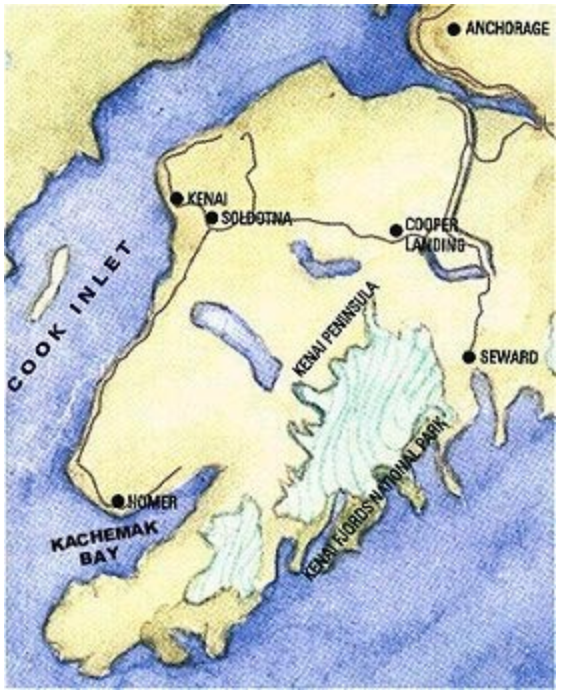


Pretty As A Postcard
Homer and Kenai
July 3 to 8

We departed Anchorage on July 3 bound for Homer, on the southwest side of the Kenai Peninsula. Our route paralleled the Turnagain Arm, a long narrow bay off Cook Inlet. There is a tragic history associated with this bay. It is normal to have tide swings in this region in excess of 25 ft, with extremes at low tide exposing long, wide mudflats. These mudflats are composed of glacial mud and silt, which acts like quicksand to the unsuspecting hiker who happens to venture out on them during low tide. Many people have been trapped in this mud and, with the changing tides, have drowned before they could be freed. Signs warn of this danger all along the banks of this bay.

Dangerous mud-flats but beautiful scenery.

We saw 2 eagles here. Look close and you might too!

It was really tough leaving this view.

The Kenai Peninsula is a rugged, but beautiful, section of Alaska. The Portage Glacier greeted us at the eastern end of the Turnagain Arm. We passed mountain peaks covered with snow and deep valleys with sparkling rivers. In several places, fog and mist shrouded the mountains as we drove south and west along the Seward and Sterling Highways, past Kenai Lake and along the Kenai River. At the

western side of the peninsula, we broke free of the mountains and headed south on the lowlands, along Cook Inlet. To the west, across the inlet, many snow-capped peaks rose toward the sky. This was truly a picturesque drive that anyone visiting Alaska should not miss.

Homer has a population of 4000 and sits on Kachemak Bay. Kachemak is a native word meaning “fog on the bluffs”. The town sits in a postcard type setting. Most of the residences are perched on the bluff and hillside, and the business district sits closer to and along the water. Homer is unique in that a long narrow spit (peninsula) extends four miles out into Kachemak Bay. Along the eastern side of this spit is a huge marina, which houses the fishing fleet and other pleasure boats. Several bald eagles flew close by as we drove out onto the spit that first evening. Homer is the Halibut capital of Alaska; in 2001, 12 million pounds were shipped to consumers worldwide.

A FOURTH TO REMEMBER!

The fourth of July was a fun day for us. The owners of our campground hosted a noon picnic, supplying halibut, hot dogs, and desert and everyone brought a potluck dish. A raffle was held following ice cream & cake and six of us were lucky winners. Later in the afternoon, several of us witnessed the Homer Independence Day Parade. To our surprise, the motorcycle brigade included the Ricks.

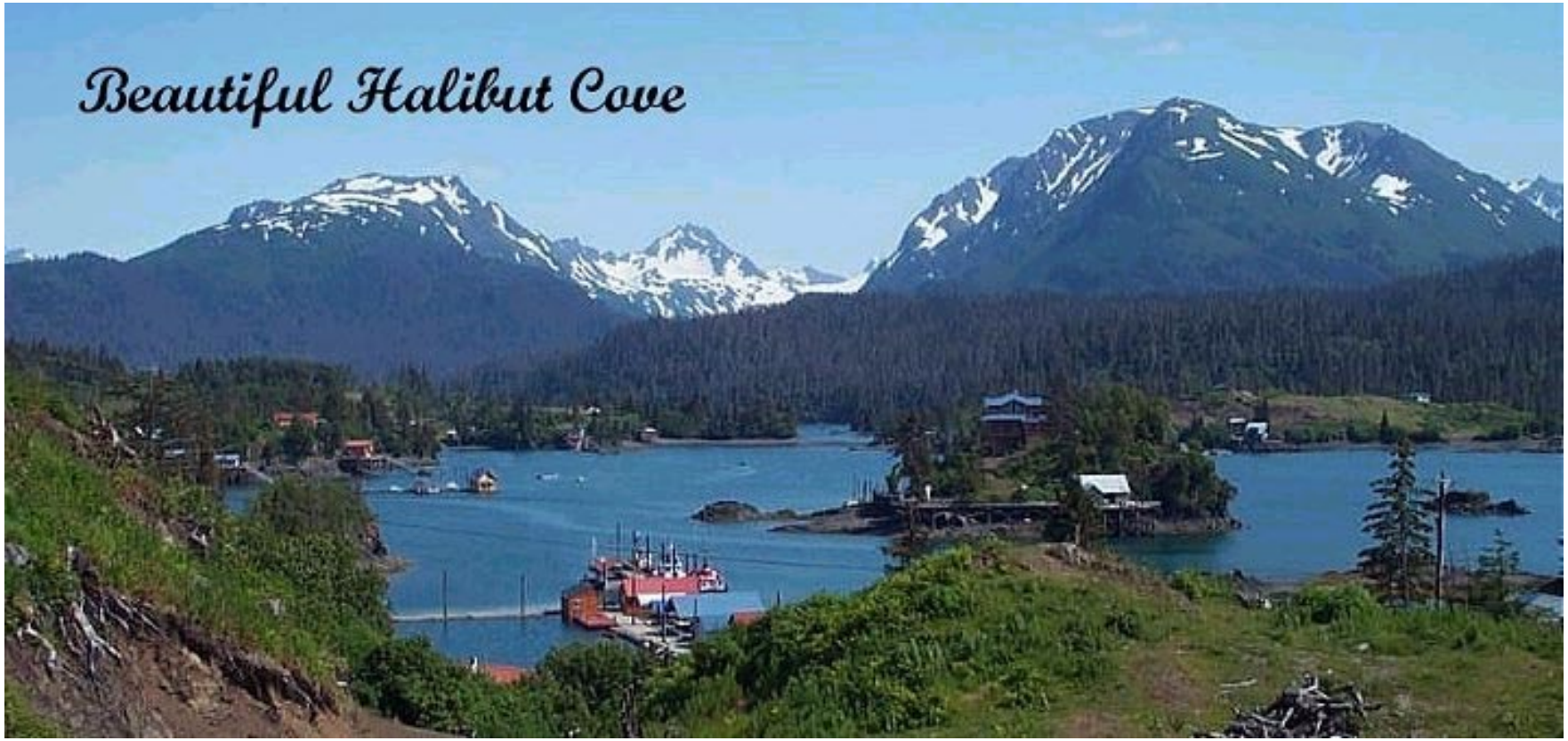
Celebrating the 4th in front of snow capped mountains.

Lots of folks turn-out for the 4th of July parade in Homer.

In fact, some felt right at home and joined in.

Friday morning saw most of us out on the town visiting the local shops before our noon departure via charter boat, called the Stormbird, for Gull Island and Halibut Cove. The sights and sounds of Gull Island were interesting, but the smell was not. This island is a rocky outcropping, consisting of two acres, but it is estimated that approximately 16,000 birds use it regularly as their nesting site. The island is home to 9 species of birds but many others are found here during migration. It seemed as if the entire island was alive. We were fortunate to see a pair of tufted puffins, which is a somewhat rare sighting.

We continued on to Halibut Cove, a charming village on Ismailof Island, which was home to a herring fishery a century ago. Today a few dozen residents, largely fishermen and artists, inhabit this village.



Octapus Ink lady with paintings.

Are there bears in them there hills?

Bored shopper! Shhhh! He might fall off!

We visited several artists' galleries, including Diana Tillion's workshop. Diana is known for her sepia colored paintings, done with octopus ink. Sepia color is multiple shades of brown. The word "sepia" is Latin for cephalopod, and an octopus is a cephalopod. Octopi use their ink as a defense mechanism, injecting it in the water to confuse their prey. Diana harvests the octopi, withdraws the ink with a syringe and then returns them to the water where they reproduce their ink supply. She is pretty sure that she has gotten ink from the same octopus on several occasions. The ink is very dense and only a very small amount is needed to produce a painting. The ink is indelible and transparent, so water is added and the paintings are done by using the lightest shades and working to the darkest ones. Most of the paintings she had on display were of landscapes and birds in the area. Strolling the12 blocks of boardwalk, we checked out the other galleries and enjoyed a beautiful day of scenery before boarding our boat for the return to Homer.

For dinner, the night of the 5th, Bill Moore (alias Billy Boots Moore Fun) was our chef and prepared great hamburgers on the grill. The ladies chipped in with other goodies. We all agreed that, up to this point, this was one of our best meals; and it was fun to eat it outdoors in such a beautiful setting.

"Billy Boots" turned into "Burger Bill" for this meal.

Oh what a halibut day! And a salmon for good measure.

THANK GOODNESS FOR GOOD FISHERMEN!

Saturday was a fishing day for four of the men while the women explored the shops. Gene, John and Bill Moore boarded a halibut charter for a day of halibut and salmon fishing. Bill Rishell visited the Anchor River, with fly rod in hand, in search of Dolly Varden, a sea run trout similar to the brook trout. Each of them was successful in different ways. The charter fishermen caught their limit of halibut plus one small salmon, all of which were processed and shared. Approximately 10 pounds of halibut and the salmon were then taken to a local restaurant where the chef prepared it to our order for dinner that evening. Our trout fisherman caught nothing, but did manage to hook 2 king salmon, fighting each for most of an hour before they broke the 9 lb test fly leader. Both fish were estimated to be about 3 1/2 feet long and weigh thirty pounds or more. Bill said it was an incredible experience and that he “got most of what each fish had to offer.”

We departed Homer on Sunday for the sixty mile trip north to Kenai, taking with us fond memories of our stay in Homer. As we were preparing to depart, a moose cow with calf crossed the road not far from our campground. This was a fitting climax to our visit to this lovely area.

Our fishermen dropped off 10 lbs of their filleted fish at Captain Pattie's, where it was prepared for us for dinner. Yes, it was as good as it looks.

YUM YUM GOOD!

On our way to Kenai we stopped at the General Store in Ninilchik to browse for souvenirs, but the memorable note about this stop was the huge size of the one dip ice cream serving that several of us enjoyed.

Guess how many scoops.

We arrived in Kenai and checked into our park overlooking the mouth of the Kenai River where it flows into Cook Inlet. The sockeye salmon were jumping and several fishermen had taken positions along the river to cast for them. That evening we saw several fish that had been caught and were told that the second run of sockeyes was just beginning. Bill Rishell tried his luck the next day with no success.

Later we learned that commercial netters had taken up positions in Cook Inlet at midnight Sunday, thereby significantly reducing the number of fish that would reach the river that Monday. Kenai is a fishing village, as we would learn that evening as we enjoyed a cook out overlooking the bay. The fishing boats began returning to town about four that afternoon. This return began as a trickle but soon became a flood. We could see from our perch above the river as many as fifty boats at one time.

Fisherman Bill . . . didn't have a prayer of catching a fish with all these guys out there. And the fish didn't have a prayer either.

This procession continued for four to five hours before it began to slow in numbers. There were literally hundreds of commercial boats returning to Kenai Harbor that evening. It is a wonder that any fish at all got by those nets that day. By Alaska law, these netters are permitted to fish for two twenty-four hour periods each week during the sockeye run. How successful were they? We visited two processors late that evening to see the unloading and processing functions. It was truly an eye opener. There is no accurate way for us to estimate the poundage that was delivered by these fishermen this day, but it must have run into the tens of tons.

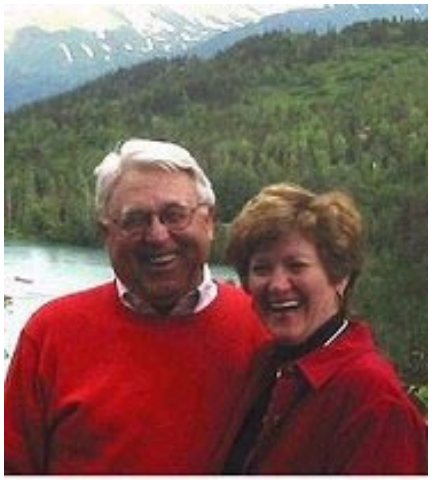
HELPING FRIENDS

Another notable occurrence that developed this weekend was that the Ricks' fuel tank began to leak diesel fuel. All the guys pitched in to help Graham empty the tank and remove it from his coach. The next day it was taken to a welding shop and repaired. After he reinstalled it in the coach and fuel was added, the engine started immediately. An amazing feat and we were ready to depart Kenai for our next adventure.

Cooper Landing and Seward - July 9 to 11

The drive on the Sterling Highway from Kenai to Cooper Landing was absolutely breathtaking. Going through the lush green Chugach Mountains and tall spruce trees that lined the sides of the road was like driving through a tunnel. The Kenai Princess Lodge RV Park, where we stayed, was a small park surrounded by the mountains. It was a beautiful setting.

Cooper Landing is not your average town. It is a roadside community that stretches for about six miles along the Sterling Highway. Cooper Landing was named after Joseph Cooper, a miner who discovered gold in 1884. A school and post office opened in the 1920's and roads were built in the late 40's and early 50's to Kenai and Anchorage. Today the population of Cooper Landing is around 369 and swells to twice that size in the summer to support the tourism industry.



Are we having fun yet?
What do you think!

Although our stay here was only one day, we still found time to get in a few activities including eating and shopping at Gwin's Lodge and store. This lodge is one of Alaska's oldest, traditionally built, log roadhouses. The Gwin's completed the lodge in 1952, after cutting, hauling and hand peeling the logs in true pioneer fashion. In 2000, "USA Today" selected Gwin's as a Top 50 "America's Best Plates" restaurant.

Cooper Landing is sandwiched between two of Alaska's most popular rivers, the Russian and the Kenai. The best way to see these two large rivers is to take a raft trip. This is also a nice way to learn a little history and see some wildlife.

Each summer people come here from all over the state and country to fish for salmon. Cooper Landing boasts the "best sockeye salmon sport fishing on earth" at the confluence of the Kenai and Russian Rivers. Needless to say, our fly fisherman took the opportunity to try his luck.

Every time we leave an area we think it has to be the best we'll see. However, once again we were proven wrong as we journeyed to Seward. Located between Resurrection Bay and the Kenai Mountains, Seward is

This is enough gear to drown us if we fall overboard! Surely WE don't have to paddle! Heave ho young man! No rest for the weary.

127 miles from Anchorage. This stretch of highway, called the Seward Highway, is considered one of the most scenic in the U.S. The population of Seward within the city limits is about 2500, plus another 400-plus prisoners at the state's only maximum security prison, located across the bay. Adding the residents in the vicinity around Seward, there are about 5000 people in the area.

The city was named for William H. Seward, Abraham Lincoln's Secretary of State. He was responsible for buying Alaska from Russia in 1867 for $7.2 million. At that time (before the later Gold Rush and discovery of oil) the purchase was considered so stupid it was called "Seward's Folly". Seward is among Alaska's oldest and most picturesque communities. It is known as the "Gateway" to the Kenai Fjords National Park, a very spectacular national park. Seward was established in 1903 by railroad surveyors as an ocean terminal and supply center. The railway connecting Fairbanks, in the interior, with Seward was completed in 1923. Today Resurrection Bay is a year-around ice-free harbor and Seward is an important cargo and fishing port.

On Good Friday, in 1964, an earthquake changed Seward's destiny forever. Damage from the earthquake was immense but was just the beginning of Seward's troubles. Oil storage tanks along Resurrection Bay exploded and caught on fire. Afraid, people headed out of town, but the bridge had sunk five feet and there was no way out. Large portions of the waterfront, 50 to 400 feet wide, simply fell into the water. Gigantic waves caused mass destruction. Then came the tsunamis (tidal waves). The first wave, as wide as the bay and 30 feet high, rolled in about 30 minutes after the quake began. They continued until the following morning. It is amazing that only thirteen people in Seward were killed. All of Seward's waterfront industry was totally destroyed. This completely changed Seward's landscape and economy. To us, it looks as though nothing ever happened; but for many of them the scars will remain forever.

Steward has its lighter side. Every Fourth of July the town swells to 25,000 to watch more than 800 runners scramble up and slide down the steep, eroded trail of Mount Marathon. The world famous races take runners 1.5 miles up from sea level to an altitude of 3,000 feet and back down. Current record is 43 minutes 23 seconds for men and 50 minutes 30 seconds for women.

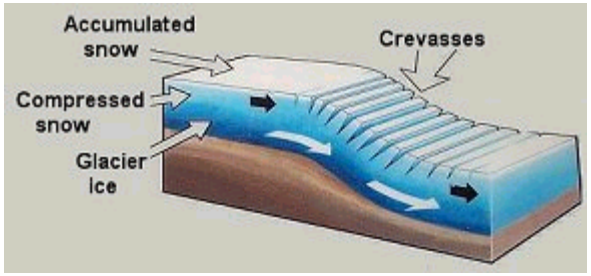
Would this be considered a town that has "gone to the dogs" since the dogs far outnumber the people?

When you say “Alaska”, many people think of dog sledding - and so did we. “But certainly not in the summer”, you must be thinking! On the contrary, just go high enough and there you’ll find snow and huskies. On our first day in Seward, a helicopter ride took part of the group over the mountains, glaciers and Resurrection Bay to Godwin Glacier. We landed on the glacier where 100 Alaskan Huskies greeted us with

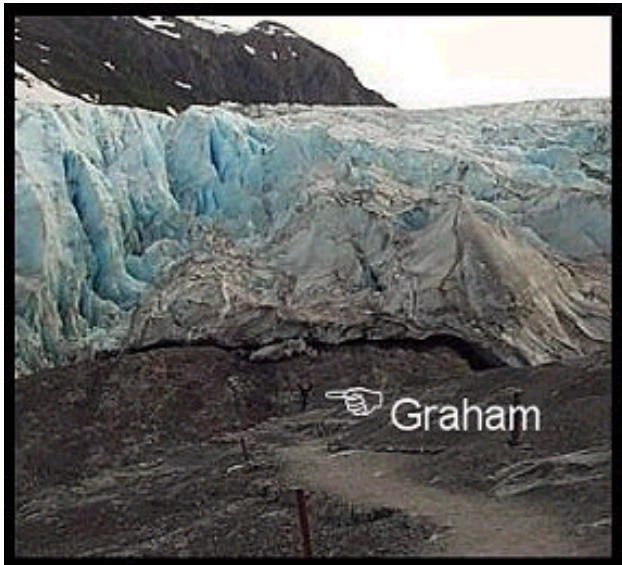
Anyone want to mush back to camp? Oh good, a volunteer! "Tally ho boys! On Dasher, on Dancer, on Prancer and Vixen."

their excited barking - what a sound! Here we found a small camp, setup for about 3-4 months during the summer, which gives folks an opportunity to drive a dog sled on the glacier. Everything in the camp is flown in just for that purpose and then flown back out at summers end. When we arrived, two dog teams were hooked up and we mushed our way across 2 miles on the Godwin glacier. Many of the dogs on the teams were future and past Iditarod Sled Dogs. In fact, many of the young folks running the camp were past participates in the Iditarod and several are scheduled to run this coming year. The sun was shining, the air crystal clear, and the temperature was unbelievably warm. Boy, what an uplifting experience! We all agreed we would rather mush dogs in these circumstances than in the winter when there is no daylight and the temperatures are below zero.

Later that day we visited Kenai Fjords National Park, which is dominated by the Harding Icefield. This icefield is 50 miles long and 30 miles wide and is a relic of the Ice Age. In spite of it's massive size, it was not discovered until the early 1900s.



No one knows for sure how deep the ice is there. An estimated 150 to 200 inches of precipitation fall on the icefield annually. As layers of snow and ice build up, light fluffy crystals and frozen water are compressed into dense ice. Firnification, which is this process of compacting snow and ice into glaciers, depends upon the balance between accumulation of snow and glacial melting. Wherever precipitation exceeds the melting, layers of "leftover" snow build up. Top layers compress those underneath, changing snow to firn (ice grains) and then into glacier ice. The characteristics of this transformed snow make glaciers look and behave as they do. Beneath sufficient weight and pressure, the glacier's bottom layer melts and becomes supple. Pulled by gravity, it bends and flows as it moves, molding itself to the land. As bottom layers conform to bedrock, the



One certainly feels small next to a glacier.

Awesome is the only way to describe the feeling.

Crevasses can be 100's of feet deep.

upper part, under less weight and pressure, may stretch past its limit and crack to form deep crevasses.

Bounded by high mountains, the Harding Icefield is not visible except from along the shores of the Kenai Fjords National Park, where it drops into the sea. A fjord is a narrow inlet of water bordered by steep cliffs. The icefield has 38 glaciers, one of which is Exit Glacier.

These bears just wouldn't pose for a good picture!

Explorers crossing the Harding Icefield from the south named Exit Glacier when they found it suitable to “exit” the icefield. Lower temperatures and increased precipitation have caused this glacier to advance. In the warmer summer months melting increases to reduce the size of the glacier. Even though the glacier continues to move forward year round, the excessive summer melt has produced an overall retreat. Exit Glacier is now 3 miles long. During the past it was much longer, perhaps extending all the way to Seward.

Exit Glacier is located in the national park and is accessible by road. Most of us hiked the trail to see the bottom of the glacier. Three of us even hiked all the way to the highest part of the trail to touch the glacier and take pictures - an awesome experience. On the way back down we encountered a little excitement when we spotted a mother black bear and her cub.

Alaska Sea Life Center

We spent the morning of the second day exploring the Alaska Sea Life Center, a world-class facility dedicated to understanding and maintaining the integrity of the marine ecosystem. The center conducts research projects that help scientists discover the reason for declining marine animal populations and other environmental changes. At the center, sick and injured animals are nurtured back to health. They also have special ongoing educational presentations to help visitors expand their knowledge about Alaska’s marine ecosystem. We were able to watch seabirds, sea lions and harbor seals in their naturalistic habitats. On March 24, 1989 the supertanker Exxon Valdez spilled 11 million gallons of oil into Prince William Sound damaging nearly 1,500 miles of Alaska’s shoreline. Thousands of marine birds, mammals and fish died. The Exxon Valdez Oil Spill Restoration Fund and private donations funded this 7-acre waterfront site.

That afternoon we took the Kenai Fjords National Park Cruise. This, one of Alaska’s most popular wildlife and glacier tours, took us through Resurrection Bay and around the Aialik Peninsula. We traveled about 110 miles in 6 hours. On the tour we saw sea lions, sea otters, harbor seals, humpback whales and a variety of birds - mostly cute little puffins. The highlight of the tour was when we headed for the Holgate Glacier where we witnessed much calving of the glacier. Calving is caused by tidal water melting the underside of the

We traveled in style.

And cruised by some whales

And hung out with some seals.

glacier's face, collapsing massive icebergs into the water. We would hear a thunderous roar and see giant waves that eventually caused our boat to rock. Our guide explained that we were very fortunate to see so much activity from the glacier.

We saw this huge glacier, heard the tremendous rumbling sound of it moving, & saw great chunks of ice fall into the water and float toward us.

We packed a lot into these two days, so the shopping time was a little short. Oh well, by now we have already seen many of the things in the shops.