Chapter 3

Along the Trail of Destruction

It is hard to define a trail of destruction, as areas of severe damage occurred from the Anchorage hydroelectric Power Plant which was situated high up in the mountains to the north of Anchorage — all the way to Kodiak Island, some 250 - 300 miles to the south. Seward, Homer, Keni, and certainly Valdez — all sustained heavy damage, and loss of lives. I did not have the opportunity to visit all of these places during this trip; however, before the end of this book, I will have been to all these areas except Valdez, and Homer. (You will remember that the Valdez area became well-known because of the oil spill in the early 90's.)

From just past the Visitor's Center and City Hall, to the east down Fourth Avenue, the north side of the street dropped away — 10 - 20 - 30 feet — wiping out all the businesses along the north side while the south side of the street sustained some damage, but was substantially intact.

The fault line approached downtown Anchorage from Elmendorf AFB, the Corps of Engineers office, past Government Hill school, crossing Ship Creek. Parts of First, Second, and Third Avenues slid down the hill effectively eliminating all buildings, splitting Fourth Avenue, destroying the J.C. Penney Co. on Fifth Avenue, damaging and destroying businesses, apartments, homes, and streets on a steady line to the airport.

The residential area of Turnagain-By-The-Sea was almost unbelievable — houses split in their middles, others standing on end; and others intact, only some slanting at angles of

forty-five degrees, or their ends unsupported over a twenty or thirty foot void.

But don't let me get ahead of myself.

During the intervening years, 1964 to 1995, some of the exact locations I tell you about may have slipped my mind, but the buildings and damage was there. If I say it was on Fourth or Fifth Avenue, I may have the wrong street, and for this I ask your forgiveness. The destruction is what my story is about here.

On Fourth Avenue from City Hall on to the east was home to some legitimate businesses, loan and pawn shops, several bars, the Denali Theater, and further on down the street was the Mt. McKinley apartment building. Pictures of most all this area were shown on TV immediately after the earthquake, and you may recognize some of the places I mentioned.

The D&D Bar and Cafe, a two-story building, slipped into a void almost to its roof. The building was heavenly damaged but not destroyed; however, a bar and cafe sitting in a thirty foot hole, with one-half the street at that level, and the other half where it was before the quake, may well lose lots of its customers. The Hunter Bar across the street still had their building intact – the street and sidewalk on that side was at the proper level. I have often wondered how many of their customers – especially the D&D Bar and Cafe as it was sliding into the void – suddenly decided to give up all alcoholic beverages during those few moments.

A few doors on down the street was the Denali Theater with its marqueé sitting level with the street. Again the buildings were heavily damaged, but still standing. If you had walked up to where the street dropped off into the void, the distance from the level street to the marqueé was close enough to jump across easily – but twenty feet below was the ticket office.

Between the D&D Bar and Cafe and the theater was an Amusement Park, Pawn Shops, Bars, Liquor Stores, – all 20-30 feet into the void – while across the street the buildings were intact – very strange.

These scenes were duplicated on down the street. When the street was again repaired – filled in – no buildings were standing on Third, Second, or First Avenues – just the streets

built through fresh graveled slopes with wooden steps leading from Fourth Avenue to the bottom (Ship Creek area) to allow pedestrians a way to walk up the hill.

Further on down Fourth Avenue stood the 14-story Mt. McKinley Apartment building – looking from City Hall as if it had made it alright. As I approached it I began seeing what looked like black spots between each window – from bottom to top. When in full view, I learned these were gaping holes with large chuncks of concrete missing and twisted reinforcing steel protruding from the remaining walls between the windows – some large enough to drive a car through – with fractured concrete everywhere throughout the building. A cloth awning entrance way was undamaged. This building was not repairable and had to be torn down later.

The Mt. McKinley Apartments were included in a list of destroyed apartments as were the Hillside Apartments, the 14 story L Street Apartments, the Four Seasons Apartments, the Karlarne Arms Apartments – more than 150 commercial buildings, and over 200 homes in the Anchorage area alone. Other areas suffered as much or more damage as Anchorage.

From here we will skip over to Fifth Avenue and note the J.C. Penney building with an entire wall falling to the street, exposing dressed manikins still standing in openings as if to invite customers to continue shopping there. Cars parked on the street below were crushed by falling debris, reducing them to scrap metal in a fraction of a second. The J.C. Penney building was wiped out, but just across a side street the Household Finance building appeared almost undamaged.

The First Baptist Church building was destroyed, and we must give credit to J.C. Penney Co. who allowed the church to use a building they owned to hold services in until they were ready to rebuild on that site. The First Baptist Church then held services in a school building until they could rebuild on Tenth Avenue facing Park Strip, a one-block wide by fourteen-block long city park. I will have more comments about this park and the First Baptist Church both later in this book.

From the J.C. Penney building on to the east, there was The Book Cache, already under repair and opened for business the first time I saw it. McClain's Camera Center also sustained

heavy damage.

As I would walk down the streets – almost any street – I would notice chunks of various sizes missing from the walls of business after business. It seemed no one was exempt from damage. Most streets were cracked and required extensive repairs or complete rebuilding.

The City of Anchorage itself was perhaps the hardest hit of any single entity. The earthquake destroyed all utilities – electric, water, steam, and sewer. Sewer lines had to be "crawled out" for a visible inspection. Many repairs were necessary before they could be used. (Please remember that although when the map of Alaska is placed over a map of the lower 48 states, portions of Alaska will touch the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, Canada, and Old Mexico, and contains an area one-fifth the size of all the lower 48 states, yet at that time had a population of just over 200,000; the Anchorage metropolitan area claiming nearly 150,000 of the entire population.) Obviously, the city required much help in handling a disaster of this magnitude.

Add to this the fact that in many areas, water lines were twisted like pretzels – mains knocked out – leaving no home or business with any source of power or water. Most streets were impassable – food supplies were gone, there was still snow covering the ground and no heat. (The city was heated by steam lines buried some 11 feet deep, and piped into radiators as a metered utility.) Supply lines to Anchorage during the winter are by rail from the port of Whittier (this also had to be checked out through the tunnel I mentioned in Chapter 2), or, by air from the lower 48 states. The harbor at Anchorage freezes over in the winter. I will have more on this later.

On a walk up Ninth Avenue, I came upon a large pile of twisted water lines which had been removed from this immediate area – six inch lines almost twisted in knots. Also in place down Tenth Avenue were irrigation pipes with outlets to each house. These had been used for several months to provide potable water to the houses in this area, as well as other residential areas throughout the city.

A tennis court in the park between Ninth and Tenth Avenues was split almost straight

across the center line where the net would have been strung, the north half dropped some 15 - 20 feet below the level of the south half – the blacktop playing area still intact on both halves. The eastern end of the park did not receive as much damage as other areas as the fault line moved closer to the Cook Inlet and on to the Turnagain-by-the-sea area.

One Saturday morning my two roommates and I decided we would attempt to walk to the Turnagain-by-the-sea area to see the damage first hand and make our own pictures of the destruction. We had been told that the area was sealed off and no spectators would be allowed in, but we thought we might be able to see it anyway. Remember, there was no public transportation available, so walking was the only way of access to the area – some 15 miles or so from our apartment – *one way.* I was in pretty good shape back then, so off we went. The first 7 or 8 miles of this walk we were already familiar with, and by that time I was well aware I had walked a long way. I was determined to go on – out Spenard Road, up the hill, and I can't remember whether we went out Northern Lights Boulevard, Turnagain Boulevard, or some other street, but I guess which one is not important.

The name Turnagain-by-the-sea may need some clue to understand – not a usual name. I was told by residents that Captain Cook who named the Cook Inlet, explored and mapped all the coast of Alaska. He also named the Turnagain-by-the-sea area. This name was the result of the explorer having entered so many inlets during his mapping, then founding them to be inlets rather than the boundaries of the land; he would tell his crew "Turn again by the sea". This happened where the Knik Arm turned south toward Portage Glacier leaving the Cook Inlet.

This area of Anchorage or Spenard, whichever we were in at that time, was the prime residential area of the city. Each home tried to outdo the next with their beautiful yards; flowers, shrubs, and always well maintained lawns. I might also make mention of the fact that the grass was always green. This was mid to late summer, the time everything dries out back in the south but still very green with flowers still blooming here.

One other thing I should mention is the fact that although this was summer, we all had our

overcoats on. High temperatures usually ran in the mid to upper sixties, with an occasional low seventies recorded. Back home the temperatures would be running from the upper nineties to well over one hundred degrees at this time of the year — some forty degrees difference. I later became accustomed to the northern climate and wore short sleeve shirts during this time of the year, however this first trip I wore a topcoat when going out

As we walked on down the street I began noticing that the end of the street looked like the top of a hill, only this area was on substantially level ground. We hadn't noticed any damage to the houses in this area for some distance. As we walked closer, it was evident the street was gone and we couldn't see any houses past that point. At the end of the street there was a drop of 40 - 50 feet or more, and directly in line with where the street formerly proceeded, lay a two-story house on its end, the building still mostly intact. Remember, most of the houses in this area were occupied when the quake struck.

Bulldozers and earth moving equipment had been at work in this area for some time and many of the houses had already been torn down and removed and much of the ground leveled. If it were not for this, we would never have been able to walk through this area of destruction.

The entire area along the bluffs of Turnagain-by-the-sea was destroyed. Homes closer to the bluffs slid into the Knik Arm, and those further inland were pushed up and down at will. One house may be crushed completely, their neighbor's home on an angle in one direction, and the house next door in another direction or moved some distance away from its foundation. Some were broken in their middles, with both halves intact, only a 20 to 30 foot drop from one half to the other.

The area before the earthquake was relatively level I understand, but afterward was dislodged similar to freshly plowed or harrowed land — only in pieces sometimes large enough to support an entire house with others maybe 10 - 20 - 30 feet across. The high side of the dislodged land may drop off to almost any depth or; the two pieces may bridge to form a mini-hill 30 feet high or better.

On a later trip to Anchorage I visited this area again. A portion of it had been left

undisturbed after the earthquake and made into a park with wooden walkways built throughout it to allow visitors to see the tremendous disturbance to the ground.

Let me give you a description of a few of the houses we saw as we walked through the area.

At once we saw a pile of rubble that may have been the remains of a single dwelling or of several dwellings. It was impossible to identify a single house although commercial photographs of the area showed many homes reduced to this status.

One smaller house which was pretty well intact had been loaded on a house movers trailer awaiting relocation to some other area. I suspect there were very few houses left in any condition to be moved.

Another house was sitting relatively level on one end while the other end was broken off – twisted off as a tornado might twist off the top of a tree. The broken end was sitting on about a 45 degree slant from the other portion of the house, and perhaps 10 feet below. I walked up to the corner of the broken end, and stood eye level to the eave on that side with the other side high up above me in the air.

I walked up to the front porch of a colonial style two-story house which didn't appear to be damaged too heavily, however, where it was located prohibited habitation because the entire area had dropped off and all streets destroyed. I don't know what happened to this house.

Another house was across a small valley (I don't know if the valley was caused by the earthquake or existed beforehand) on a small hill. This house was a rather long house and split almost exactly in its middle. One-half was 15 - 20 feet above the other half.

It is impossible to rightly describe this area of Anchorage, but these few illustrations were multiplied time and again. With every house, there was a family – individuals – whose lives were forever changed. Some financial, some physical, some emotional; and don't forget, some lost their lives. Some left Anchorage and Alaska forever – others rebuilt hopefully in an area where another earthquake at another time would not cause the same damage to their property and life. Others became determined to defeat the stress and loss they suffered. In every case lives were changed, and perhaps life itself was appreciated more.