Chapter 20

On the Way to Juneau

The city of Juneau, Alaska (the State Capitol, some 14,000 population) had contracted with the Corps of Engineers to build a dam, a hydroelectric power plant, and transmission lines. A location some twenty-eight miles (over the top of the mountains, in a total wilderness area to the south of the city), was chosen as the site. Personnel were being selected to start the project. I was asked if I would transfer there to begin the project, although I would not be staying at that site to its completion. I agreed, – travel orders were cut (travel by private auto was authorized), and off to new horizons I went.

I began my journey early one morning – a two day trip – and after passing the city of Palmer, I was in a whole new world. From Anchorage to Juneau is about 900 miles by auto, except you can't get all the way there by car. The last 90 to 100 miles from Haines to Juneau is made on the Alaska Ferry. I traveled the Glenn Highway to Tok Junction where it intersected the Alaska (Alcan) Highway which I followed some 300 miles. At Haines Junction I took the Haines cutoff to the city of Haines – then the ferry on to Juneau.

Palmer is sitting on the banks of the Matanuska River which heads at the Matanuska Glacier. Mountains are encountered within just a few miles outside of Palmer. The first noticeable area caught me quite by surprise. I was of the impression I was gently driving up the side of a mountain, when all of a sudden a break in the trees along the side of the road

allowed me to see that I was very close to the banks of the Matanuska River — a sudden drop of perhaps a hundred feet, or more.

As I went farther up the road, continually climbing higher up the side of the mountain, I came to a giant horseshoe curve covering several miles. In the valley below (now several hundred feet down) the river made the same contours as the road. The left side of the road was always *up,* — sometimes rather gently at other times very abruptly — the top being out of my vision. There was a pull-off at a scenic viewing area near the end of the horseshoe which I took advantage of to take several pictures. I'm not brave where heights are concerned, and I was quite hesitant to walk to where the road broke away to look down. I'm not good at estimating heights or distances, but I believe there was a drop of a thousand feet or more to the river below nearly straight down. The pictures really don't do justice to the actual scene, but I'm reminded of the distances when I look at them.

The next point of interest was the Matanuska Glacier itself. The leading edge of the glacier was at ground level at the head of the Matanuska River. (I was looking down on it from high up the side of the mountain, on the other side of the river.) This is the only glacier I have ever seen while standing on solid ground that I looked down on — of course I also looked up to it as it traveled for miles and miles up into the mountains from the opposite side of the river until it disappeared into their peaks. I believe at the upper end it is protruding out of an ice field where elevations exceed 13 thousand feet.

The glaciers leading edge is accessible by car, though I never did find out just how to get to it. There is no massive leading edge like Portage Glacier, but Matanuska Glacier can be walked on to from ground level. I dont believe the Matanuska Glacier is moving. I remember seeing an Oral Roberts special TV show years ago which was filmed at this location. From where I was parked today, it was probably ten or fifteen miles away. At this point the highway had reached an elevation of some 3500 feet — almost as high as I would get on this leg of my journey traveling by car.

Only a few miles farther up the highway, there was a communications site accessible by car, hanging on the side of an almost perpendicular solid rock cliff. I would estimate this cliff to drop – almost straight down – probably 1500 to 2,000 feet. A small building hung in a very small offset in the side of the cliff which housed the communication site – and I suppose the personnel quarters of those who worked there. Driving to this building – just a few hundred feet off the highway – would have been almost unthinkable to me. But, having reached there, to turn the vehicle around to come back out – no way! I'm not sure I could have walked down the road (only wide enough for one lane at best) – at least I would be walking in the inside rut.

Finally through Tahneta Pass, and a stop at Eureka Lodge for a piece of pie and a cup of coffee. A very nice lodge – miles from anywhere.

For many miles from here there wasn't much to be seen – that is close by. The road was on a high plateau, but always to the south and east there were mountains – seemingly made out of snow and glaciers. At one place – I'm not sure just where – there was a sign that the mountain to the south (some 50 to 75 miles away) was the highest point to be seen in this area. I believe the sign said seventeen plus thousand feet, although the tallest mountain I can find on the maps I have are just over sixteen thousand feet. There are mountains in Yukon Territories over the Canadian Border which I circled on this trip to Haines that were well over seventeen thousand feet. Perhaps I'm mistaken where the sign was.

At Glennallen I intersected with Highway 4 – an intersection is a rare occurrence in Alaska. I believe there were only ten highways in all of Alaska at that time. Highway 4 ran from Fairbanks to Valdez – about 400 miles. Going north at this intersection was the closest way to drive from Anchorage to Fairbanks. It was also the cut-off leading to the road to Mt. McKinley National Park at that time. I wanted to make both of these trips but never had the opportunity to do so.

Still continuing northeast, the Glenn Highway paralleled the Copper River. This entire area was pretty high country – 2500 - 3000 feet – always with very tall mountains to the south. I passed Sinona Lodge, Porcupine Creek, and Mentasta – which also has a range of mountains by that name. The Tetlin Indian Reservation is in this area.

Then I was at Tok Junction. Don't ask me where Tok is, I don't know, but it has a junction anyway. There is a Tok River, perhaps that gives name to Tok Junction. This is the point where I joined the Alaska Highway (over 1500 miles long from Fairbanks to Dawson Creek, British Columbia, Canada). There was a motel, cafe, and a few buildings here, and somehow when I stopped there to eat, there were several people in the cafe.

From Tok Junction to Border City – the Canadian Border – was about another hundred miles. I traveled back into more mountains nearer the road as I proceeded now to the southeast for the rest of my journey. This would be the Matanuska Mountains – rugged and very beautiful. I was now paralleling the Tanana River almost all the way to the Canadian Border.

One area I encountered somewhere in this area there was a very wavy section of the road. By wavy I mean two or three foot high ripples. The surface of the road wasn't broken, but to drive over these ripples seemed like a roller coaster ride. The top speed for this area was twenty-five to thirty miles per hour, and then it seemed I might go into orbit as I topped any given peak. The pattern was rather persistent with each ripple being probably thirty to forty feet from peak to peak. Upon inquiring about this, I learned that somehow the permafrost had melted or thawed and refrozen, and that this was a problem on building roads in this environment. Then I was at Border, and time to spend the night.

Customs between the United States and Canada I found to be quite lax, both here and at North Portal, Saskatchewan, Canada where I entered the United States later after having driven out the entire Alaska (Alcan) Highway. But that's another story for another time.

Having arrived at Border about 6:30 in the evening, both custom houses (U.S. and

Canadian) were closed for the night. A sign was posted at each of them that if you should reach them when they were closed, find a place on either side of the Border to spend the night, and await their opening the next day.

So, I found a place on the U.S. side of the border at the only motel there – that I knew of at least – ate a good hot meal, slept well, and awaited their opening in the a.m. I went through customs between the U.S. and Canada four times, and only once was I ever asked to open the trunk of my car. I guess I just have an "honest" face.

The Alaska Highway from the Canadian border to within about sixty miles of Dawson Creek is gravel. Most of the highways in Alaska – all that I traveled on, except one from Palmer to Mt. McKinley State Park which was still under construction – were asphalt roads. On the gravel roads if you travel more than forty-five or fifty miles per hour – and that's stretching it sometimes – the gravel would beat your car to pieces. Oncoming cars and particularly any cars that might pass you, create a real hazard for breaking windshields and headlights. This happened to me near the end of the gravel Alcan Highway, not more than seventy-five miles from Dawson Creek when I drove to the lower 48 down the Alcan Highway.

Another peculiarity of the Alaska Highway is that where roads were easy to build, they were wide – lots of room – but when they were "hung" on the sides of the mountains, they are barely wide enough for two-lane traffic. Guard rails apparently were unknown down this road – which occasionally drops off their sides near to infinity.

Road signs are worded differently – for instance a "sharp curve" becomes a "bad corner". You get used to it. When I came upon one "bad corner" a wrecker was lifting a VW bus from who knows how far down the side of the mountain where it had tumbled off the road.

The people in Canada are the same – I think some might have been better U.S. citizens than many in the lower 48. They were very friendly, and wanted to know all they could about the United States. In fact, I ran across some who operated a cafe/motel/service station that had moved to Canada from the lower 48 to call home.

Accommodations – food, shelter, gas, etc. – were generally located about thirty miles apart; although in some places it would be fifty or more miles between services. I had been warned of this, and decided it was expedient to use the top half of my gas tank, so the half full marker was my alarm to look for a service station to fill up again.

Gasoline and food were quite expensive – you can understand that the cost of transportation mandated this. However, motels were unbelievably cheap compared to the lower 48. Granted, there were no Holiday Inns or Ramada Inns, just Mom and Pop operations – usually "adequate", and always clean. The bathroom might be at the end of the hall, but then you also might be their only customer for that night. One place I stopped was at a lodge. I was given a four bedroom cabin which had six full size beds, and I was their only customer that night. The price I believe, was either $8 or $10.00 – and it was situated on the shore of a beautiful lake. What a place this would have been to spend some time at.

Moving on down the Alcan Highway, I passed several lodges. Meals of hamburgers and french fries was the menu at most of the places I stopped. Bacon and eggs for breakfast were usually available. You can appreciate the reason for this, as at times I would travel for miles and miles without seeing another car.

Then I came to Kluane Lake – a natural lake fed by several glaciers, rivers and streams. One of the areas located on the shore of the lake was Destruction Bay – this name I had heard before connected with the Gold Rush days. For miles the road paralleled the banks of this lake – which in places was several miles wide. Speaking to someone at one of the lodges along the shore, they told me the lake was very deep in some areas. This was an extremely beautiful area.

While stopped in the Destruction Bay area, I noticed someone looking up the side of the mountain. When I see people looking up – I look up too. Probably about 3500 feet up the side of the mountain there was a group of twenty or more mountain sheep jumping from rock to rock. I leaned up against my car to support my head, and watched them for a long time. They were a long way off, but still I could see them quite well.

Looking to the southwest were the St. Elias Mountains. The "little" mountains in front were ten - twelve - fifteen thousand feet tall, but the granddaddy was Mount Logan at almost twenty thousand feet. This was the second tallest mountain I have ever seen. Just to the south of this mountain is the Bagley Ice Field. On another trip, I flew over this ice field.

Then I was at Haines Junction – a fork in the road. The Alaska Highway forks to the left to head for Whitehorse, the capitol of Yukon Territory. Traveling that fork was another trip, so this time we turn to the right on the Haines cutoff to head for the city of Haines another 175 miles or so to the south.

Always in Alaska and Canada there were rivers, mountains, and lakes that were spectacular. This drive to the southeast was no exception. I passed the Kathleen Lakes and Dezadeash Lake shortly, and had to stop for a few minutes at each to enjoy the scenery.

To the south and west was always the tall, glacier covered, mountains and from here on to Haines, I was moving across high plateaus and through mountain passes. Then I came onto an old glacier bed – the glacier was long gone – but it had created several miles of totally flat land as though it had been graded but always higher and higher. The road was built in the center of this valley which was probably a mile and a half wide. To either side were mountains – rugged peaks – but not too high above the valley where I was traveling.

As I was driving along, I kept seeing a blur to the landscape. I didn't know if my eyes were failing or not, so I stopped. Here was a sight I would not have imagined in a thousand years. This whole area was working live with chipmunks. Where they came from – how they chose this area – I will never know.

I sat for a long time and just watched – there was no other traffic on the road. They eventually came up to within five or six feet of my car. Reluctantly I finally decided I had better go on – the ferry left Haines for Juneau at 7:00 p.m.

I don't know how high the highway got in this area. On the map it shows a Chilkat Pass at an elevation of 7,300 feet. I suppose that was the peak of this road, I'm just not sure.

Then I topped a rise, and there before my eyes was the Ice Age. Mountains, glaciers, an ice field – and from where I was sitting I could see it all. The mountains in this area are generally from six to nine thousand feet high. This was one of the most spectacular sights I have ever seen. It's impossible to put it into words.

From the point where I was sitting, the road in front of me fell away beyond my point of vision. The best way I might describe this is that if you were to take a roller coaster ride, just as you topped the first big peak to start the plunge, you are unable to see if there is a track in front of you or not. This mountain was the same. I could see thousands of feet down – but not more than a couple of hundred feet of road in front of me, and it pointed in the direction of the valley far below. It looked to me as if at that point I would free fall thousands of feet to the valley below.

Furthermore, before I left Anchorage I was told that a road slide had occurred in this area, but that the day before I left, it had been opened for one lane of traffic. Oh well! check my brakes, gear my car down, and here we go. The road cut to the left just before reaching the fall-off point, and followed the side of the mountain on to the border. It was a pretty steep grade – in some places the road had been hewn out of the rocks – but in all places, a bobble in driving would lead to a fall of several thousand feet. Remember, this is a graveled road and no guard rails.

Then it was before me – a stretch of road a quarter of a mile long was gone – literally. When it slid down the side of the mountain, the whole road went. Construction crews were working – both here where I must try to drive across, and way, way, way, down there in the valley, where I hoped I wouldn't wind up. Pile drivers were trying to stabilize the area to prepare it for another year – and perhaps another slide.

The flagman waved his flag – it was my turn to try to hang my car on two dirt tracks with just enough room for the width of the car if you just cleared the rock face of the mountain. The mountain was to my left, so I had to trust it was wide enough to keep my right wheels

from sliding over the edge. It was *not a smooth surface.* There were dips, and if you would dare look, the men and the equipment working at the foot of the mountain looked like ants. Pray and keep going — then I was on the other side of the slide area.

Near the foot of the mountain was Customs again — back in Alaska and the United States. Behind the Customs building, there was still a pretty good drop to the roaring river below, that I was looking down on from the slide area above. From here it was very beautiful.

And then I was at Haines.

While in Anchorage I had met with the Resident Engineer of the Juneau Project Office, who lived in Haines. He had an apartment in Juneau, and flew home to Haines every weekend. According to the news in Anchorage, the roadslide had prohibited cars from reaching Haines for several weeks, creating a backlog for the ferry (the only way to get a car to Juneau). There was room for passengers, but cars had to wait several days — in line — to find space on the ferry. The Resident Engineer had graciously agreed that I might leave my car parked in his yard until I could pick it up some time later.

Just a word or two here about the Alaska Ferry. It can be accessed from Seattle and Vancouver and originates at Prince Rupert, then follows the inside passageway up the coast of Canada and Alaska — this run ending at Skagway. This is the place of entry for the Klondike Gold Rush in 1897. It is stated that during the winter of 1897-98, twenty-five thousand prospectors started their climb up and over the Coast Mountains, to Whitehorse and on to Dawson, Yukon Territory. The hardships were unbelievable. Each prospector had to pack all his mining tools, whatever blankets, pots and pans he might be able to take, and at least a year's supply of food — *for a thousand miles* — by foot. At the very beginning of his trip was a tall snow-covered mountain which had to be climbed to get his journey under way.

Today there is a narrow gauge railroad paralleling this trail over the mountains as far as Whitehorse. I never had the occasion to travel this route, but I was told that the tracks in

places literally were "hung" on the sides of the mountains and were anchored to its rocks. I'm sure that riding this train through this area must be quite frightening.

My car was parked, and I was off to board the Alaska Ferry for Juneau. These are pretty good size ships – at that time all identical – three hundred fifty three feet long (more than the length of a football field), and capable of carrying five hundred passengers and one hundred eight cars. They resemble a cruise ship more than a ferry and have restaurants, snack bars, beverage bars, and some staterooms. The lobby is outfitted with reclining chairs, and stewardesses are close by. A very comfortable way to travel.

We left Haines just after dark, and traveled all night to Juneau. There was some moonlight, but much of the night I could only see outlines of the islands we were passing – just a few of the eleven thousand islands making up this 450 mile run from Prince Rupert to Skagway. Some seemed rather close by – I hoped our captain knew what he was doing.

What I could see was very beautiful, and I hope that some day I might be able to make this trip in the daylight. Then about six o'clock in the morning we were docking at Juneau – the state capitol of Alaska.