

CHASING ALASKA

A Portrait of the Last Frontier Then and Now

C. B. BERNARD



LYONS PRESS
Guilford, Connecticut
An imprint of Globe Pequot Press

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Lyons Press is an imprint of Globe Pequot Press.

Project Editor: David Legere
Text Design: [TK]
Layout Artist: Sue Murray
Map by Mapping Specialists Ltd © 2013 Morris Book Publishing, LLC.

Frontispiece: The author standing beside a Haida totem pole at Sitka National Historical Park, photo by Kim Bernard.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication data is available on file.

ISBN 978-0-7627-7846-1

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Tonight there is no wind . . . and we are moving steadily west.

SOUTHEAST ALASKANS CALL IT A SUCKER HOLE WHEN A PATCH OF BLUE opens in the clouds and suckers you into thinking the sky is clearing. Tourists fall for them regularly. The locals know better, beaten down by the unrelenting rain that saturates these islands. There seems little chance of such false promises as I leave the harbor, no fragments of clarity, the sky resolutely overcast. Shadows paint the mountains with undertones of menace, though sun brightened the same snow-bitten peaks just yesterday, a rare cloudless winter day in Sitka. I'd hoped for two in a row. As my lazy wake spreads, other boats nod their assent of my wish—less modest here, perhaps, where you measure misery by the calendar and dodge raindrops 230 days a year. The two weeks of uninterrupted sunshine that greeted my arrival in town served as opening act for the downpours, deluges, and drenchers that headlined the next fifteen without reprieve.

My God, I thought. What have I done?

Liquid sunshine, they call the rain here, an intentionally optimistic euphemism, but it's more like a houseguest who won't leave or paranoia you can't shake. Want to survive Southeast Alaska? Learn to ignore rain, or embrace insanity. I'm no optimist, but I believe the mind's instinct for survival resets certain counters each night out of psychological necessity—every day is a new one—and I awoke this morning looking for the sun. Maybe I'm still too new here, still in the habit of New England's finicky forecasts, but I'm still susceptible to sucker holes. On the way to the

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harbor, a dull glow to the east gave me hope. Clouds bullied it into hiding before I even parked my truck. The sky and water over Sitka Sound are the same flat gray, without boundary or texture, erasing the horizon. It may be months before I see the sun again.

Under the bridge and into the channel. In the no-wake zone the boat's gas engine rumbles and stutters beneath me, rattling floorboards, vibrating the cabin and dash, angry at being roused from its slumber, desperate for more throttle—and me on my second cup of coffee, commiserating.

The first, fat drops of rain hit the windshield timidly, one at a time, testing for resistance, smearing under their own weight. Soon the rain soaks the glass in overlapping sheets, falling with abandon for more than a minute. Even at full speed the wipers can't keep up. I silence them and notice no difference. Rain drums the flybridge overhead, the windows around me, the tin chimney of my galley stove. It batters the stern fishing deck and the rigid-hulled inflatable lashed to the transom. It pelts the 10-horse kicker I keep for trolling and for emergencies, and if I close my eyes, the rain on the cowling sounds no different than rain on an air conditioner in a city window. Except I couldn't be much farther from a city if I tried.

It's January 2001, the first weeks of the new millennium, and I've been in Alaska for a year and a half.



Not so long ago geologically, ice covered most of Southeast Alaska. More than a thousand clustered islands form the Alexander Archipelago, including Baranof Island, on the western edge of which sits Sitka, my new home. Just about all of them, and the fjords, channels, and straits surrounding them, lay beneath the heavy glaciers of the last great ice age. Then one day it all began to melt. As the glacial cap released its water, the sea level rose hundreds of feet, flooding massive swaths of lowlands. The irresistible forces of tectonics and something called isostasy—the rise of landmasses formerly depressed by the weight of ice sheets—forged the dramatic structures that give the landscape its geomorphic curb appeal. Glaciers sculpted the land as they receded, leaving striations in the rock, farewell notes in the ancient language of the natural world. What once was ice became ocean.

Then the sea dropped once more, and ocean became dry land, though traces of it remain well inland—and well above the modern sea level. Scientists have found beach gravel deposits near Juneau at elevations of 750 feet. Stunted tundra grew on the new land, giving way first to pine then the sprawling temperate spruce, cedar, and hemlock rain forests that cover it still. Alaska was changing.

Soon the first humans colonized Southeast. More than 10,000 years later, their descendents remain. Of course, now they share it, for better or worse, with the others who arrived over the centuries, exerting their own irresistible forces to shape the land, including—most recently and in order—Russians, Americans, and tourists. Alaska teems with people and interest groups who lay claim to it: charter fishermen and commercial fleets; oil industrialists, environmentalists, and naturalists; hikers and kayakers; reality television producers; loggers, miners, hunters, and trappers; wildlife photographers; recluses and outcasts; apologists and militiamen; Native corporations and shellfish co-ops; Realtors; the Palins. I'm no different. Like countless others before me, who labored over canonical portraits of Alaska, I want to share all I can about this Great Land and the collective stories of just some of its people. But, selfishly, I want to have an effect on a place that's had such a tremendous one on me. Alaska has marked me as indelibly as the ice has marked its own stunning landscape.

Alaska has more than 600 named glaciers and nearly 100,000 anonymous others, most of which occur in the southern part of the state. Just 13,000 years after the last ice age, too brief to measure in geologic time, they're still receding—and fast. Some, like those in Glacier Bay, have moved as far as 70 miles in the past century alone. Tyndal Glacier in Icy Bay averages a third of a mile a year. Others clock more modest paces, but in 2005 an aerial survey monitoring 2,000 glaciers found 99 percent of them in retreat. They may look static, ancient, permanent. They're anything but. Ice flows through and beneath them as surely as water through the world's great rivers, which means their ice is not the same ice as a hundred years ago. Alaska is still changing. Even when you can't see it.

Those changes are not limited to the land. More has happened to affect the nature of Alaska in the past century than in the hundred

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centuries before it. The climate and the wildlife. The cultures of its people. The types of people who choose to call it home, and their reasons for doing so. Its accessibility to the rest of the world—in this age of technology, even the very definition of remoteness is evolving. Alaska is changing faster than ever. Some people work to instigate that change, to facilitate the transition into the new Alaska—to mold it into what they think it *could be* rather than embracing what it *is*—while others fight to keep things as they were. In that way, our relationship with Alaska seems no different than our relationships with the people we love.



Eighteen months ago, in July 1999, I lashed my canoe to the roof of my truck and pointed the bow upstream, north and west, toward Alaska. My target rings circled the small fishing town of Sitka, an Inside Passage afterthought on the outer edge of an island where the Tongass National Forest collides with the Pacific. The most direct route measured more than 4,000 miles. But I wasn't yet thirty years old, swapping everything familiar for a new career, new life, new everything, so why go direct? One day I was writing for a high-tech firm in Massachusetts and living in the suburbs, the next driving cross-country to become a reporter for a small family-owned newspaper I'd never read in a town I'd never visited. I agreed to start work in five weeks. My girlfriend would follow later that summer. With only ten days' notice, I packed my truck, said my good-byes, and left. There was a lot of ground to cover.

I spent nearly a month on the road. In Syracuse, Cleveland, and just outside Jackson, Wyoming, I stayed with friends. In Montana and British Columbia, I pitched a tent and lay awake in the dark, questioning my choices. I drowned a few flies at the end of a trout line, slept in motels that remapped the boundaries of cheapness, filled myself with gas station hot dogs and truck stop coffee, and visited the endless parade of landmark enticements in the northern states and western Canada. I saw dinosaur statues in Thermopolis, Wyoming; the world's largest fly rod in Houston, British Columbia; and a bear waving at traffic just outside Banff. In Prince Rupert, BC, I spent a few days drinking with members of a motorcycle club

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working the railway across the country, and then drove aboard the ferry and pitched my tent on the upper deck, long past the point of no return.

Even in Alaska, where the scenery literally takes your breath in windless rushes, Sitka exists as geographic hyperbole. Mountains rise like the island's spine from an ice field along its back. Granite ledges point to the sky, sharpened by time, peaks snowbound above a temperate rain forest so lush it appears carpeted. Rocky beaches hem the shore. Across Sitka Sound, a dormant volcano's blasted-flat top seems a feat of human engineering. Relentless rainfall gives everything the blurry focus of watercolor on paper.

Books and magazines perpetuate Alaska as a mythical, savage place, equal parts nature documentary and wildlife theme park, but my first impressions revealed an urban side as well: houses, the occasional lawn, a small but bustling downtown of gift shops, cafes, and drugstores. But it wasn't the suburbs I knew. On my first day, my newspaper ran front-page stories about a humpback whale that torpedoed a 78-foot sailboat at anchor and a brown bear that dragged two dogs into the woods. Welcome to Alaska.

Before I left New England, I filled a bottle in the Atlantic to remind me of my beginnings. It turned out I didn't need it. If you go back far enough, all water flows from the same source. A few weeks later, my dad ran into a shirttail cousin who told him about a Bernard who left home for Alaska some years earlier, a French Canadian sailor who'd grown up with my great-grandfather. He didn't know the details, and when we asked around the family, neither did anyone else. Those first months in Sitka, his story began to unfurl before me like a sail catching the wind.

Between 1901 and 1924, sailing out of Nome, Captain Joe Bernard explored the Arctic from Alaska to Canada's Coronation Gulf. Many times he'd been shipwrecked, frozen in, or presumed lost at sea. The *New York Times* archives contained notices of his death premature by half a century. Unlike most of his peers in the age of Arctic exploration, Joe was self-taught, uneducated, and



Captain Joe Bernard in Nome.

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as a free trader, unsponsored by any government or other interest. Despite remarkable accomplishments and the respect they earned among his contemporaries, he was largely forgotten a century later.

I ended up in Sitka by chance when the local paper, the *Daily Sentinel*, made the better of two job offers, the other in Nome. It seemed like more than coincidence when I found records showing that Joe had moved to Sitka in 1970, two years before his death. The state buried him in a cemetery reserved for “pioneers,” sprawling, neglected acres stretched like a sleeping dog at the heels of a forested mountain. The cemetery, it turned out, abutted the house I rented, adjacent to a field where my neighbors and I ran our dogs each day. Vague city records couldn’t identify his grave, but after work each night I walked the rows of flat, granite grave markers with a flashlight, scraping away moss and mud until I found him. It was December 23, 2000, what would have been his 122nd birthday, his grave so near my house that from it I could read the numbers on my alarm clock through my bedroom window.

I’d put nearly 7,000 miles on my truck and parked it on top of my own family.



When humpback whales dive, their tails rise from the water like weather vanes. They gather near Sitka each year to fatten up before their southern winter migration. Sometimes a whale rolls laterally, and a great, lazy fin breaks the surface like a sail. A common sight in Sitka, even from shore—even from my living room window. A friend visiting from New England came out in the boat with me once, and we found ourselves surrounded by a pod. I killed the engine and we sat on the foredeck as mist from their blowholes wet our skin. The ocean boiled with bubbles as they fed around us, the dog startling each time a fin or fluke slapped the water.

“I’ve paid a lot of money to go whale watching back in Massachusetts,” my friend said, “but I’ve never seen anything like this.”

When they breach, their entire bodies become visible—but just momentarily, just long enough to provide a sense of their staggering size. A long-liner in a bar once told me about a whale that followed his boat, systematically removing baitfish from each of the few hundred hooks

spread the length of his gear. When it finished, the whale surfaced alongside the deck and fixed him with a gentle, unblinking eye the size of a soccer ball. *More, please.* The boat was a 45-footer, the whale notably larger, its subsurface bulk unspoken.

That's how you see Alaska, too, in fleeting glimpses, parts of a whole difficult to imagine. Its sheer size defies metaphor—its western edge as far from its easternmost as Los Angeles from Atlanta, its northern tip as far from the southernmost as Canada from Mexico. You can no more make generalizations about a place that vast than you can watch a weather forecast for Portland, Maine, and expect it to apply to Portland, Oregon. Alaska has more coastline than the rest of the United States combined. It boasts America's most western and northern points. In 1976, John McPhee famously wrote that if someone could figure out a way to steal Italy, he could hide it in Alaska and no one would find it. That's still the best way to grasp its size.

Yet with so few people living here—just 600,000—in many ways it's the smallest state in the union. If it had the same per-square-mile population density as Washington, DC, nearly 7 million would call it home, but flip the comparison and you'd find just 80 people in the DC phone book. You don't have to stay in Alaska long to realize how small it can be. Meet anyone who has ever lived here and within a half-dozen tries you can arrive at the name of a mutual acquaintance, a bush version of six degrees of separation. Writer Lynn Schooler calls it “a neighborhood a thousand miles long,” noting that “people are spread thin in Alaska, but our trails loop and intersect together in odd, predictable patterns.”

The Alaska of Barrow, Kaktovik, and Kotzebue shares little with that of Anchorage, Wasilla, or Palmer. Bethel has about as much in common with Ketchikan as Miami does with Eau Claire, Wisconsin. Maybe it's best not to look at it as a single Alaska, but as dozens. More. Everyone who visits finds his or her own version. Those who move here experience still another, and those born here know a different Alaska entirely.

I don't claim to know Alaska—no one can, least of all an outsider. But I know what it means to me. Though it's the subject of my writing, it's also a sign of my failure as a writer, because no words are sufficient to convey what I feel for it.

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Exhausted, the rain peters off to manageable drops on the boat's windshield. A few degrees colder and it would fall as snow. The channel snaps into focus when I restore the wipers, and off the starboard side, businesses and docks line the shore. I leave room to port for the bigger commercial boats and glide past the Pioneer Home, where Joe lived the last few years of his life, lonely faces in its windows. A half-dozen floatplanes perch on their docks like ospreys digesting dinner. Tenders unload fish kill at the processor. A seiner sits clear of the water on the city grid, dripping rain, the receding tide exposing its belly. Letters on its transom say it's a long way from home.

So am I. I've traded my familiar existence for one my friends and family back east would find unrecognizable, eagles as common as pigeons, whales visible from my living room window, bears eating berries on the same roads I jog. I've swapped traffic jams for boat maintenance, business casual for Carhartts and rubber boots. But even after the better part of two years, Sitka doesn't feel like home. I love it here, but I'm not *from* here, not *of* here. I'm still an outsider, an observer. Maybe I always will be, a dog playing wolf as the pack surrounds him.



When I clear the breakwater at the other end of the channel, I open up the engine. At just over 20 knots, I tilt the trim tabs to manage the hull's plane, and the bow drops obediently. I'm running at full efficiency. Even so, my next trip to the fuel dock, like every trip there, will gut me. Even with her water tanks empty, the *Monkeyfist* is heavy and inefficient. She's no beauty queen either, and the fickle, half-assed affections of her previous owner, a local dentist, haven't done her any favors. But then, neither have my own. In the short time I've owned her, I've lavished her with love, but it's the first love of an awkward teenager. I don't know what the hell I'm doing. I wasn't raised around boats, and with the exception of some beer-soaked mentoring from a coworker and some guides in neighboring slips, I'm largely making it up as I go along. My intentions pure, my execution awkward. The one thing I've accomplished successfully was

saving her from the name the dentist bestowed upon her, *The Red Bagel*, which sounded like an unpleasant euphemism. Twenty-seven feet at the waterline, she's older than I am, and each time I run her a part of me wonders what mechanical failure awaits. Before buying her I test-drove her on three separate occasions, and she broke down all three times. I bought her anyway. A monkeyfist is a mariner's knot to tie a towing line.

If the Brady Bunch had owned a boat, it would have looked like this. A sectional sofa and table in the main cabin converts to bunk beds. There's a small private head as well as a galley-up with sink, fridge, and Dickinson oil stove. Behind a privacy curtain in the fo'c'sle, just below the helm, lies a large wedge-shaped bed, and the upholstery throughout is early 1970s.

I sip coffee and listen to NPR on the local public station, Raven Radio. Occasional bursts of squelch and hailing requests buzz Channel 16 on the marine band VHF, and I lower the volume. I use it to check in with friends when I'm away or to find out if and where the fish are hitting, though such conversations are best conducted in code. Today there's no one I want to talk to. I'm not out for fish, not running my crab or shrimp pots, not searching the beaches for deer or scouting for ducks. I'm looking for a quiet bay and some time to myself.

An hour north of town, clouds peel like strips of gauze, exposing the healed skin of the sky beneath. The sun burns through, reflected in the water, blue on blue.

In my experience, life works the same way as sucker holes, though when I get older I hope I learn that I've always had it backward, and that you should save your cynicism for the clouds, not the sun. I throttle back and ease my way toward the shore. For now, daylight bears down on Alaska, raindrops glisten on spruce needles, and the rocky beach dries in the sunshine that stains the mountain snow the color of fire. I may be just a visitor, but while it lasts there's no place I'd rather be.

I quietly drop anchor and let the boat settle with its own diminishing wake. On the foredeck, the crisp January air feels brittle in my lungs, as if one deep breath might break off a piece of the day. I step back into the cabin and grab a sweater. I'm belowdecks only a minute, but back outside the mountains have already regained their shadowy menace. A few minutes later, drops of rain intersect the calm surface of the bay.