

CAMP DENALI
McKINLEY PARK, ALASKA

TUNDRA TELEGRAM VOL. VI

We began our sixth season with a rather ambitious plan for buildings and improvements, curtailing all our services but housekeeping accommodations in order to expand camp to meet the demands of the opening of the new Denali highway into McKinley Park. We expected a rather uneventful summer with light business, and only dared dream we could accomplish all we planned with only three sets of hands to do all the work. (One pair of these would be, figuratively speaking, tied to the cradle.)

Camp was anything but uneventful. We were full to capacity many nights, and we completed all the projects we had planned plus a few others. But not with only three pairs of hands! All summer long we accumulated volunteer workers who arrived unrecruited. Some stayed a few weeks, others all summer.

First came Peggy Johnston, former U. of Alaska student, who flew in with Celia before the road opened to help take camp out of winter mothballs. Meanwhile, Ginny and Woody and Romany "Small", now aged one year, loaded the cars, shipped them to the park, and drove out to camp. Arriving at camp on June 8, the Woodys found that Celia and Peggy had already collected a staff of one: Garry Kenwood, from Three Rivers, California.

A tall, lean Korean war vet, Garry had worked on trail crews in Sequoia Park summers, and live-trapped deer in winter for a U. of Calif. research project. He had driven to Alaska in his jeep pickup truck for a vacation. He had arrived at Wonder Lake right behind the snow plow, intending to camp there for a few days. Under cloudless skies, Mt. McKinley loomed in view for fourteen straight days. It was love at first sight for Garry. Just to be near and look at that mountain was all the recompense he wanted in exchange for his labors. The highest wages couldn't have bought the work Garry put out. His deeds will rank with those of Paul Bunyan in the legends of Camp Denali.

On June 12, Woody picked up two hitch-hiking Australians struggling along under heavy packs at the Toklat river. They planned to spend a few days camping at the end of the road. They left Camp Denali Sept. 7 to drive with Garry down the Alaska Highway. David Williams was a graduate mechanical engineer from Melbourne. Elaine Scott had been a chief stewardess with Quantas Airlines on their international runs before she teamed up with Dave to hitchhike to Alaska.

Dave was placed in charge of privy production, and before the summer ended had built five "Houses of David", with Garry digging the holes. Elaine took care of the cabins, helped with dishes and laundry, and had energy left over for varnishing. By summer's end the whole staff was talking with Australian accents.

The nursery problem was solved with the arrival of Sue Dean and husband, Fred, head of the University of Alaska Wildlife Dept. Fred had a grant to do research on grizzly bears, so Sue lived at camp while he roamed the park observing his subjects. In addition to looking after Romany and her own young sons, Dougie, age three, and Jeffie, age one, Sue answered the field phone, talked to visitors, and tended the store.

Then Dolly Horn and Ora Anderson arrived. Dolly serves as housemother for a men's dorm at Drake U. in Iowa, while Ora teaches high school in Parlier, California. Between them they caulked the entire lodge inside and out, making it snug against the cold winds and driving rains of early fall. They also carpentered, cooked and washed both dishes and clothes.

Others who spent time with us exchanging labor for board and room were Ted Anderson, a young doctor who had just completed his internship; Margaret Shroyer, a teacher from Everett, Washington; and John Crump, a young airman on furlough from Ladd Field.

Guests from all over the world found their way to Camp Denali. Among them were a young Briton from North Borneo, three Dutchmen from Amsterdam, several Englishmen and a girl from New Zealand. We also numbered as guests a young Scotch couple, a couple from Norway, a girl from the Dominican Republic, and two Swiss. A young Austrian Scientist, Hennig Harmuth, who visited the camp in 1955, returned this summer with his bride, a girl from Germany. For their honeymoon they had come to Alaska by foldboating down the Mackenzie river, through the Peel, the Bell, and the Rat rivers with a portage across to the Porcupine and so to Fort Yukon on the Yukon river - the route of the early day Hudson's Bay trading parties!

Several scientific parties made camp their headquarters including two International Geophysical Year groups studying glaciers. Les and Teri Viereck were back in one party, Les as botanist and Teri as field assistant.

We welcomed a new neighbor and an old friend to the Kantishna: Grant Pearson, formerly Superintendent of Mt. McKinley National Park. Grant retired last year, but couldn't resist the lure of McKinley. He built a small cabin below camp on a bench above Wonder Lake creek, and spent the summer there.

We also said goodbye to an old friend. On Aug. 22, Johnny Busia passed away at his cabin in the Kantishna. Death came at the end of a summer that had seen the return of many of his former companions: Grant Pearson, the Hoslers, Bob Mize, Frank Bonnell and Bobby Sheldon. It came mercifully before winter once again isolated him from the company he loved. His health had been gradually failing all summer, but he refused to let us fly him to the hospital in Fairbanks. Johnny maintained he wanted to die in his own cabin, not in a strange bed, and we could only respect his wishes. Right up to the last he made his home brew to dispense to visitors even though he no longer touched it himself. The morning of his death he gave Grant Pearson money with which to pay his debts. He passed away quietly in his sleep that evening.

We buried him where he wished to be, on a knoll behind his cabin surrounded by the graves of his beloved sled dogs: Big Jim, Sandy, Lucky, and Paddy. It was a simple funeral. His friends built a coffin and dug the grave. Grant Pearson spoke a few words about Johnny from his thirty year's friendship. Then we all signed the guest book and pulled ourselves across Moose Creek on his cable car for the last time.

Johnny was a simple, unschooled man, but he was wise, honest, and generous. Hundreds had signed his guest book, sipped his beer, and enjoyed his warm hospitality. He was a good friend and neighbor; we will miss him. Johnny had made his home in the Kantishna since his youth. He hadn't been to Fairbanks for thirteen years or to the Park station for four. He would not have understood the world that will come to the Kantishna with the new road. With his death an era comes to an end, for a little bit of Alaska dies with each oldtimer.

Nature played many pranks this summer. The weather was the driest and warmest in the history of camp. Shorts and tennis shoes were more in order than the usual jeans and shoepacs. Wonder Lake creek went dry, the first time in over thirty years. This had its tragic side: forest fires raged all through the Interior, and smoke sometimes obliterated the view of McKinley for days on end.

There were other odd happenings. Sheep were sighted in Kantishna for the first time in several decades. A beaver, miles from water, charged Garry as he took its picture on the road near Camp Eielson. On one trip into headquarters, we sighted 15 bears, the most ever seen on one journey. To cap it all, a new species made its appearance in the Park: beef cattle, strayed from their range just north of the boundary in the Lignite district.

The Muldrow glacier took the limelight away from Mt. McKinley this summer. Where formerly it was difficult to discern anything of the glacier from the park road except the rubble-covered terminal moraine, one can now see clearly the huge jumbled blocks of blue-white ice towering two hundred feet above its old level.

To observe and photograph this phenomenon we made numerous overnight expeditions up the lateral moraine of the Muldrow to Anderson's Pass. Where once you looked down onto the Glacier from the ridge along Glacier creek, you now looked a hundred feet up into the air at the bizarre seracs which are over-running and pushing up under the green tundra. At places high up on the ice one could observe a mesa of grass and willow that had been lifted up by the force of the moving ice. At other spots, wildflowers waved in the sunlight a few inches away from slabs of ice that would soon engulf them. A chain of small lakes formed along the lateral moraine, some of which would drain out overnight as water cut an outlet. A beautiful lake has refilled an old bed at the head of Glacier creek near Anderson's Pass. We hope it stays there. It is a spectacular spot for overnight camping trips.

Where we couldn't walk to observe the ice, we flew. Above the big icefall at Gunsight Pass, the glacier has remained unchanged. Below Gunsight Pass to the terminus, it is a mass of jumbled ice blocks and crevasses that appear to bar any possible travel. A group of mountaineers from Everett, Washington spent three weeks trying to find a route from Magonogal Pass out onto the glacier so they could climb the mountain. They returned defeated. In late August Celia and Garry managed to ford the McKinley River, now swollen from the quantity of melting ice at lower altitudes, and made their way up to Magonogal. They reported the glacier at that point had dropped more than two hundred feet, leaving just a shelf of old ice clinging to the cliffs about thirty feet broad. Beyond this a sheer precipice fell away to the main glacier mass far below. To find a route onto Mt. McKinley from this approach will now be a major undertaking for mountain climbers.

What has caused all this activity? The sharp earthquake centered here last March? An unusual accumulation of ice at the head of the glacier which started it moving? Neither Dr. Troy Pewe, USGS glaciologist, nor any of the other glacier experts who studied it are sure of the answer. One thing is certain -- nature is seldom mild in McKinley Park.

It was well we had so many willing hands to make light our work, for we certainly didn't get any cooperation from any of our mechanical aids. Our machinery seemed to be jinxed. Everything from the typewriter and adding machine to the Volkswagon Kombi bus broke down. Woody and Dave were continually up to their elbows in grease. Even the park hotel, after doing our laundry for five years, could no longer perform this service. We resorted to our "armstrong" washing machine -- wash board and elbow grease -- for all laundry. Luckily the sun shone often.

On August 3, the first car pushed through to McKinley Park over the new Denali highway. From then on we were full every night. Our old Ford truck gasped its last trying to haul in enough gas in drums to meet the demand of the new-type motor tourist. The park hotel, long used to gearing its life around the arrival and departures of trains, found guests arriving at all hours of the night, needing food, gas, and car repairs. Jack West's sleepy little trading post at Cantwell village, 30 miles south of the Park, had customers beating on the door at 3 a.m.

Then there was the Territorial police officer who drove all the way to Igloo patrol cabin (Park Road Mile 33) looking for the turnoff to the Park Hotel. And the new outhouses sitting in front of the carpenter shop at Park headquarters waiting to be trucked to camp sites were used where is as is.

These growing pains of the newly-opened highway were soon remedied; signs were posted at all junctions, and stocks of gas and oil increased to meet the demand. It was a valuable dress rehearsal for next summer.

By summer's end, all of the tent cabins at Camp Denali had been moved to locations in the spruce woods along our entry road with parking space provided for each cabin. We replaced them in the upper lodge area with small rustic chalet-type cabins, fitted with built-in bunks and cupboards. Woody has a new tool house. Clear spring water has been piped 3,000 feet down the hillside from No Name creek to spigots outside each cabin. Foundations have been laid for a separate dining hall and kitchen, which will release the lodge for lounging and recreation. Also begun is a new Trading Post located at the upper parking area, to serve the drive-in business.

We will be operating Camp Denali full scale next summer, with meal service, guided trips, and a transportation schedule to meet passengers at the train.

Up until now, we have never used the Tundra Telegram for propaganda, but we need your help. Many of you have observed and photographed the big bull moose feeding in the shallows of Wonder Lake with Mt. McKinley in the background. You have also managed to get close-up portraits of the almost-tame bull caribou browsing in the vicinity.

All of these animals face annihilation unless ~~Cops~~ can be taken to protect them. With the opening of the Denali highway, hunters have poured into the area just north of the park boundary. We have no quarrel with hunting, but camping on the boundary, waiting for a protected animal to poke his head over the arbitrary line is not sportsmanship.

Very shortly much of the wildlife living in the area around Wonder Lake will be shot off, for they range both inside and outside the park boundary at this point in a natural feeding area bounded by Moose creek and the surrounding hills. This will mean a great loss to those people who get a thrill from watching these wild creatures in their native habitat.

We would appreciate having each one of you write to the Fish and Wild Life Service, Dept. of the Interior, Washington, 25, D.C., requesting that an area be set aside and designated as a wildlife preserve with the following boundaries: from the Kantishna entrance of Mt. McKinley National Park north to the terminus of the road at the Fanny Quigley air strip, with no hunting to be permitted along the road or for a distance of three miles off the road on either side.

A few personal notes in closing. Liz and Bill Berry spent the year in Southern California, where Bill finished back orders of paintings and was a consultant for Disneyland. Their "miniature" husky now weighs 85 pounds. Ted and Barbara (Cross) Lachelt are parents of a boy, born May 2. Ted worked as an engineer for the Park Service in Yellowstone after a winter of graduate school at the University of Washington. He vows he will be back in the Eagle's Nest next summer. Bill and Ginny Nancarrow have completed several new log cabins with fireplaces at their Deniki Lakes site, ten miles south of the park station on the Denali Highway, and should be open for business next summer.

Celia is taking a course in Botany at the University, and works part-time on the Fairbanks Daily News Miner as a writer. Woody is studying for his civil engineering degree at the University; he hopes this type of work will offer more chances for winter employment than his forestry training. Ginny's time is devoted to dishes, dustpan, and diapers.

And that brings us to the close of another year at Camp Denali. We are making out a new mailing list for the Tundra Telegram. Many of last year's copies were returned because of wrong addresses. If you move and still want to hear from us, drop us a card. We are cutting down our mailing list, so if you want to continue to receive the TT, let us hear from you.

Best wishes to all of you for the coming year

CAMP DENALI

Woody - Ginny - Celia - "Small"