

JOHN AND THE VOLCANO

By John S. Halbert

I first heard about the volcano in March, 1980, while visiting the home of our company's representative in Vancouver, Washington, across the Columbia River from Portland, Oregon. While he and I were in a conversation one evening, his wife stepped into the room with an announcement. "I heard on the news that Mount St. Helens is shaking," she said.

Noting my puzzled expression, they told me that the mountain was a dormant volcano in the Cascade Mountains about thirty miles northeast of where we were at the time that had not erupted in about a hundred-and-fifty years. Not sure what she meant about the mountain "shaking," I didn't figure there was much to it. Probably just some minor earthquakes, and since I lived in California, I was used to them.

The news reports about the vibrating mountain went on for several days, catching my attention at some point. Then the earthquake stories seemed to subside. In the meantime, I continued my job as a traveling sales representative across fourteen Western states for '*Berryman Products*', the well-known automotive chemical company.

Several weeks later, the shaking mountain in southwestern Washington State began making the news again. Television reports appeared about a "bulge" that was growing on one side of the massive slopes, along with dozens---later hundreds---of measurable earthquakes taking place daily. Scientists and instruments were now staked-out in positions around the shuddering volcano that seemed to be awakening.

About that time, local and national news outlets started interviewing an elderly character with the improbable name of "Harry Truman," who operated a lodge on nearby "Spirit Lake." The crusty old man, who seemed to embody the independent spirit of the Old West, steadfastly refused to move from his home in the shadow of the mountain where he had lived for almost all the eight decades of his life, thereby becoming an instant cult-figure. As news cameras rolled, he even visited elementary schools in Portland and Salem, Oregon, giving wide-eyed students his colorful philosophy of life and of living with the mountain, again making the news. But he still insisted he would never leave his lodge-home.

By early-May the authorities were warning that an eruption might be imminent. Scientists monitoring the shaking volcano theorized that a chamber of melted rock, called "magma" was moving beneath the mountain. On Saturday, May 17, network television news stories reported that, led by a military escort, some residents who had been evacuated a few days earlier were allowed back to their threatened homes for a very short time to retrieve personal belongings.

The next morning, Sunday, May, 18, I turned on the radio in my apartment in Mountain View, California and was greeted by an excited announcer reporting that Mount St. Helens had just erupted in a stupendous explosion that had destroyed all life and vegetation for several hundred square miles all around it! The eruption was continuing, the reporter said, and a dark-gray, mushroom-shaped cloud was shooting pulverized ash a dozen miles into the sky. Cities and towns downwind from the eruption---to the north and east of the volcano---were being buried in many feet of heavy, choking ash, he said. According to the reports, among the cities most affected was Yakima, where I had spent a week working with customers only a few weeks earlier.

It was feared that in the immediate area of the disaster dozens of citizens, loggers, and scientific people were lost. The reports said that Spirit Lake was inundated by floating logs---the limb-stripped remains of the trees of the once-beautiful and lush “Gifford Pinchot National Forest.” All were now either blown-down or covered by hundreds of feet of mud. Harry Truman’s lodge was gone; buried underneath three-hundred feet of ash, presumably entombing the old man. Live reports from helicopters at the scene told that the heat of the eruption was rapidly melting the snowpack on the mountain and a fearsome, frenzied flood was rushing down the Toutle River, carrying along trees, houses, even bridges in the raging torrent. Later, it was determined that a heat-wave of eight-hundred degrees Fahrenheit from the initial explosion had blasted down the river valley, killing fourteen lumberjacks in a logging camp. In all, thirty or more people were missing. It was an explosion on a scale not experienced before in modern times in the continental United States.

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Two and-a-half years later, I was in the Portland area once again, and decided to see the mountain and the destruction for myself on the way to my next assignment in Walla Walla, in southeastern Washington. My plan was to take a helicopter ride up to the mountain in the late-afternoon, then double-back down to the Interstate and catch the east-west state highway to Walla Walla. On a Friday afternoon, I drove through the ravaged area along the Toutle River that had hardly been touched since the floods had carried-away nearly everything, leaving ruined houses, barns and buildings as far as one could see. For some distance beyond the now-placid river, the banks were overlaid by dark-gray, sand-like ash that covered everything many feet deep; here-and-there a steel bridge would lie in a twisted, jumbled heap---unmistakable evidence of the mighty forces that the floodwaters had wrought.

As I motored along the repaired roadway toward the mountain that soon became visible above the denuded hills ahead, I decided that “desolation” was the best description for the moonlike-landscape all around. Everything was either buried or surrounded by vast mounds of

dried dirt-like muck. “Pyroclastic flow”, I remembered they had they called it; the slurry-like mud and ash from the melted snow on the mountain that had torn away or buried everything in its path as it swept along after the eruption.

When I arrived at the heliport late that Friday afternoon, the operators told me they were finished for the day and that I’d have to come back tomorrow. In the gathering gloom, I drove the forty miles back to Longview, Washington and spent the night.

As Longview was a picturesque logging town, the next forenoon I walked around, snapping pictures, then after lunch I headed back up the Interstate. At the turnoff onto the road leading to the volcano, I stopped at the Visitor’s Center. (The mountain had already created a “mystique” for itself that was drawing visitors.) The centerpiece was a big tabletop topographical elevation map that depicted in detail the layout of the mountain and the surrounding destruction.

By the time I arrived at the heliport, it was mid-afternoon, just in time to catch a flight that was leaving. In what would be one of the most unforgettable adventures of my life, the ’copter, a military-type aircraft now outfitted for passengers, lifted-off and turned in the direction of the mountain that looked to be nearby but actually was about a dozen miles distant.

As we flew along, constantly climbing, the volcano grew in size until it was all we could see ahead of us. Staring out at the desolate landscape, my observation was that it was the ugliest thing I had ever seen. All the quiet, symmetrical, snow-topped beauty of the past that had drawn decades of tourists to its lake and to the lodge, was now gone and replaced by an enormous dark-gray, featureless, flattened-conical mass whose top---about a cubic mile’s worth---had been blasted into space. What was left was a crater with one side open where the landslide that had started the eruption had taken place.

At 8,000 feet altitude the chopper turned into the yawning open side of the crater. Above and ahead of us was a red-glowing, pulsating dome, about the size and shape of the “Astrodome” in Houston. “That’s the ‘lava dome’!” the pilot called out, as we circled the hideous aggregation from which yellow, smoke-like fumes arose. Inside the helicopter, juddering in the thermal currents caused by the heat of the dome, I could smell the sulphurous odor that literally came from the center of the earth. “This is the second dome,” the pilot went on to us passengers (there were about six of us, plus the pilot), “the first one exploded away several months ago . . . this one has been building since then and it’ll probably blow up too, before long!” I hoped it would wait until we were back on the ground at the helicopter port and I was long-gone from this place.

After some minutes of circling the fuming, glowing dome while all us passengers snapped pictures, the pilot nosed the chopper out of the crater and circled the jagged, flattened top of the hulking mountain while we took more photos. At length, the helicopter passed over the remains of Spirit Lake, now one big log-jam; a solid raft of tree-trunks floating on top of the now-elevated lake. Looking down at the stripped forest and the sand-like ash-fields that went on for miles in all directions, I speculated as to where Harry Truman’s lodge might have once been.

As we flew about the region of the catastrophe, the only scenery below consisted of various rolling hills covered by tree-trunks, minus their limbs---millions of them, it seemed—all blown-down in the same direction *away from the mountain*. “The explosion blew-off the limbs of the trees!” the pilot called out. Below us were what looked like countless prostrate telephone poles.

There was nothing beautiful anymore on or about Mount St. Helens. As far as one could see, the former lush forest and its centerpiece once-conical snow-topped mountain that had been a visual delight for so long, was now a lifeless, blasted landscape overlooked by the hideous, gray, top-flattened volcano. About that time, it started raining, which added to the dreary effect. With the pilot dodging intermittent rainshowers, in comtemplative silence we flew from the scene of the disaster back down to the heliport.

By the time we landed, a half-hour later, the rain had stopped although it was still a gloomy day that was edging on toward an autumn dusk. As I drove away, the heliport people were securing the helicopter for the evening; our flight had been the last one of the day.

A few miles down the road, I came upon the shell of what had once been “Camp Baker,” a logging headquarters. A historical marker out front of the faded yellow-metal building read:

CAMP BAKER

APRIL 1944

TO

MAY 1980

The sign indicated that the logging camp had been a fixture in the “Gifford Pinchot National Forest” since 1944 until its fourteen inhabitants had all died at once in the 800-degree-blast of hot gas from the volcano that swept through the place a few minutes after the initial eruption on May, 18, 1980. Given those circumstances, the loggers had never had a chance. Another nearby sign alongside the roadway warned:

POTENTIAL HAZARD AREA

HIGH -- LOW SIRENS USED

AS EVACUATION WARNINGS

WHEN HIGH -- LOW SIREN SOUNDS

LEAVE THE AREA IMMEDIATELY

I parked the car and walked around the deserted, grim-looking place. Inside the aircraft-hangar-like structure, mounds of dried mud-ash a dozen feet high still climbed halfway up the inside walls where the rampaging river had deposited it in its headlong rush down the valley that terrible day. Looking around, it was sobering to realize that this was where fourteen men had died suddenly. I snapped some pictures, then stepped in a hurry back to my car. For some unaccountable reason, I wanted to get away from that sad, melancholy place as soon as possible. Getting back into my car, I drove a couple of hundred yards down the highway, then stopped and took a final set of pictures.

Not long after I drove off, I noticed that the engine was racing but the car was moving along slower and slower. Concerned, and wondering what was happening, I floorboarded the gas pedal, but the vehicle presently came to a complete stop with the engine running at full speed. Appalled by this unexpected breakdown, and concerned that I was alone in an isolated area with daylight fast disappearing into dusk, I stopped the engine and raised the hood of the car. What confronted me was an engine compartment splashed-wet by an oily substance that was dripping onto the ground underneath the engine with little *'Plops.'* Groaning, I spotted the cause of the problem: a hose had popped-off the transmission-cooler radiator that was bolted in front of the engine's main radiator. The fluid was from the transmission that was perhaps now seriously damaged.

As I stood there, shaking my head, wondering what to do, a car pulled up. "Could you give me a lift to the next town to get some transmission fluid?" I asked the young couple, who nodded. "There's a town just down the road," I added.

In a few minutes, we drove into the hamlet called, "Cougar", which was about halfway back to the main Interstate, and located an auto-parts store. After I paid for several cans of the proper type of transmission fluid, the young man and woman took me back to my immobile car. With a wave, they turned about and left.

I re-tightened the oil line to the transmission cooler and re-filled the fluid-case. Hoping against hope, I started the engine, put the car in gear and gave it some gas.

Nothing happened; the car wouldn't move.

Now what? From the looks of things, I was stranded alone in the midst of what amounted to a moonscape (remember I'm in the middle of miles of desolation from the volcano) with a burned-up transmission on a late Saturday afternoon and the sun was going down. There seemed to be every likelihood that no one would be coming along before the following Monday, at the earliest. On top of everything else, I was supposed to be In Walla Walla the next day. I thought about what the Boss might say. (I was, after all, on a *personal* side-trip in a *company* car.) I walked around, slapping my hands in frustration. Then, resigned to the inevitable, I rummaged around in the trunk for supplies that might have to last me until Monday, What a fix I was in!

Time passed; evening had come on and I was mentally preparing myself to spend perhaps several nights in the car, when I thought I heard the rumble of engines. Sure enough, in a matter of seconds, flickering headlights came into view from a nearby side road. A caravan of State Highway vehicles! The lead machine stopped alongside the car and a worker in a hard-hat looked down at me. "Something wrong?" I explained my predicament to the fellow, as several other men got out of their trucks and stepped up.

"Okay, we'll call a tow-truck." Already one of the truckers was on his State Highway two-way radio. "They'll be here in about thirty minutes," the man said.

With profuse thanks, I watched as the truck caravan roared off, once more leaving me standing alone in the darkness. I hoped the rescue-wrecker could find me on this dark road.

Scarcely a half-hour later---wonder of wonders---there came the wonderful sounds of an engine! Presently, a tow-truck whined up, its headlights shining on my car with me standing beside it. In short order, the malfunctioning vehicle was hitched-up, and with the car swinging along behind the wrecker, we were on our way out of the depths of the volcano devastation.

After a while, we arrived back at the Interstate, to the town of "Castle Rock." Civilization never looked better. At a motel, I paid the driver, who tugged the car to the side and lowered it to the ground.

With nothing much else to do, I hung-out the rest of the weekend around the little town and the motel that had a convenient restaurant attached.

Monday morning, I had to make the dreaded telephone call to the Boss back in Texas, who, thankfully, was understanding. "Those things happen," he boomed, "get the car to a Buick dealer (the car was a Buick) and arrange repairs." The man went on, "Rent a car and work Portland this week. Next week, you can resume your assignment in Walla Walla."

And so it was that the excursion to Mount Saint Helens was memorable, and not only for the volcano.

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Several months went by, and I was once again in Washington State, this time driving southwestward through the east-central part of the state on my way to Yakima. Near the town of "Ritzville", all about me was evidence of the eruption of three years before. Everywhere I looked was gray ash, very fine in texture---almost like talcum powder---in fields, on top of buildings and barns; alongside the roadway. I remembered that the area had been straight-downwind from the eruption and the ash-cloud had passed directly overhead. Remarkable, I thought, that, even though I was two-hundred miles from the volcano, physical evidence of the eruption was still all about.

Ever one to take advantage of a free souvenir, I stopped the Buick and found an empty wide-mouthed drink-bottle in the trunk. Stepping out into a field where the ash was still as pristine as if it had dropped there that morning, I scooped the jar full of the stuff that was surprisingly heavy and screwed tight the lid. (*To this day, the jar of Mount St. Helens volcanic ash makes for an interesting topic of conversation.*)

Later that afternoon, I observed, in the far distance, on a direct-line with Yakima, a gray anvil-shaped cloud with a tail beneath it to the ground, all backlit by the sun. On a hunch, I turned on the radio, and, sure enough, Mount St. Helens was erupting at that very moment---the cloud was made up of the pulverized remnants of the lava dome that I had flown around in the helicopter some months earlier.

When I drove into Yakima an hour before sunset, it was almost as if evening had already arrived as the downtown was strangely dark from the ash cloud roiling overhead. The streets were pretty much deserted---one of the lessons the citizens had learned from the first eruption was that the ash was dangerous to breathe. This time, the townspeople were ready. In the hotel restaurant, a local resident told me to be careful if the ash got on my car. Furthermore, along with being very abrasive to cars' paint, it could cause fatal damage to the engine should it get sucked into the air intakes. Enough of the weighty stuff could collapse a house or a building. I learned that, as compared to snow that would eventually melt, the ash had to be physically removed or else it stayed there as it was in the field back at Ritzville, three years after the first eruption.

The next morning, the car *was* covered by an inch of the stuff that I had to *c-a-r-e-f-u-l-l-y* wipe off. All about the town, the dust-like volcano effluent swirled and floated about in the breeze like malign little dust-devils. True to what the man had told me in the restaurant, everywhere I looked, citizens were going about their business wearing particle masks.

The healthy lesson I learned from my encounters with Mount St. Helens was that you really *can't* fool 'Mother Nature'.

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EPILOGUE:

Some months later, the very helicopter in which I had ridden into the crater crashed onto the *third* lava dome that was again building and had killed all nine who were aboard, including the pilot. I saw a picture of the wreckage; the numbers on the tail of the wrecked aircraft matched those of the one in which I had flown. It was speculated that somehow the helicopter had encountered a fatal thermal current that threw it out of control.

