle loose and dropped him to the ground. In so doing, he flew off. We

put the combined forces of all our minds together and deduced that this was a young eagle trying to learn to fly, and had become afraid to turn loose, and was holding on to the tundra for dear life. We figured that when he was released, he was afraid not to fly then — hence, his solo flight. We didn't give private flying lessons to all the young eagles on the island, just this one.

Continuing our journey of Amchitka we must mention "The Amchitka National Forest". During World War II someone brought a small cedar to Amchitka and planted it near the entrance to the Officer's Club. This tree lived — from World II until I was there in 1968. The only comment needed is that it hadn't grown any from the day it was planted and stood some two or three feet high at that date. I imagine it is still there — surviving from one storm to another. No other plant even resembling a tree was found on Amchitka Island.

Other than this one tree, all vegetation was limited to tundra — a mixture of many ground cover grasses — some supposedly rather exotic, we later learned. During the period of this test shot, there were horticulturalists all over the island, identifying grasses and flowers composing the tundra. In fact, it was kind of an amusing sight to see three or four "doctors" on their hands and knees, crawling around in the tundra; or to witness their excitement when they would spot a minute flower with a quarter of an inch blossom, of unknown (to me) origin. The small flowers were very pretty though.

I experienced several hikes through the tundra — today I would not be able to go more than a few feet. Imagine if you will, walking in snow up to your knees. I tried this in Anchorage. However, the tundra may be even harder to walk in. Generally your feet would sink ten or twelve inches deep, and had to be lifted above that level to negotiate the next step. This was very hard work — but if we saw anything, walking across it was the only way of going from one point to another. My longest walk across the tundra was over a mile — one direction — then back again. I'll relate this incident later.

After we left the eagle episode, we walked on down the road (not tundra here) to a point

of land facing the Bering Sea. This was the entrance to the only bay on the island. Lots of incidents took place in this area, but for now I will stick with a tour of the area.

The bay was surrounded on three sides by higher ground, maybe sixty or seventy feet elevation, falling off quickly to form a deep area about half a mile wide and a little longer. A coral reef to the north end of the bay gave it a natural protection from the continual swells of the Bering Sea as well as the intense storms occurring eight or nine months of the year.

Along the west side of the bay area were the remains of World War II gun emplacements. The guns had been removed but the tracks they rotated on were left behind. These were heavy iron rails set in concrete geared for motorized aiming of the guns. Their diameter was twenty to twenty-four feet. I imagine these were quite large cannons which I'm sure discouraged the Japanese military from attempting an invasion of Amchitka.

Concrete bunkers were strategically located along the outer banks of the shore line in this area. Anti-personnel spikes (sharpened, embedded steel spikes capable of penetrating boots and feet) were found around the edge of the entire island. Unexploded bombs, and buildings still full of "live" ammunition were located to the northwest end of the island. More on this later.

Directly across the bay to the eastern side was a sunken Liberty ship — sitting on what little beach there was — mostly out of the water. It was rusted to the point that all identification had long ago disappeared. I never heard the story of how it was sunk.

The area of the bay where we were at this time was the staging area for removing salvagable items from Amchitka at the end of World War II. I understand that when the military left the area, they took what they wanted, then sold salvage rights to some insurance company. They then salvaged all they thought they could turn a dollar on and left the rest to just rust and rot.

In this area were bulldozers, vehicles, even a snow-cat, and numerous other items. We would imagine they loaded until their barges were filled — then just left. These pieces of equipment they left, were the cause of my losing half a night's sleep later during the

construction of a wharf in this area.

Perhaps the most interesting part of this bay were the sea otters. This was home to the largest known population of sea otters in the world. It was not unusual to see five or six fairly close to the shore. They would "dive" for clams on the bottom of the bay, then lay on their backs on top of the water while eating them. Their "dive" would put the top choreographers to shame. They appeared to be a very playful animal -- looking almost as if they were smiling when you were close by them.

You will remember that years ago they were almost killed to extinction for their furs. Coats made of sea otter pelts were greatly sought after early in this century. By treaty they became protected from hunters until by this time they were over populated. They are an animal perhaps three feet long, and weighing (I was told) some sixty to eighty pounds each. They have a heavy, soft, fur.

The Pacific side of the island had a rather large seal population. When remaining very still, they would move up close to the shore to see what a human being looked like. Sometimes if you would sit very still a whole herd of maybe thirty or forty would congregate a couple of hundred feet off shore to watch you, just as you were watching them. They would stay as long as you would. Always there would be a large "bull" seal in front of the pack who seemed to tell the rest to move closer or to stay put. They would begin their move toward shore from some distance out to sea with only the bull seal appearing at first. He would then be joined by one or two others at a time -- always diving and moving a little closer to shore until there was a large herd of them.

They were quite interesting to watch. I sat for long periods several times while on Amchitka just to pass the time watching them. I wonder what they thought of me? -- what they are telling their grandchildren?

An aerial view of Amchitka will indicate hundreds of natural lakes. Some may be two or

three acres in size, but others literally no more than a foot across. Whatever size they were, they remained full to their capacity at all times, however there was evidence in parts of the island of dried up lakes. Some are connected to others by small streams (miniature streams), but running swiftly with crystal clear water, and always entirely pure. Their depths may be from a few inches to maybe three or four feet.

One of the strangest things about these "natural lakes" (no outlet to either the Pacific Ocean or the Bering Sea) is that several of them were full of Dolly Varden trout — of a nice size, I might add. No one had any explanation of how they became resident in these small lakes. Several were caught, and some cook could be persuaded to prepare them for a private meal. Tasty!

There is always someone to spoil everything, so; the Alaska Game and Fish Department sent word to the military commander that Amchitka *was* part of Alaska, therefore it was necessary to purchase an Alaska fishing license to fish on Amchitka. Most residents of Amchitka were not residents of Alaska. This made the cost of license quite high.

One more item about fishing at this time, then we'll move on. Bank fishing in the Pacific Ocean could become quite thrilling, if you didn't mind what you were catching. Ocean Perch were fighters, and one of the most beautiful fish I have ever seen. They came in a kaleidoscope of colors — all of them near fluorescent. They were not a big fish — eight or ten inches long, but were exciting to catch and you could almost always depend on a lot of bites. They were very bony and had a large fin on their backs. I doubt if they were edible, so we caught them and threw them back in for someone else to catch.