

## Chapter 27

### Semisopochnoi

There were 20 foot swells battering our boat, the mast arching a good 30 to 40 feet side to side — and this was not a storm, just normal or maybe better weather than average. We were on a University of Washington Scientific boat heading north from Amchitka out into the Bering Sea bound for Semisopochnoi for a day of leisure — at least that was what I hoped.

As you may have already guessed, we were not immune to having a good time whenever afforded. I heard about this trip to Semisopochnoi at the last moment. The crew of the University of Washington boat which was about 60 feet long and I can't identify the type (maybe a trawler) — announced they would take about twelve or fifteen residents of Amchitka on an all day recreational trip to Semisopochnoi. Meals on the boat, and an hour or so on shore at the only beach on the island, then back — over a 13 hour trip.

Let me fill you in on what little history I came in contact with about this island. It lies off by itself to the north of Amchitka some 40 to 50 miles — kind of outside the line of the Aleutian Island chain, yet is counted with them. Proceeding north from Semisopochnoi there is nothing but water for over 1500 miles, where you would cross the International Date Line and on into Russia on the Chukotsk Penninsula. To the best of my knowledge, the island had never been inhabited — except for stoppers-over or shipwrecked survivors. It is made up of five distinct volcanos, inactive, but some of the personnel on Amchitka accused them of puffing a little smoke now and then. (I was never totally convinced it wasn't clouds protruding

from the tops of the mountains.) The highest point on Semisopchnoi is recorded at 4,007 feet — compared with Amchitka's 1250 feet. They looked pretty impressive — when the weather would break enough to see them from Amchitka. The mountains were rugged, similar to much of the Rocky Mountains, but always had a bluish-purple hue to them.

Since cruises were not often offered on Amchitka, two or three of my Corps of Engineers buddies and I decided to go. With a five minute notice to my boss — receiving his blessing — made a quick dash to the harbor and within just a few minutes, we were on our way. Out of the harbor — through the protective reefs, then rock-a-bye baby — up, down, jerk and hold on. But then, by this time I had flown in the Alaskan skys enough to sort of become accustomed to this except this was on water. You could hardly tell the difference. We had begun our 13+ hour round trip to Semisopchnoi.

The day we picked was one of the nicer days I had seen while on Amchitka. The weather held pretty good all day — even *some* sunshine — but not enough to spoil us. We lay around on the hatches which they had covered with some sort of matting. This came in quite handy as the boat would hit the bottom of the swells with quite a jar. We all placed our best estimates and collectively decided we were riding at least 20 foot swells — no white tops — just up and down.

A couple of incidents happened on the way over which were noteworthy.

First, one of the men — I didn't know him personally — decided he would climb the mast. Now this pole stood 50 or 60 feet tall above deck, and was swinging from side to side in enormous arcs — each ending with a decisive jerk.

This doesn't speak well for the intelligence level of our crew on Amchitka — but, it's hard to explain how they could find 500 men to go to a deserted island about as far from any mainland as you can get — and stay there for months or years — anyway. So be that as it may — our friend got to the top, held on with one hand and swung like a monkey for several minutes. He was able to get back on deck — having proved he could do it — and was calm for

the rest of the day — probably thinking over what he had done, and if he should put this on his next resume. No? Oh well!

The next incident involved one of our Corps of Engineers employees. He was standing up on the swinging, jerking, deck; when an unexpected lurch threw him off balance. He headed on a run to try to regain his balance — straight for the rail which was only some 2 feet high.

Let me explain that the water temperature of the Bering Sea at this time of the year was only in the mid-forty degree range. We were told that life expectancy in water of this temperature was only a matter of two or three minutes. Should anyone fall in, it would probably be certain death.

At least the mind of our employee was not damaged at this exact moment, as just before going over the side, he fell down on the deck, rolling into the rail — getting wet, but living to tell about his experience.

I must tell you about our sighting a whale — underwater — but close enough to be seen as he swam by. We never got eyeball to eyeball with him, but the underwater outline passed us by quite quickly. I'm sure he was as big or perhaps bigger than our boat. Live and let live — that's my policy — and it worked this time at least. This made two whales, one dead and one alive, that I saw while at Amchitka — in all my life in Oklahoma I never saw a single one. We had lots of big lakes there, but not that big. Catfish, now that's another thing.

Another strange sight — at least to me — was some large birds about the size of turkeys sitting on top of the water. I don't know what kind they were — not pelicans, I'm sure. They were grey feathered and didn't seem to fear us at all nor did they mind riding the 20 foot swells.

Then we picked up ten or twelve porpoises (dolphins) which swam along side our boat for a long time. They would jump within two or three feet of the rails, right where I was standing.

This was a beautiful sight to see — it was as if they were playing with us.

I got the great idea that I would just leisurely take their picture — from just two or three feet away, and I could display this prize photograph — I could show it and tell my grandkids how their grandfather had conquered the Bering Sea. . .

Before you ask to see a copy of this picture, first let me ask you if you have ever tried to take a picture of a jumping porpoise — close up? No? Well let me spare you the wasted film and embarrassment of trying to explain why you couldn't do it. I had a pretty fast 35 mm camera and was using ASA 400 speed film which was sufficient to catch their picture only I wasn't fast enough. The closest I got to a picture of one was a splash. They also splashed me a few times while I was standing there trying, but we won't mention that any further — Now will we?

I will be happy to show you my color photo of a perfect splash anytime you would like.

The weather had become heavily overcast by now with a ceiling of about 2500 feet. Perhaps this is what made the mountains of Semisopochnoi look so purple. Of course, the vegetation was green — and these two colors along with a fine mist gave a very peculiar hue to their appearance. Most of the mountains dropped straight into the sea. There was only one small beach area at any place around the island — and this one was rather steeply inclined. Our boat anchored nearly a mile out into the sea due to rocks — mostly uncharted — surrounding the island.

We were very fortunate that the only beach was on the lee side of the mountains — thus the swells were much more calm in this area. Our taxi service to the beach consisted of one twelve-foot bass boat with a small outboard motor. I wasn't too happy about loading into this small boat with seven or eight others for a mile trip across the Bering Sea, but; after coming this far, I thought I'd try it. We all went ashore (two boat loads) except one Japanese boy who came with us but couldn't be coaxed to taking the trip ashore.

When we beached, I guess the slope of the sand at water's edge was probably 10 - 15% — a very steep grade to debark from, and proved even harder when we tried to get off the

island. We'll cover that later.

I went in on the first boat and was sure glad that I did. We saw a sight that was gone before the second boat load could be brought ashore.

When we got to the narrow beach, near the edge of the vegetation leading up the sides of the mountains, a dozen or more blue fox came out of the vegetation. They came right up to us. It was easy to see that they had probably never seen human beings before, and were as curious about us as we were about them. We stayed as still and quiet as we could for several minutes, and they came within three or four feet of us on their inspection tour. After maybe five minutes, they one-by-one disappeared into the vegetation and we didn't see any trace of them after that.

They were beautiful animals — deep blue hair all over their body — all colored the same with no break to the color of their coats anywhere. They stood probably nine to ten inches tall, with near perfect features. I was very pleased to have seen these animals.

I mentioned the vegetation before and have used that word because I couldn't identify any plants I saw. Of course, I know very little about plants anyway. This was almost unpenetrable — and stood some ten feet tall — presenting a near solid wall. We had come on to the island in sort of a valley between two volcano mountains. The end of the valley ended at the foot of another of the volcanic peaks. We had intended to walk up this valley — probably no more than a quarter of a mile long — to explore this portion of the island. All of the mountains were too steep and rugged to climb — and besides that, I would have been chicken to try it anyway.

After penetrating no more than 50 to 60 feet into this solid mass of vegetation, we found a cabin built out of driftwood. One room, very crude, and had been built for survival purposes by the crew of a boat which had blown in and wrecked some years earlier. One of the boys claimed he found a note in it stating this, but I didn't see it.

Back on the beach, we built a fire out of driftwood, took pictures, and nearly froze to death — having such a good time. Some of the men took off up and down the beach, and found that the length they could see, was all there was to it. Some found glass balls (used as floaters in fishing nets), and generally most everyone who made the trip enjoyed it.

Then came the time to get everyone back on the boat and return to Amchitka — at least five hours away and it was getting on into the afternoon.

Our trusty fishing boat showed up on the beach, so with two of the crew on the University of Washington boat, trying to hold it from flipping over — we tried to pack about six or eight more men into it and head back. We got in, and the boat swamped. We got out — wet — they emptied the water out, so we got back in again and it swamped again. One more time — only this time we got it off the beach with just a few inches of water in the bottom. Now take a 12 foot bass boat, put two or three inches of water in its bottom — then add eight or nine men to it, and there isn't much freeboard left. I sat just as lightly as I could, and I think everyone else did too, because we made it all the way back without sinking. (No one had any life preservers.) It sure felt good to get my feet firmly planted on the deck of the bigger boat. I went into the galley to have a cup of coffee and to dry out.

In a few minutes someone out on deck hollered for us to come and see the boat returning with the rest of those who had gone ashore. This time there were nine men in the bass boat and I'm not exaggerating, the freeboard looked to be no more than an inch and a half or two inches. They made it too, but I don't know how.

Then we got underway for Amchitka.

Back through the swells again — up, down, and occasionally sideways. A repeat performance — only this time, we were all very tired. I sat in the galley most of the way back, drank coffee, and wished that the boat would stop rocking. I never got a full-blown case of being seasick, but it was close enough to be uncomfortable anyway. We had one boy that had to be put to bed for the trip home. We had a meal on the way back, but it was noted that

there were a lot of absentees from the table.

We docked back on Amchitka about 11:00 that night — stopped by the mess hall where they fed us again, then off to bed so we could start another day tomorrow.

This was one of my most cherished opportunities while I was in Alaska.