

Alaska - One Year Later

by

Murray Morgan

NOTE: Murray Morgan, Tacoma, Washington, travel writer and author of such Pacific Northwest best-sellers as Skid Road, The Last Wilderness, and The Dam, has just returned from a two week air tour of Alaska. The following are his impressions of the 49th state a year after the March 27, 1964 earthquake.

ANCHORAGE -- A year after the earthquake of March 27, 1964, a casual tourist might pass through this section of Alaska without realizing it had happened.

The fishing port of Valdez is being rebuilt, and the railroad town of Seward still bears scars along the waterfront. But the other affected coastal towns, perched on the knees of the great mountains, are unmarked.

Anchorage, Alaska's metropolis, vibrates with boom. The slide area on Fourth Street has been cleared and a civic debate continues as to whether it should be returned to business use or left as open space, revealing the encircling mountains. It's business beyond usual in downtown stores, and shop windows reveal such Alaskan necessities as parkas, sports shirts and FM tuners.

Fifteen floors above Anchorage, an old timer in the swank Top of the World cocktail lounge points out a few remaining 'quake scars visible in the mountain-rimmed city below, sighs and whispers of the Good Old Days

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when a man could get high at the Bucket of Blood. The Top is the crowning glory of the Anchorage Westward, the city's newest hotel, soon to be rivalled by the Captain Cook, which will open in June with its own roof room and an athletic club, another feature sure to make the sourdough sigh.

Smaller hostelries, sans rooftop dining, but with a smart lounge to replace the local equivalent of the Bucket of Blood, are being readied from Petersburg to Seldovia in anticipation of a bumper 1965 tourist crop. (Today's Alaska tourist need never be without his Beefeater on the Rocks, but he will find the few remaining dance hall girls are for demonstration purposes only.)

Alaska's second city of Fairbanks, which still remembers the days when a single year's gold production was worth \$9 million, has in two years put almost that amount into its University of Alaska campus. Oldsters complain that the younger generation is more interested in water skiing than dog sledding.

For one reared on Robert Service and tales of the Chilkoot Trail, it is disconcerting to fly into Fairbanks and, on registering at the Fairbanks Inn, to find yourself in a world of sanitized toilet-seats, free TV, multilingual chambermaids, and a cuisine that embraces filet mignon and Eskimo-caught shee-fish.

But Alaska's appeal is not primarily to the lover of the international class hotel. Many visitors want their dough sour, their skins bear, and their hotels smacking a bit of the bush.

Alaska has many comfortable small hotels. Some, like the New Seward in Seward and the Heady in Homer, are distinguished mainly by their lower

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prices and the friendliness of the management. Others are unique.

The Nugget Inn at Nome, for example, was shipped north in parts, lightered ashore, and reassembled last year on the dark sands of the gold beach. Each of its fifteen rooms has twin beds, bath and an efficiency kitchen for those who want to boil their own shee-fish or coffee.

The Wien Alaska Airlines Hotel at Kotzebue, in the Eskimo country, is a neat and congenial barracks that can be reached by plane or kayak. Its family-style dining room serves up reindeer, Arctic fish, blueberry pie, sourdough hotcakes - and a view of the Arctic Sea. The Beachcomber, a former Canadian cruise ship, is being turned into a hotel in Kodiak, an island town which has just been invaded by the tourist with wheels. Two other new hotels at Kodiak are set for summer opening.

In the past most visitors to Kodiak arrived by air and carried guns. They came because the island is the home of the Kodiak bear, largest of carnivorous animals, a dangerous quarry and an impressive trophy. Others stalked the King crab - not as big, and much more succulent. But since Kodiak is now on the Marine Highway (Alaska's ferryliner system), a new type of hunter has appeared, armed with camera and history book, in pursuit of the past.

Kodiak's history goes back to 1763, when the island was discovered by Russian fur hunters. A charming Russian Orthodox church stands on one of Kodiak's hills. The earthquake produced a new reminder of Alaska's Czarist past, uncovering an old stone wharf built by Alexander Baranof, manager of the Russian-American Company, for the little vessels of the sea otter hunters.

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The new ferryliner, the Tustumena (it's named for a glacier), runs between Kodiak and Anchorage. Along the way it noses into several interesting ports; salmon-rich Seward, on fjord-like Resurrection Bay, from where the Alaska Railroad runs north to Anchorage, Fairbanks, and Mount McKinley National Park; Homer, a sportsman's mecca with a unique industry - the processing of jams and jellies; and Seldovia, where the narrow, twisting waterfront streets of wooden planks provide an Old World atmosphere.

The Tustamena's run is out in the country known as The Westward. And westward it is - Kodiak being so far out it's practically due north of Hawaii.

In Southeastern Alaska, a separate stretch of the Marine Highway threads the island-flanked Inside Passage between Prince Rupert, British Columbia, and Skagway. Three big ferryliners -- the Malaspina, the Matanuska and the Taku -- make this 679-mile run, the longest ferry ride in the world. They carry 500 passengers and 108 cars. Last year 100,000 let the captain do the driving.

Between Rupert and Skagway, the ferryliners stop at seven ports -- Ketchikan, Wrangell, Petersburg, Sitka, Juneau, Haines and Skagway, each interesting in its own right. Ketchikan, Sitka, Wrangell and Haines feature the finest stands of totem poles in existence, outdoor galleries that attract visitors from all over the world. Sitka also boasts a Russian church rich in ikons and art, and Petersburg, Alaska's "Little Norway," offers tiny shrimp that melt on your tongue.

Motorists debark from the self-propelled highway either at Haines or Skagway. From Haines they can drive over an international link to the

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Alaska Highway and turn north to Fairbanks and Anchorage. They can't drive out of Skagway, but they can put their autos on a flatcar on the historic White Pass and Yukon Railroad and, ensconced in comfortable coaches, ride the famed Trail of '98 route to Whitehorse, Yukon Territory. From there they can return through Canada to the United States or drive north to the Interior.

A trip lasting two weeks in the dead of an Alaska winter is a far cry from the warmed up tours provided the effete summertime visitors, but today, a year after the 'quake, I found evidences of the thaw everywhere.

At Valdez, a new "Gypsy Queen," a cruise yacht that hauls tourists from Valdez to scenic Columbia Glacier, has replaced a namesake disabled by the Good Friday temblor. A new observation lounge has been added to the state ferry Chilkat to accommodate those making the Prince William Sound water route between Valdez and Cordova. The venerable White Pass and Yukon Route reports its biggest advance bookings since the Days of '98. Out back in Fairbanks, Captain Jim Binkley is slapping a new coat of gilt on his tourist riverboat, Discovery.

In the dowdy state capitol building high on the hill in Juneau, where the legislature is currently in session, no major new bill deals with the 'quake. That comes under the head of old business.

The legislators are looking forward and outward. They are pondering such problems as the state's relations with foreign nations. (Alaska is the only state bordered by two foreign powers -- Canada and Russia, and negotiating trade with a third, Japan.) And the legislators are deeply concerned with tourism.

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Both houses of the legislature crowded into the House Chamber in joint session last month to hear the Alaska Tourist Promotion Association present the case for tourism as a major Alaskan industry, an industry described by ATPA President Jack Musiel, as one "You do not have to mine for, drill for, survey for; it exists, just waiting to be expanded."

The air carriers, tour operators, hotelmen and others who make up the ATPA, will spend more than \$750,000 in 1965 on media advertising, and more than \$1,000,000 on such promotion as folders, posters, mailings and travel and sales department payrolls, Musiel told the Alaska legislators.

Robert Giersdorf, vice president of the association, pointed out in a follow-up speech that the CAB has just authorized stop-overs for visitors touching down in Alaska on transpolar flights on foreign carriers. Last year 61,000 persons aboard KLM, SAS, Lufthansa, Air France and Japan Air Lines planes arrived at Anchorage but could not leave the airport. Now they can look at Alaska's varied wonders before going on, or make it their U. S. port of entry.

"Alaska is an intriguing concept for Europeans and Japanese," Giersdorf told the legislators, in urging them to pungle up additional funds to promote tourism. "Our problem -- and your problem -- is to make more people realize that it is accessible."

The quake of '64 is fast receding into history, a part of the lore and consciousness of the 49th State, akin to Seward's Folly, the Gold Rush and Statehood.