

Chapter 4

Let's Take a Trip South

Even though all public transportation had ceased with the earthquake, the tour business still had to make a living. One tour which seemed to be the most popular, was a bus trip to Portage Glacier — a National Park — some sixty miles to the southeast of Anchorage down the Knik Arm, an extension of the Cook Inlet. Several of us got together one Saturday and decided we would take this tour.

As we left Anchorage on the Seward Highway we noted a change to the landscape almost immediately. Although we traveled adjacent to the Knik Arm all the way to Portage, we moved from a relatively flat area where Anchorage is located, to what seemed to be a much colder and hostile mountainous area within just a few miles. Scrub trees, probably spruce or some other evergreen, lined the road and were not very sightly. This was a good area for maybe bear and moose, but by this time the area might be developed for home sites. Then it was just a place to pass through.

We soon had the mountains closing in on us from both sides. They were beautiful with hanging glaciers, waterfalls from their tops to their bottoms — not quite free falling, but running down their sides on a 45 - 50 or some with over a 60 degree slope. The mountains were perhaps 6 - 8,000 feet tall, but remember they started from ground just above sea level. They were mostly snow capped, and appeared to transcend to unknown depths into the Knik Arm. Evidence was seen every few miles where avalanches of various sizes had scarred their

surfaces. Piles of rock and debris were left where they came to rest.

Our bus stopped at an area where we could pull off the road. Our guide advised us that we were approximately 600 feet above sea level at this point — this being the highest elevation we would attain on this tour. Not too high, but on the left side of the road the mountain proceeded several thousand feet up, at an angle that would take a mountain climber to negotiate, and on the right side of the road about the same angle into the Knik Arm which had narrowed to a deep valley at this point. A hanging glacier was high up the mountain on the opposite side of the Knik Arm from us. We noticed there had been a remarkable drop in temperature where we were now as compared with what it was when we left Anchorage. I later learned there was a drastic difference in the winters here as well as other areas just short distances from Anchorage.

The Alaska Railroad also ran parallel to the road we were traveling. Evidence of the earthquake was everywhere, with crews working on the railroad bed, bridges, and laying new track throughout this area.

Trucks were hauling fill materials including large boulders to both the railroad bed as well as the highway roadbed, making some areas almost impassable for our bus. Wooden bridges had already been built to cross most streams — fast moving glacier-fed streams — in most areas, and in one place we made a short detour through the stream bed. A new temporary bridge was under construction at this stream. The road we were traveling on as I remember it, for a number of miles had a crack almost directly where the center line of the highway originally appeared. It was now silted in, but was still visible where it hadn't been covered over. I don't know how deep the crack had been, but was generally some 6 - 8 inches wide at its tops.

As we later pieced together information, we were told the earthquake had dropped — in place — this entire area from 6 to 10 feet, which would allow the high-high winter tides to completely inundate both the road and railroad beds. (We were told the high-high to the low-low tides in December ran up to 54 feet. The high tide may come in traveling down Knik Arm with a 6 foot wall of water.) Good practices of construction — not burying large rocks —

were forgotten, as increasing the elevations of the roadbeds above the high tide level was the most important item at that time. There were many miles of road and railroad that had to be rebuilt before the next winter which was not too far off at this time.

Villages, including Girdwood and Portage, sank below the high tide levels, and were covered by the tsunami produced by the earthquake. They were deserted as they stood. The houses were not destroyed, and some even had cars parked beside them. From all appearances they were left just as they were that afternoon of March 27, 1964.

Now for a lighter side. Mt. Alyeska, where the Winter Olympic Trials were held not long before the earthquake, is just off the Seward Highway where we were traveling. Our bus took us on a side trip to the Mt. Alyeska Lodge for a short stopover. This gave everyone an opportunity to see the area, ride the ski-lift to the top of the mountain if we wanted to, or just have a cup of coffee. I looked at the ski-lift — just an open bench you had to back into as it was going past — how it went up, up, up beyond sight over a ridge a thousand or maybe two thousand feet above us, how it hung over an area which I'm sure looked like the Grand Canyon from the lift; and decided I would let my buddies tell me about the top of the mountain where the skiing took place when they came down. I believe there is a glacier, snow covered year around, at the top where they ski.

In the meantime, I walked around the area. It was very beautiful. The Lodge was set in a valley between steep and rugged mountains. A small roaring stream was bridged just in front of the lodge. Two small native children were all smiles for the *tourists* to take their pictures. The lodge was beautiful, tall windows facing the mountain, pine paneling, and very comfortable with a big fireplace. The coffee was fine and I joined the others when they returned. I was told, several times, that I should have gone to the top with them. Well, maybe. . .

On to Portage Glacier.

A short dirt runway appeared adjacent to the road we were traveling with a single engine

plane sitting on it. Our tour guide told us Alaska was spotted with small runways where planes could land in case the weather closed in before they could get out of the mountains — they would just land, wait it out, then take off to continue their trip. While at Portage Glacier we saw the benefits of this. The plane we had just passed setting on the runway, flew over us while at Portage Glacier, on its way over the mountains to Whittier

Our bus pulled up to the Information Center at Portage Glacier and let us off for an extended stop to view everything. An enclosed overlook was placed at one end of the parking area. A clear unobstructed view of the glacier lay across a natural lake filled with several icebergs formed by the melting edge of the glacier breaking off in huge chunks. The parking lot had a large crack 2 to 3 feet wide, extending into the lake at waters edge, a product of the earthquake. The area was surrounded by very rugged mountains with roaring streams coming down their sides fed by hanging glaciers and melting snow at their tops.

You have seen pictures of them — glaciers are a blue-green color and can always be spotted by this. They stand out easily from the white snow around them. A Park Ranger at the overlook told us they were made by packed snow which became so heavy it could not support its own weight. It then molded itself into a soft plastic-like material — pliable to the touch, and always exactly 32 degrees Fahrenheit, regardless of the temperature around it.

He told us Portage Glacier was one of few remaining active glaciers — where the ice field is moving rather than sitting still. Because this was an active glacier, the leading edge was continually breaking off in large chunks the size of large houses or even bigger, causing quite a splash. Huge icebergs were formed by this broken-off portion of the glacier.

We have mentioned before how misleading distances and sizes are when you move into a mountainous area. Having struck up a conversation with the Park Ranger, he asked me how wide I thought the lake was, and how tall the leading edge of the glacier was. I didn't want to appear too ignorant, so I indicated it looked to me like the lake was perhaps a quarter of a mile across, and the glacier maybe 20 feet high. He smiled and told me the lake was over four miles wide, and the leading edge of Portage Glacier averaged about 200 feet high above the water line. He said most visitors who were not familiar with distances in mountainous areas

would guess similar to this.

What I thought was a short distance into the lake was an iceberg. Again, he asked me the same question — how far and how big. Of course my estimates were ridiculously low, so he told me the iceberg was protruding out of the water some 60 feet, with another 550 to 600 feet submerged beneath the water. He advised me that only about one-tenth of an iceberg was ever seen above the water level.

One more time he pointed out the difficulty of determining distances in areas we are not used to. The small airplane we had seen on the dirt runway coming toward Portage Glacier flew over us when we started talking, and I had forgotten it by then. He asked me to locate the plane then and I couldn't find it. With his assistance, I finally spotted it — just a speck way up the glacier and still climbing to clear the mountain top. This let me know the enormous size and length of Portage Glacier. I don't know the height of the mountain Portage Glacier was on, but some mountains in this area are up to 13,000 feet elevation.

I learned from these incidents as well as others, that I just couldn't be relied upon to tell dimensions or distances in circumstances like these.

As I continued talking with the Park Ranger, he related the experience he had with the earthquake. It seems that part of his duties during the winter while the lake was frozen over, was to drill holes through the ice and measure its thickness at different points, as well as the depth of the lake. (700 plus feet deep he told us.)

At 5:36 p.m. on that eventful day, he and two other Park Rangers had just walked out on the ice to make their measurements. Several things happened which started a very frightful few days for them, he related to me.

First, the ice broke loose from all the edges surrounding the lake, removing any bridge to the banks, — they were stuck on the ice with no way off. The lake surface then became an iceberg some four miles long by two plus miles wide with jumbled ice cubes at its side.

The dangers of being unable to get off the lake then became a further nightmare, in that the giant iceberg they were on, started a motion action — up, down, side to side, generating

giant waves under the ice, caused by the ground motion of the earthquake. They were constantly afraid it would break up, and they would fall into the cracks and drown. He said the place where they were at the time this action started was rising and falling 10 - 12 - maybe as much as 20 feet. They were unable to keep their footing, and were sliding great distances, only to return again as the motion reversed directions. After a period of time — he couldn't tell how long — they were able to reach the middle of the iceberg where the motion was neutralized pretty well, at least they weren't sliding from side to side.

When the motion subsided enough, they walked the perimeter of the iceberg and found several feet of frigid water and floating broken ice separating them from the banks at any place. This was near the end of March, and would probably not freeze over again that spring. He said they were aware that there would probably not be any help for an indefinite time, and they would freeze to death if they were unable to attain shelter.

With survival their primary interest at that time, they discussed any possibility they might have for getting off or obtaining help. Someone remembered a workmen's line cabin a short distance into the mountains where the Alaska Railroad tunnel to Whittier entered the mountain. This was built so workmen who might be stuck in a snow storm or otherwise and couldn't return to Anchorage, might spend the night. From their inspection of the edges of the iceberg, they had determined that that area was probably their best chance for getting off the iceberg.

With much difficulty, they were able to make their way to the cabin, where they built a fire, had food and water, and generally were alright. I believe he had told me this was some twelve hours after the earthquake when they were safe in the cabin, and that they were there four days before being rescued.

I returned to Portage Glacier on each trip I made to Alaska. The majestic splendor — the awe of its size, and the weight and force it carries down the mountain is spellbinding. Giant rocks are reduced to dust, turning water and ground to a gray color, but always there is a touch of green breaking this monotony by rocks having just enough jade in them to add color

to the ground. If you ever visit Alaska, don't miss this Park.