

Chapter 25

Juneau and Return

Back at the District Office in Anchorage I checked in at the appropriate offices to give my reports. As you are aware, paper work has top priority in everything done in the government. All apparently went well so they let me keep on working for the government.

I was alerted very quickly after my return, that I had been chosen as Chief of the Administrative Section of the office on Amchitka, and as soon as I could clear up all the loose ends of my Nome trip, they wanted me to proceed directly to the island again. One problem. I had left my car sitting in the front yard of the Juneau Project Engineer's home in Haines — about 900 highway miles from Anchorage. Before I could transfer from Juneau to Amchitka, I must return to Haines to pick up my car. Orders were cut, and the next a.m. I flew out of Anchorage to Juneau.

I flew into the Juneau International Airport this trip, was met by the Project Engineer who had my airplane ticket in hand to fly north to Haines. I must say that the approach to the Juneau Airport was just above tree top level — this always made me nervous, but we made it o.k.

From Anchorage to Juneau we had again flown over the St. Elias Mountains and the Bagley Ice Fields. This is a sight everyone should see at least one time — almost unbelievable. But, I'll have more about ice fields soon.

We left the Juneau International Airport to board an Alaska Airlines commuter plane downtown, near the dock where the ferry arrived when I first came to Juneau. This flight was on a Grumman Widgeon — a nine passenger combination sea or land airplane. I didn't have a lot of time between flights, and they were ready to board when I arrived at the dock.

This plane was a new experience to me. A floating ramp was placed to the door of the plane which seemed to be at least 50% submerged in the water. In fact — after I reluctantly boarded the plane, the water of the bay was up to window height, and the bottom of the opened door just barely cleared the water level, appearing as though we would sink at any moment.

Anyway, we got loaded, locked the door, and taxied out into the bay for takeoff. With a little encouraging on my part, we became airborne after a time, and proceeded on our 90-mile flight to Haines.

Our pilot — no stewardess, no place to put one — told us we would cruise at 8,000 feet. We skirted the edge of the Coast Mountains. This was the flight where I got my best view of an ice field, and I don't even know the name of it. Our altitude put us just above the level of the mountain tops — and gave us an unobstructed view of the ice field. If you can imagine that all the valleys between the mountain peaks were filled with snow, and that only an occasional rocky peak, maybe 50 - 100 feet tall would protrude above the perfectly level sheet of ice — this is what the ice field looked like. We had the privilege of flying just to its side — perhaps from a couple of miles to ten miles away for most of our flight from Juneau to Haines.

As we approached Haines, our pilot had to manually hand crank our landing gear down so we could land on a hard runway at Haines. (Just a few days after this while on a return flight to Juneau, he forgot to crank the landing gear up, causing him to crash on landing at Juneau losing the plane in the bay, but the pilot got out without injury.) But this time he was able to provide us with wheels to land on, although it wasn't too easy a task. He had to turn loose of the plane's controls and use both hands to turn the crank to lower the wheels. As he would

turn loose of the controls, the plane would take off in any direction — up, down, right, left — so he would have to grab the controls again to level the flight out. After several attempts the landing gear was locked in and we landed without incident.

It was now near noon, and I wanted to get as far into my trip to Anchorage as possible this day. I found the Project Engineer's house with my car parked in his front yard, and would have begun my journey at once — except — my car wouldn't start. I found a mechanic who had me going in a couple of hours — nothing serious, just dust in the carburetor — so I got off on my journey in the middle of the afternoon.

The slide area was all repaired now, and anyone crossing the area at this time wouldn't know anything had happened back in the early spring.

The chipmonks were still there, and late in the afternoon I found a cafe where I could eat the usual meal — hamburger and french fries — always available along with the remote roads. This had been a beautiful clear day, and I expected it would get quite cold during the night, which it did.

I wanted to get far enough along on my journey, to be able to make it to Anchorage the next day, so I decided I'd keep driving for awhile after dark.

After sundown, I noticed what I thought was a big bank of clouds in front of me. After awhile I noticed they were changing shape and were still glowing as if the sun were still shining on them (it was now way past dark). Their size was massive — from one horizon to the other — and always the same distance in front of me. I kinda forgot what time it was, and only after I began noticing green and pink streamers extending from them, did it dawn on me that I was seeing an enormous display of the Northern Lights. Sometimes there would not be any movement for several minutes, then quite rapidly a streamer would protrude for (how can I estimate sizes or lengths in something like this?) perhaps millions of miles — your guess is as good as mine.

I don't know if I ever saw the road I was driving on or not, but I noticed that I had driven until well after midnight already, and many of the motels or rooms were closed for the winter. The next place I saw a light at I stopped. They had closed, but agreed to let me spend the night — or at least the rest of it.

During my three winters in Alaska, I never had the opportunity to see the Northern Lights again — but this night I drove with this massive display directly in front of me for some six hours. A treat I'll not forget.

I made Anchorage the next day without anything else noteworthy happening.