

Wilderness House Literary Review 17/2

William Vaudrain
Unlimited Miles

We used to say that "our way was north," and as the years passed, our way encompassed New Hampshire, Vermont, Maine, and the Canadian Maritime Provinces. We also headed west with a month-long cross-country motorcycle trip to California, a few more 'cycle trips out to Yellowstone National Park and down through the Grand Tetons. Eventually our journeys would require us to rent a car in order to take a nice little drive to Alaska. But that's a whole other story... and this is it.

It was August of 1981, and Pete Panosian, Adolfo Andrade, and I were three "twenty-somethings" on a mission; to get ourselves and the rental car we were driving safely to Alaska and back again before the end of the month.

President Regan was threatening to fire the striking air traffic controllers, so my friends and I were relieved that we weren't flying and had chosen the long way, deciding to drive on our great adventure. But we had only a month in which to get there, see what we wanted to see, and get back home again. There wasn't any time to waste.

We were no strangers to long-range adventures. I had taken a month-long motorcycle trip to California and back with Pete's brother John, and on our cycles Pete, John and I had toured the Canadian Maritime Provinces, and twice ventured out to Yellowstone National Park. But Alaska? That would be the crown jewel of all our adventures! We had been there on maps, in books, and in our imaginations. For this landmark event, we would park our motorcycles in favor of a car.

Pete had subscribed to Alaska magazine, and each month we couldn't wait to pour through its pages. There was an article titled "Cooper Landing, My Hometown" that had lit the fuse. I can remember seeing the photographs of the dark green, spruce-covered mountainsides running down to the banks of the glacial turquoise waters of the Kenai River. Reading the article allowed us to get a look into the lives of the people who lived there. It was a glimpse into an existence that had up to that point been the stuff of fiction, existing for us only in the works of Jack London or Robert Service. This was the real thing, and the planning for our trip began in earnest. Now was the time to fulfill the dream, to answer our own "call of the wild".

Much to our disappointment, John wasn't able to get the time off from work. Our greatest adventure was going to be missing one of the usual characters. However, our friend Adolfo jumped at the opportunity to take his place.

We each had our reasons for taking this trip. For Pete and I, our way was north, and there wasn't any place much farther north than Alaska. I had also returned to school the previous year and had the feeling that if I didn't go, I might not get another chance.

Adolf was an adventurer and liked nothing better than a good road trip. We were going to drive so far that we would end up at the end of the road and have to turn around to get home. He was also on a quest to get

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his hands on some sheep skins to cover the front seats in his van. He said it would be cheaper and more exciting to buy them out west "where the sheep were."

We would rent a car from Hertz since they advertised free, unlimited miles. I called them to make an inquiry.

"When you say unlimited miles, suppose we drove to... say...Alaska?" I asked the Hertz representative on the phone.

"Still free miles," he replied.

When can I come in and where do I sign?

Over the many weeks of planning, we debated which routes to take, what we would need, and how we would fit it all in the Ford Escort station wagon we planned to rent. Each week consisted of meetings where maps were unfolded, lists were made, and plans solidified. We calculated stages of mileage, divided it by the car's estimated miles per gallon to get the rough idea of the gallons of gas needed, and then multiplied the number of gallons of gas needed by the average price of gas per gallon to figure out a ballpark cost of fuel for the trip. It was hard to believe that math wasn't our strong point in school. We handled our calculations as if we were NASA planning a trip to the moon. Actually, for us, Pawtucket, Rhode Island to Homer, Alaska and back to Rhode Island again was more challenging and personally more significant than any old trip to the moon.

Peter, Adolfo, and I set out from Pawtucket, RI on August 1st ("You're sure it's unlimited miles?", we had again asked the car rental agent behind the counter) and except for stopping and making camp for one night in Glacier National Park, Montana and then again in McBride, British Columbia - neither location producing any sheep skins for Adolf - drove straight through to Alaska.

The three of us took turns behind the wheel, stopping only for gas, the bathroom (which we tried to coincide with the gas stops), and hastily eaten meals. We referred to our driving strategy as "The Domino Principle"; when the driver couldn't drive any more, he would fall into the back seat to sleep. The former back seat occupant would fall into the navigator/radio man position. The former navigator would become the new driver. The process would repeat itself every five or six hours.

The country between Rhode Island and Wyoming was familiar territory. Peter and I had traveled it when we had taken two previous motorcycle trips out to Yellowstone National Park in Wyoming and down through the Grand Tetons to Jackson Hole, so we didn't feel as if we were missing anything big with the non-stop drive through. The new, uncharted region began with a right-hand turn up into North Dakota and then a due-west heading through Montana with another eventual right turn up to Glacier National Park on the Montana/Alberta border. That was our first scheduled stop where we would park the car and set up the tent for a night.

After Glacier National Park, we headed north and in front of us the view of the great plains of Alberta rolled on to the horizon, broken only by the jagged line of the Canadian Rockies to the west. Our route eventually took us to Calgary where we stopped to convert some US dollars into Canadian currency. Then we climbed up into the Canadian Rockies to

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Banff and Jasper, travelling the Icefields Parkway where for the first time I saw real glacier-fed rivers and lakes, their water the same milky turquoise blue as the pictures I had seen of the Kenai River. The scenery was fantastic and whetted our appetites for what was to come.

Even with all the weeks spent planning and talking about practically nothing else, the true enormity of the trip didn't actually hit me until we had gotten as far as McBride, British Columbia. We had stopped and set up the tent to camp for the night. We broke out the map of North America and spread it out over the hood of the car. Seeing the actual distance we had traveled up to that point, how far we actually were from home, and how far we still had to go was a big bite to digest. Rushing along the highway had kept our minds occupied with watching for signage, the gas gauge, studying the road maps, catching a nap when we could. We were moving, moving, moving, putting as many miles behind us as quickly as we could.

But now, during this time of quiet reflection, it hit us that we were traveling not just across the country (heck, I had already done that), but almost diagonally across the entire continent. This was a little hard to wrap our minds around and I needed some quiet time to let all that sink in. I left the others and went and sat in the back seat of the car to just stare up at the ceiling for a little while. My mind had gone blank. I came back to reality a while later when Pete asked me if I was going to sit there all night. I looked at my watch and discovered that fifteen minutes had passed of which I had no memory. Looking out at the landscape I saw that the rays of the sun had slanted in and painted the mountains around us a deep reddish gold. Here was another item that made me realize that we were somewhere far different than home. It was nine o'clock at night and the sun was still up! We definitely weren't in Kansas anymore Toto.

There was a general silence during dinner, not due to another stunning meal of canned vegetables and boiled rice, but because our eyes and ears outnumbered our mouths twelve-to-three and we let the majority rule. The sound of the buzzing mosquitos and the crackle and pop of the fire contributed more to the scene than our voices ever could. When the stars finally managed to sparkle out into the midnight blue dome of the sky, we retreated into the tent for a much-anticipated good night's sleep.

That was the first time we were all sleeping at the same time since Glacier National Park and it wouldn't happen again until we got to Fairbanks. I had been looking forward to sleeping in the tent, stretched out in my sleeping bag. Compared to the cramped back seat of the car, it was luxurious. At this point, we had covered over three thousand miles. This much-needed night of restful sleep was free from the usual thoughts of maps and distances to drive. The stillness and silence was a welcome relief from the never-ending sound of the engine and the rumble of the tires as the car sped along the road at sixty or seventy miles per hour.

What brought us to this point so far from home? A dream. Alaska had always been a dream destination for us. We had always loved the outdoors, and for years, in all seasons and weather, had hiked, snow-shoed, climbed, and camped all through the White Mountains of New Hampshire and the rest of New England. At some point, our conversation around the campfires always turned to Alaska; the Last Frontier, the Pipeline, North-

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ern Lights, Gold Rush, glaciers, Mt. McKinley (it was still called that back then) ... wolves and eagles and bears, oh my!



At the beginning of the home stretch – mile marker 0 on the Alaska Highway out of Dawson Creek - we decided to add to our experience by picking up a hitchhiker. He was standing on the shoulder of the road with his thumb out, holding a small cardboard sign with “Alaska” scrawled on it in black marker. We pulled over and opened the passenger side rear door. He said his name was Jimmy, he was from Louisiana, and he volunteered right up front that he was sorry, but he didn’t have any spare money to chip in for gas. I opened the rear hatch and he tossed in his surprisingly small duffle bag. Like many of the pilgrims on the road to Alaska, he was either looking to find something or to lose something. In either case, traveling light didn’t slow you down. He told us he was a good driver and if we needed him to, he would take turns at the wheel. That was pretty much our sum and total knowledge about Jimmy from Louisiana and that was fine. It was all part of the adventure.

Pulling out of Dawson Creek, we began traveling the legendary “Alcan”; the Alaska-Canada Highway. It was all dirt and gravel back then and we spent a lot of time having to dodge stones kicked up by eighteen-wheelers which zoomed by us in both directions. We also had the good luck not to lose a headlight or windshield to the barrage. From what we saw, it seemed as if one out of every three cars had suffered some sort of stone-related damage.

Whenever we stopped for fuel, we noticed that Jimmy would go into the station and, although he had no money to help fill the gas tank, would fill himself with candy bars and other junk food that he could stuff in his mouth before getting back to the car. This began to rub us the wrong way, as well as the fact that we had lost our “bedroom” when we picked Jimmy up. I thought we were being soft-hearted, but as it turned out, we were soft-headed. But what could we do? We couldn’t just toss him out in the middle of nowhere, so he was with us for almost 700 miles. He did do his share of driving, but it required one of us staying awake to supervise. We reached Whitehorse, British Columbia and there, we told him we were stopping for the night and weren’t sure what time we’d be leaving the next day. It would probably be best if we parted company so we wouldn’t slow him down.

Once he was out of sight, we grabbed a quick meal and again hit the road. Unfortunately, there was only one road, and as we left town, there stood our former passenger with his thumb out. Adolfo, Pete, and I exchanged looks and shrugged our shoulders. As we approached Jim, Adolf suddenly jumped on the gas and we sped past him, avoiding eye contact. Our last image of Jimmy from Louisiana was of him shrinking in the rear-view mirror. Our feelings of guilt must’ve lasted almost a quarter of a mile. Hope he made it alright.

Reciting Robert Service out loud as we crossed into the Yukon Territory (I had proudly memorized “The Cremation of Sam McGee” in its entirety) and stopping for a real breakfast at a lodge on the Coal River where we splurged and had sourdough pancakes and reindeer sausage,

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remain vivid memories. (I could swear the moose head mounted on the wall was watching us.) Then there was the incident when we stopped for gas but had missed a time zone change. "Open at 7AM" said the sign, so we sat patiently at the pumps for about ten minutes before we beeped the horn. We woke up the gentleman whose gas station wasn't due to open for another hour. (What do you mean it's only six o'clock? asked Adolfo.) He saw our RI license plates and asked us about our journey. He told us of the first time he had come up the Alcan in 1967 and how we were lucky because it was a heck of lot easier trip now. He stretched, said since he was up anyway, he'd fill our tank and get us back on the road. He responded to a question from Adolf, that no, he didn't know where to buy sheep skins. With a wave, he wished us luck and sent us on our way.

Moose and the occasional roadside bear were our daytime companions during the journey, but stopping in the deep, silent, darkness of a Yukon night, we discovered that the multitude of fierce, red eyes that had been reflected in our headlights belonged to more rabbits than we had seen. Dozens of them. I think that Adolf knew that they belonged to rabbits since when we stopped he got out and ran off chasing them to just beyond the reach of our headlights. I always thought it was a little foolhardy since even if he was sure they were rabbits, he didn't know what else might be out there that might be eating those rabbits. That same night, while stopping to stretch our legs there was an unexpected summer display of the aurora. During that deep, silent darkness, I came to the conclusion that in spite of what some people might say, the Northern Lights do make a sound, like the faint crinkling of cellophane, barely discernable on the edge of hearing.

We crossed the Alaska State line at about dawn on August 7th, approximately one-hundred and sixty-eight hours after we had left home. We were exhausted, excited and still a bit apprehensive. After all we had done and seen, and all the distance we had put behind us, the trip was only half-way completed. There was still an equally long stretch of road ahead of us before we were safely back home. Fortunately, the pressure was off; we had made it to Alaska and had time enough to enjoy it and the return trip.

Arriving in Fairbanks, we met up with a friend of ours from high school who had moved there, and we stayed with him and his wife for one night before heading south down the Parks Highway to Denali National Park. The great mountain itself wasn't visible, much to our disappointment, but while there, we decided to have a wilderness adventure and spend a night out in the bush. We organized the equipment we thought we'd need and stowed it in our packs.

The next morning, we boarded the yellow school bus that ferried passengers on the tour through the park. A tradition of the tour was when anyone spotted any wildlife, you called out and said what side of the road it was on so no one missed it. There was one gentleman who was a willing participant, only more times as not, what he thought was an animal was a downed tree or a rock.

"Bear on the left!"

"Moose on the right!"

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“Moose on the left!”

After enough false alarms, the passengers pretty much stopped paying any attention to him. We bounced along for a while longer and had the driver stop and drop us and our gear off in what seemed to be a good spot. We hitched up our packs and headed out onto the tundra.

Now, you need to understand that once we got off of the bus, we were totally on our own. There were no facilities of any type. There were no other roads, no man-made structures or other shelter. The low-lying tundra rolled out in front of us for a few miles before the land began to rise and the mountains began to grow up out of the earth. The bus, now a small dot of yellow as it travelled the road on the edge of the forest continued on its way and then disappeared around a bend. We were alone.

For an hour or so we followed a small creek that meandered its way down from the mountains and across the tundra. The corridor of brush and scrub willows that lined its banks grew back from the stream for a dozen yards or so on both sides, providing the only vegetation of a height that provided any concealment. We took a short break and decided to cross the stream. That’s when we came across the bear tracks in the mud of the stream bed, and they were going the same direction we were.

We had seen tracks before and were aware of the bears; we had “bear bells” tied to our packs and we were making noise and talking in loud voices, so they would know we were coming. We wanted to make sure not to surprise anything large, furry, and omnivorous.

But these tracks were different from the others. Not only were they huge, but they were so fresh that the whorls on the pads were still clearly visible and water was still seeping into them. A few looks back and forth at each other and without a word being spoken, we had a sudden change of heart. It’s a humbling experience when you come across physical evidence that makes you realize that you’re in the vicinity of something that is higher in the food chain than you are.

Quickly getting out the map and compass, I started to triangulate our position (a skill needed before GPS was invented). We were looking for the most efficient route to beat a dignified but hasty retreat back to the road. Jamming the map and compass back into my pack, I pointed, and we tramped a mile or more in that direction. Suddenly we saw a familiar yellow dot come into view; it was the bus as it was winding its way back out of the park. We eyeballed the best route that would get us to the road the quickest and double-timed it, managing to make it with a minute to spare. We flagged down the bus and the driver greeted us with no trace of surprise in his voice.

The night was spent in an old railroad car- turned-bunk house that served as the youth hostel in the park. That evening while standing around the communal campfire, I noticed that a pilgrim across the fire was staring at the URI sweatshirt I was wearing. He nodded at me and asked if I went to URI. His name was Dave and as it turned out he was a recent graduate of the University. We even had some mutual acquaintances. Time spent in conversation passed quickly, and the fire burned low. It was time to put the lid on a very busy day.

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The next morning, after coffee and donuts for breakfast, we were off to our next stop; Anchorage, where we were going to treat ourselves to a real bed and a hot shower!

(As a sidenote, Dave and I met up again several years later when we both were working for the same human services agency in RI. Each of us pointed to the other and simultaneously said, "Alaska!")

In Anchorage, as fate would have it, there was no room at the inn... any of them! Except for the high-end hotels downtown that came nowhere near fitting our budget, and a basement room in a cheap motel that had wall to wall carpeting that was squishy with an inch of water, ("Not big problem. Bed dry! You sleep on bed not floor!" the Korean manager informed us), there wasn't a vacancy to be had; it was still tourist season. Since we were still relatively fresh from a good night's sleep, we decided to keep heading south. Destination: Homer, as far west as you can drive on the U.S. Highway System, Homer is quite literally the "end of the road."

We headed south out of Anchorage, down the Seward Highway, and around Girdwood, found ourselves caught up in a small herd of Winnebagos following their seasonal migratory route down the Kenai Peninsula. Using some questionable-but-effective driving maneuvers, we managed to lose them where the highway splits off towards Seward. We continued down the peninsula on the Sterling Highway towards Homer.

The Kenai Peninsula was beautiful, and before we knew it (and if we had blinked, we might have missed it) we were passing through Cooper Landing... THE Cooper Landing! Of course, we stopped. It was like stepping into a waking dream. The turquoise blue water of the Kenai River looked just like it did in the pictures in Alaska magazine, only it was alive with the flashing red of spawning sockeye salmon. It was the first time that I had seen salmon that wasn't in a can! Pete and Adolfo had to take me by the arms and lead me, slack-jawed, back to the car, my hands reeling an invisible fishing pole. A short break for photos at the Cooper Landing Store and in a cloud of dust, we were off again!

Stopping at Kasilof, we caught a glimpse of a towering range of mountains rising up from across Cook Inlet. Although many miles away, they were huge, and their snow-covered peaks gleamed in the late afternoon sun. Unfolding the map, we found their name; the Chigmit Mountains. There were ten thousand footers among them, making "our" White Mountains of NH mere foothills in comparison. Standing among them was Mt. Iliamna, the second in the chain of volcanos running up Cook Inlet. We were looking at a real volcano! It hadn't gone off since 1954, but it was a real volcano! But volcano or no, it was time to go.

As we neared the "end of road", it followed a long decline to sea level, where it entered Homer. We arrived in the early evening under an August sun that was nowhere near setting, and just kept following the road. It led us out onto the Homer Spit, a long, narrow moraine left behind by a long-gone glacier, extending 4.5 miles into Kachemak Bay. Surrounded by snow-capped mountains and deep, icy water, it is Homer's most unforgettable natural feature. The road ended at a spot aptly called, "Land's

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End.” Here you had no choice but to turn around or drive into the Bay. We parked the car and pitched our tent out on the end of the Spit. That taken care of we walked back up the road to do a little reconnoitering and discovered one of the unforgettable, man-made features that Homer has to offer: The Salty Dawg Saloon.

Built of logs with a small lighthouse as part of the structure, it is a bar of some renown. The interior is papered, ceiling and walls, with business cards, messaged dollar bills, foreign currency, and ladies underwear to the point where it’s difficult to tell exactly what material the inside is built of.

I wish I could say that I clearly remember that first, monumental visit to The Dawg, but we threw caution to the wind and celebrated our arrival in grand fashion. The details are hazy at best, watered down by a small river of tequila and faded by the passing of time. The finer points have been left to wander somewhere amongst the beauty of The Spit. One thing I do remember is sitting at the bar with Pete and Adolf on either side of me. Staring back at us was our reflection in the mirror behind the bar. We raised our glasses in a toast to ourselves, where we were, and what we had accomplished. Leaving the Dawg, we staggered twice the actual distance to where we had made camp.

The next morning came much too quickly, accompanied by a short but violent storm that almost blew the tent, with us in it, into the bay. But as quickly as it had come, it was gone, leaving behind a morning of blue, freshly scrubbed sky with the snow-covered tops of the mountains radiating white from across the other side of the bay. There was still a breeze blowing, and the white-capped waves were hurling themselves up on the beach with the sound of rolling thunder. It was a beautiful day to recover from the previous night.

I remember us sitting amidst the fishing boats on the waterfront early one afternoon during those few idyllic days in Homer. We were perched atop a stacked pile of crab pots, drinking some god-awful coffee and eating shrimp steamed to order, fresh off a boat. We sat there, peeling shrimp, and staring out across Kachemak Bay at the Kenai Mountains. The sun was reflecting off the water, and a light breeze was blowing. Pete, in his best impersonation of a snooty Newport socialite, turned to me and asked,

“Say Vudsie, what do you think the poor people are doing this season?”

We all laughed, knowing that even though we were the poor people, where we were was worth much more than the money we had spent getting there. The sound of our laughter was so pure and clear that it fit in to the surroundings as much as the crying gulls or the sound of the wind whistling through the rigging of the nearby fishing boats. I looked at Adolfo and Pete and realized that this was one of those perfect moments in time. The sights, sounds, and even the smells, were all frozen with crystal clarity; a still shot of the moment filed into the photo album of my mind. Any time we spent might never again be exactly like this. How could it?

We made our farewell appearance at The Dawg that night. We were leaving the next day, so we tried to keep things under control, wanting to have (most) our wits about us as we began our homeward voyage.

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After breakfast the next morning, we pulled out of Homer. The car climbed the same hill we had come down on our first day. The view was just as awesome, only it was out the back window. I watched as the Spit got smaller until we went around a curve and it vanished from my sight, probably never to return.

We repeated our mad scramble on the return trip, with a slightly different, route, taking us through western British Columbia and the states of Washington, Idaho, , and Wyoming. We were hoping to hook up with our old friend and fellow adventurer, Cinncinatus, who had been working in West Yellowstone that summer. Unfortunately, we had missed him by a day, and he was already headed home. We did enjoy a three-day layover in Yellowstone National Park and were back in Rhode Island by the end of August, with quite the tale to tell the car-rental company to explain the more than 10,000 unlimited miles we had put on their car in a month.

("Where the heck did you take this car?!?," asked the man behind the counter after checking the mileage. "Alaska", I replied. "I asked about that, remember?")

The years have passed much too quickly. Things have changed while the planet has made its many trips around the sun.

Adolfo, who never did get his sheep skins, got married, moved to Massachusetts, and eventually dropped off the screen. As of this writing, I haven't seen him in well over twenty -five years and wouldn't know where to begin looking.

Pete and I remained close friends. He got married, settled down, and never made it back to Alaska, although we shared other adventures in other places. I went back to school at the end of that magic August of '81. I reconnected with an ex -girlfriend who became my wife- to-be. We got married my senior year and I graduated from the University of Rhode Island in 1984.

I eventually did make it back to Alaska in February of 1996. Just to show how things can change in a dozen years, I was going through a divorce.

I had made friends online who lived in Anchorage, and they had invited me to visit if I needed to get away from the emotional turmoil that was churning up my life. I took them up on their offer and, flying into Anchorage International Airport that February day, I practically had my nose pressed to the window. The snow-white and ice-blue landscape below me was a different world than the lush green one I had seen that August, fifteen years earlier. The old feeling of excitement I had felt for the state was rekindled. As I drove my rental car up International Airport Road and passed the "Welcome to Anchorage" sign, I broke out in an ear-to-ear smile that wouldn't go away. I had been through a lot, and there was a whole lot of water under the bridge, but I made it. I really was back! Alaska was mine, a place where I had no shared memories of my ex. We had done a bit of travelling and going back to any of those places would just lead to the ghost of a failed marriage bending in and throwing a shadow over things. Going to Alaska allowed me to breathe deeply and write a few lines of a new chapter in my life.

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I met up with my friends Roxy, a local radio personality and Vickie, who taught middle school, and spent a lot of that week moving in and out of various circles of their friends. I did a lot of driving around, looking for familiar sights I might remember from my last visit all those years ago. I think I found the motel with the soggy carpet, but I already had a room at the Copper Whale Inn, a nice B and B downtown. I took a long shot and looked for the name of a girl I knew from college who had moved to Alaska soon after graduation. All I knew was that she lived in Eagle River, about twenty miles north of Anchorage. (Hi, this is Bill Vaudrain. Did you have Professor Palmentier for Botany 101 at URI?) The gamble paid off and I reconnected with my friend Cheryl.

From 1996 through 2009, I went to Alaska almost every year - twice a year when I could afford it; a week in February for Fur Rendezvous in Anchorage, and two weeks in August to fish for salmon around Cooper Landing in the Russian and Kenai Rivers. August visits would also include a couple of days in Homer. I'll never forget seeing The Spit in August of 97 as it came into view around the same curve that I thought had forever removed it from my sight in 1981. I guess that's where my heart really was when it came to Alaska. The Salty Dawg was still my favorite stop.

Peter and I would often talk about our Alaskan adventure, and he would listen to me with undivided interest when I would tell him about my latest visit north. I would good-naturedly rag on him about his failure to get back to Alaska and often upon returning from a summer trip, I would present him with spruce seedlings that I had brought back with me. I told him that if he wasn't going back to Alaska, I was bloody well going to bring Alaska to him. He planted them in his yard and probably had the only stand of Alaskan White Spruce growing in the lower forty-eight.

The trip in August of 2009 marked my eighteenth visit to Alaska. As I sat there at the bar in The Salty Dawg, the reflection looking back at me from the mirror behind the bar was that of me with Pete and Adolpho on either side, twenty-seven years younger, not knowing that it might never be better than it had been then. Well, it's assuredly been different, but I can't say with definitive certainty if it's been better.

The Great Land kept calling me, and the dream had been that someday to maybe make a permanent move. It would be easier than the flying back and forth, and I always said that I'd probably miss those little bags of peanuts the airline used to give you when you flew.

Well, the best laid plans often go astray, as they say. After returning to school to earn my RI teaching certification, I had gone as far as getting my Provisional Alaska teaching certification. Each February I would spend a day or two visiting Vicki at her school and observing her classes. I got to know her principal who would greet me with, "It must be February vacation in RI, Bill's back!" Getting my teaching degree was a means to an end. I would need a profession to make the move possible and teaching was it. I did get a job offer there and it almost happened, but it really wasn't practical, and I had to turn it down. Common sense had crept into my life, so I taught in RI instead...although I still keep that provisional certification from Alaska among my souvenirs.

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I never did make a permanent move to Alaska. The dream passed, and so has one of the original dreamers. Pete has gone on to the end of the trail, passing away in November of 2001 from cancer. After dozens of camping trips, thousands of miles of motorcycle adventures, and long years of friendship, it's hard to believe that he's gone. There's an empty spot in the lives of all the people who knew him and were lucky enough to have called him their friend. Although he himself never made it back to Alaska, I did post a picture of him, along with his obituary, on the community bulletin board at the Cooper Landing Post Office on my trip that following February. I think he would have liked that.

Whenever I made the trip north, Pete and Adolfo were always standing there right next to me; whether I was looking out over a moonlit winter landscape with the Northern Lights pulsing overhead, or as the fireweed was topping out and I was pulling a salmon out of the Russian River. Or as I sat in the Salty Dawg, looking into the mirror behind the bar and raised my glass in a silent toast to friends gone but never forgotten.

In some ways, I guess that first trip has never really ended. The story has wheels that keep turning, and there have just been more unlimited miles added to it.