

Nenana River Adventures

Last summer, my wife Mary Lou, and I made a trip to Denali National Park. We stayed at the Princess Hotel in a room overlooking the Nenana river. We watched a parade of rubber rafts full of people floating through the Healy Canyon and it brought back some great memories.

Forty years ago, Byron Haley and I became the first people on record to successfully float through that canyon. I am Jim Douglas. I live in Anchorage and Byron now lives in Fairbanks.

In 1947, I came to Fairbanks over the ALCAN Highway. Thirty-one days from Laramie, Wyoming in a Model A Ford. We had a convoy of three outfits; my brother, Claude Douglas, his wife, Dorothy and son Bob in a 3/4 ton Ford panel pulling a trailerhouse, Bill Willie, his wife, Phyllis and sons Bud and Buzzy in two-ton Diamond T truck, also pulling a trailerhouse. Bud Willie and his dog Blackie rode with Glen Kelly and me in the Model A. That little Ford never missed a beat nor did it break down at anytime on that trip. Today, Claude, Bud Willie and I are the only survivors of that trip.

When we arrived at Fairbanks on April 30, I was twenty-two years old and had less than twenty dollars in my pocket. I needed a job and the Alaska Railroad needed brakemen. I was hired and sent to Healy to work.

Healy was a small community consisting of the railroad hotel, the roundhouse and a few houses. There were also three coal mines: The Black Diamond, Healy River and Usibelli. There were no roads. The only way to get there was by railroad.

I had never rafted on any river, but I soon became intrigued, if not obsessed, with the idea of floating the Nenana River through the Healy Canyon.

The local people that I talked to about it told me not to try it. Others had tried but none had made it. One attempt had been made by a crew of railroad bridge repairmen who were working on the Riley Creek Bridge at McKinley Park. They had a supply of discarded timbers which they used to make a raft. The crew floated the raft

down Riley Creek to the Nenana where they boarded it and started out. In less than half a mile, they came to a bend in the river where there is a sheer rock bank. The current carried them into the rocks and the raft was broken up. They managed to escape onto the rocks and up the bank. Clearly, a wooden raft was not the proper vehicle for that river.

Later, while I was on a freight train that was delayed at McKinley Park with the cabooses parked so that I had a view of the same spot where the wooden raft had been destroyed, I saw a grizzly bear standing on a gravel bar, looking across the river. I could tell that he wanted to cross over. He waded into the water and the current carried him downstream for about two hundred yards. He climbed out having made no headway in his efforts to get to the other side. He went back to the spot where he had first entered the river and he was swept downstream again. He exited the river again, shook the water from his fur and walked into the bush. He didn't really want to cross anyway.

I worked out of Healy for three or four years, always trying to find some way to float the canyon. Meanwhile, my brother Claude and his wife had built a service station, grocery store and coffee shop at thirteen miles on the Richardson Highway. It was called Hi-way Park Service. Sometimes, while working out of Fairbanks, I would help out at the service station. One day, a fellow stopped in for coffee. He had a four-man rubber raft that he wanted to sell. I told him of my dream of floating the Healy Canyon and he assured me that his raft would do just fine. I bought it from him for twenty dollars.

Soon after I bought the raft, I moved back to Healy. I was working the passenger train between Healy and Curry and I was eager to try the raft. Bob Cook, a railroad telegrapher and station operator wanted to go with me but suggested that we try other parts of the river before attempting the canyon, so we took the raft to Cantwell on the train and put in at the Jack River. We floated down to Windy and into the Nenana. There we encountered some pretty good rapids but had no real problems. It was fun. A little further down, we came to the Carlo railroad section house. I knew the cook, Alene Likas, who at times would ride the train to Fairbanks. I knew she was a good cook and that we could at least get some coffee.

She fixed us roast moose sandwiches and fresh blueberry pie to go with the coffee.

After eating, we re-boarded the raft and continued on. There were rapids, but still, no problems. We were having a great time. Then, we came to the confluence of the Nenana and Yanert Rivers. There, we ran into some *real* rapids. As soon as we hit them, we were flipped up-side-down. We each grabbed a safety rope. I don't recall whether or not we had life jackets, but we hung onto the raft and finally got it to a gravel bar. Both rivers are glacier-fed and that water was *cold*. We ended up on the opposite side of the river from the railroad and while I had managed to hang on to my paddle, Bob had lost his. We could see more rapids farther down the river and we had no choice but to get back in and go on. Rafting is not so much fun when you're cold and wet.

We made it to McKinley Park where we decided we had had enough. I could see that the 7 1/2-foot long and 4 1/2-foot wide raft was not the proper raft for the Healy Canyon. I don't think the fellow that I bought it from had used it in any rough water. However, we had a good time and gained some experience. I decided to look for something bigger.

At the end of the summer, I moved to Anchorage. I wanted to be near skiing and Arctic Valley had some rope tows. A friend, Dave Carpentier, who along with his wife, Cathy, had built and operated Carpentiers Lounge on Boniface Parkway, had a rubber raft that he thought was a good one and he said he would let me use it. It was constructed of very thin material and was shaped like a doughnut. It was about eight feet in diameter and weighed about 60-70 pounds. It looked good to me.

The following summer, I moved back to Healy and took Dave's raft with me. I was working between Healy and Curry again, when I told Byron Haley, a friend and fellow crew member, of my plans to float the canyon. He said that he would like to go with me. So, we put the raft in the baggage car at Healy and rode with it to McKinley Park. While the train stopped to let passengers and baggage on and off, Engineer, Phil Hertz came down from the engine to help us run the air hose from the baggage car to inflate the raft. After train No. 5 departed, Bill Mason, the station agent, took us in his pickup to the

river. There, Byron and I put the raft in the river and got aboard. At last I was going to try the canyon.

We soon reached the bend in the river where the wooden raft had busted up and even though both of us had a paddle, we quickly realized that they were as useless for controlling our raft as the bridge gang's paddles had been for controlling theirs. The current carried us straight into the bank and against the jagged rocks but, our round raft just rolled off the rocks and on down the river.

It wasn't far to our next test. There were rapids that were not visible from the railroad that took us by surprise. They were rough, but we had no real trouble. We were eager to continue and floated on to Moody. There, Bob Turnbull was to be waiting with a camera. Bob wrote a weekly article for the Fairbanks News Miner. He was planning to take pictures of us in the Moody rapids. He waited and waited, and finally figured he had missed us and went back to Healy. Bob still lives in Fairbanks.

Our next challenge was what the modern-day rafters call 'The Knife'. It is a jagged rock that projects out of the water. If the river is low, it sticks up three or four feet. On the day of our trip, however, the river was flooding and water was pouring over the top of it. The main channel goes to the left and a smaller channel goes through a narrow gap to the right. We had expected to be carried through the main channel, but the river had other ideas. It took us right over 'The Knife'. It felt as if our raft was being torn apart. We were carried over the rock and dumped about eight feet down into a trough, but landed right-side-up. We had a tear in the floor of the raft, but no punctured air compartments.

The canyon is very narrow for some distance after 'The Knife' and the current really rushes through there. Our next problem was at the railroad station named Garner. A rock ledge runs out into the river and creates a large eddy. We were pulled into this and were swirled around and around. We paddled as hard as we could but we could not break out. Finally I was able to jump onto the ledge and pull us out of the whirlpool.

We were just about out of the canyon now. When we got to Healy, we were able to get to a gravel bar and we pulled the raft out of the river. After about 7 or 8 years of waiting, I had finally made it through the canyon!

There's a small log cabin at the spot where Byron and I got out of the river. It was the home of Hobo Bill. He had seen us climbing out and came outside to investigate. He asked us if we had come through the canyon. When we said yes, he replied that he had lived in that cabin for 40 years and that we were the first to ever make it.

He told us of some other attempts that had failed. One was by two men who met with disaster but had managed to get out of the river. Two others tried and were never found. Had I talked to Bill first, I may have had second thoughts myself.

Bill was one of the many human Healy landmarks. He was a bit of a recluse. About once a month he received a check, perhaps a pension. When it came, he would travel to the railroad hotel and have a delicious family-style meal for 75 cents. The railroad also had shower and laundry rooms but Bill was never known to use either of those facilities.

Otto, a Finnish fellow with a high shrill voice lived by the lake that was named for him. Pop Hollis told me that when Otto was younger, he could do a back flip and land on his feet. Otto worked himself to death trying to develop a coal mine on his property.

It was a privilege to know Pop (Lee) Hollis. He came to Healy from Montana in 1933 as caretaker for a herd of yaks. He was conducting an experiment by the government to see if the yaks would adapt to the area. The yaks didn't adapt, but Pop did. He was a crack rifle shot and could hit a running wolf. His wife, Fern was Healy's postmistress. They had three children, Tom, Grant and Margrette.

Frank Spadero, an Italian with a heart of gold, was the railroad section foreman in Healy. He came to Healy from Chitna where he had worked for the Copper River Railroad between Chitna and Cordova. He retired from the Alaska Railroad and was on the Seward dock when the 1964 earthquake struck. The resulting tidal wave washed over the dock and Frank was never found.

John Calvin was a trapper. He had a cabin at Healy and three more in remote areas. I have been to the ones on Coal Creek and Moody Creek, but not to the one was on the Savage River. At 75 years plus, John would put on a packboard and with his dogs, Pat and Mike set out to one of his cabins. He used a sled in the winter and in the summer he put pack saddles on the dogs. My sister-in-

law, Dorothy, occasionally invited John to dinner. He would come, freshly bathed and wearing a new-looking Alaska Tuxedo. That's green whipcord pants and matching jacket, very popular in those days. They were sold by Northern Commercial Co. of Fairbanks and Anchorage. John was always clean and was a man of high moral standards.

Joe and Kelly Vonah ran the Lignite Roadhouse. They grew greenhouse vegetables that Kelly used to prepare delicious meals. When their business declined, Kelly moved to Fairbanks. Joe shot himself on the roadhouse steps.

Tommie Martin was a prostitute. She operated out of a log cabin at Squaw Point. She had a sign that said 'Whorehouse' posted above her door, proclaiming her profession to the world. She was quite attractive and for years did her bit for the morale of the coal miners. Tommie made a mistake once. She fell in love with a coal miner and entrusted him with \$10,000.00 of her hard-earned wages. He was supposed to take it to the bank for her. She never saw the money or the miner again.

Rae Winters also was a prostitute. She worked out of Goat Mary's on the Suntrana branch. Mary was known for her long skirts and shoe pacs that she wore winter and summer.

Tommie, Rae and Goat Mary all sold booze from their respective places of business. Illegally, of course. When they needed supplies, they sent an order to Coghill's General Store at Nenana. Jack Coghill filled their orders and sent them to Healy via railway express. On our way from Healy to switch the mines at Suntrana, we delivered their goods to them. There was no charge for this, but they always gave us a bottle from each case of booze. We divided the bottles with the engineer, Phil Hertz and fireman, John Thompson. Goat Mary was not as generous with her bottles as the other two were.

Cap Lathrop owned the Healy River coal mine. In 1948, he built the Fourth Avenue Theater in Anchorage. He was killed at the Suntrana mine when he fell on the tracks and was run over by a coal hopper.

Emil Usibelli established his coal mine with hard work and determination. He started with two old, worn-out dump trucks. His wife, Rose, did laundry in Fairbanks to help buy groceries while they

were getting started. After Emil died, his son, Joe took over. Emil would sure be proud if he could see the operation today.

Gus Parish started the Black Diamond Coal Company. When Larry Reed of Reed, Dodson and Martin made him an offer, he sold the mine to them. Jim Dodson was a well-known bush pilot.

Sometime in the mid-1950s, my brother Claude and I made a hunting trip to Windy. We each got a moose. While there, we looked at an old sod-roofed, abandoned log cabin. It sat on the riverbank and had a spectacular view of Panorama Mountain. I wanted that cabin. Hunting season over, I went back to my job as conductor on the passenger train between Healy and Curry. One day at Cantwell, Henry Peters boarded the train for Fairbanks. He was a trackman and lived and worked at Cantwell. After he was seated and I picked up his pass, I asked him if he knew who owned the old cabin at Windy. He gave me a name but said that the owner had died. At this point, a lady sitting within earshot spoke up. She said that she was Mrs. Brundidge, U.S. Commissioner at Nenana. The cabin owner had been a welfare recipient and when he died, his estate was to go to the state of Alaska. She wanted to get information on the cabin so it could be sold. I made it sound as worthless as I could, and asked how a person could go about buying it. She said it would be sold at an auction. I asked when and where. She replied that the only requirement for a legal auction was that three people be present. Well, there was Henry Peters, myself and a tourist. She said she could hold the auction then and there on the train. So she asked for bids and I opened for \$25.00. No one raised my offer and I was soon the proud owner of a hunting cabin. I wrote her a check and she sent me a bill of sale a few days later. I then filed on the five acres on which the cabin sat and was awarded title to it.

I kept that cabin for over 16 years and even though the cabin was built in 1924, the only repairs that I had to make were to put a tin roof over the sod.

When I retired from the railroad in 1975, I sold the property to Al Smith who owned the town of Cantwell.

During the years that I owned the cabin, my family and my brother's family went there every year for a hunting trip. I can count over 30 moose that we took there, some with trophy sized racks. We also took several caribou and two grizzly bears. We never wasted

meat and saved it all. I must have made over 50 trips by canoe from the Paxson highway to Windy, a trip of around 20 miles. I capsized a few times. Once I lost my favorite rifle.

My little cabin was just a few miles from Cantwell. Most of the residents around there were Alaska natives. They were good people who treated me very well and who always kept an eye on the cabin for me when I wasn't there.

I made many friends there and those friendships have lasted 40 years. There were the Nickolis, Tansys, Secondchiefs, Stikovans and of course Henry Peters and his sister Alice Norton. When I went moose hunting, Henry's 90 year old mother would say 'Bring me a moose's nose.' Alice had three pretty daughters; Irene, Nellie and Maggie, and a son named Bud Carlton. Bud was a railroad section foreman at Cantwell for many years. I talked to Maggie on the phone recently and she told me that she has two children that have graduated from college.

Ruby Tansy owns and operates the service station on the highway at Cantwell. Her 90 year old father still rides his three-wheeler.

Nome Stikovan lives in Anchorage and works for Sears. He never wore a cap or gloves, even on the cold, windy and snowy day when he helped me install the tin roof on the cabin. Even as a kid, Nome was a talented checker player. I thought I was pretty good since I had been taught by my Dad who was the champion of Delaware County, Oklahoma. Well, anyway of Maysville, Arkansas with a population of about 100. That was my Dad. I hadn't been beaten by anyone in Alaska until I played Nome. I never won a game when I played with him. He should have graduated to chess.

That cabin gave me more pleasure than any other possession I have ever had.

After Byron and I came through the Healy Canyon, we continued on to Nenana by canoe. Once, after capsizing, we pulled into Julius Creek for some of the best grayling fishing in Alaska.

Later my son Mike and I put the canoe into Brushcana Creek on the Paxson highway. We floated down to the Nenana and on to Windy. For me, that made the entire length of the Nenana that I had floated, from its headwaters to the Tanana river, about 150 miles. I have not heard of anyone else that has done that.

Last year, Mary Lou and I made a trip outside. Upon departing Salt Lake City on the return trip, we were seated next to a friendly young man and we struck up a conversation. His name was John White and he was from Healy. It turned out that he runs an outfit that floats rafts through the Healy Canyon. His company is called the Nenana Raft Adventures. I told him of my experiences on the Nenana and he invited us to make a trip on one of his rafts. This summer, I hope to do just that. I would like to go back through the canyon.....the easy way.