Reflections of Change:
Memories of Mount St. Helens

Understanding the laws of nature does not mean that we are immune to their operations.
David Gerrold

Sometimes life can change in a single instant. On May 18th, 1980 Mount St. Helens, a sparkling gem within the Cascade Range, erupted with a level of violence that few had expected. Within moments, lives were lost, dreams destroyed, and verdant forests of old growth timber were laid to rest. People around the globe would feel the impacts of Mount St. Helens's eruptions. The mountain that had remained dormant for over a hundred years awoke with a series of earthquakes that alerted the world to her vitality. The 1978 warnings issued by United States Geological Survey had been proven correct.

For people living in the shadow of the mountain, the volcanic rumblings and the onslaught of media and notoriety were both exciting and a nuisance. For many, the loss of such a pristine playground was and remains deeply felt. For others, the memories of fear, shock, and absolute awe are forever ingrained in their minds, the result of bearing witness to the mountain's fury that fateful morning.

Memories of Mount St. Helens will forever remain with the people who lived, worked, recreated, and cherished the ice-cream-cone shaped mountain that was their neighbor. They remember what Mount St. Helens and the surrounding area used to be, and in some cases will never be again. Each personal account featured in this exhibit is a valuable piece of the story as a whole. Together these stories give a more complete and personal look at the effects a natural disaster can have on the landscape. The lessons learned are innumerable and invaluable. They transport us to a place and time that will forever grace the history of Washington State.

Special thanks to photographer Roger Wirth and the Longview Daily News for the use of this amazing photograph of the May 18, 1980 eruption.
A world event

I arrived, and of course there was media there from all over the world. Paris Television, BBC London, Tokyo Television, Time Magazine—it was a world event. Initially, I set up briefing times at ten in the morning and three in the afternoon. I was staffing it by myself, 24 hours a day. I didn't get much sleep, and when I did, it was on the ground.

Roland Emetaz

Roland Emetaz spent most of his 37 years with the Forest Service in Wildland Recreation Management. He developed the Northwest Weather and Avalanche Center and is still involved in avalanche awareness and education. A few days after the May 18th eruption, Roland was asked to serve as the Information Officer to the media. He agreed, not knowing what he was getting himself into.

Some of the media were getting in there with helicopters and after awhile, I began to find out that the media knew more than I did about what was happening in there, and I was the Information Officer! So I told one of the deputy's about this, and he said "you're going in on the next rescue ship to Spirit Lake." I said, "The Forest Service won't let me go in there." He put his hand down by his side arm and said, "You're going in next ship." So, I went in. I was intimately familiar with the country around Spirit Lake and Mount St. Helens and I couldn't recognize anything. It was just completely changed—everything was different. There were vents with steam coming out of them. It looked like moonscape. Everything looked gray. After I flew in there and came back out, I had a lot better feeling on what was going on and what it looked like and how difficult it was for the searchers.

I was heading north on I-5, and instead of getting light, it was getting darker. I couldn't figure out—the rain was dirty rain. Then I figured out what was happening. It was another eruption of Mount St. Helens. The rain was mixed with ash. The only way I could keep my windshield clear was to constantly press the windshield washer. Finally, I ran out of water. I couldn't see, so I pulled into a service station, but it wasn't open and the water wasn't turned on. Well, I was pretty desperate because I had to be there to do the 10:00 briefing. I noticed a case of beer in the back seat of the car next to me, so I said to the guy in the car, "Hey, could I have a couple of bottles of beer?" I explained who I was—I had to get to the rescue center. You know, I put some of that beer in the windshield washer, and it worked. It was good enough to get me up to the main interchange at Kelso [Washington] where I could pull into a service station and get some water.
The tunnel was for the stabilization of Spirit Lake. Spirit Lake was rising rapidly. There was no outlet for it. They were pumping water out of it as fast as they could, but they were afraid it was going to breach, and go down the Lewis River side of the watershed and wipe out Woodland.

Duane Parks

Since 1978, Duane Parks has been employed as a Ready-Mix concrete truck driver. In 1982, he was working for Cowlitz Ready-Mix, one of the many companies under contract with the Army Corps of Engineers to work on several projects, including the rebuilding of the Spirit Lake Highway. Despite unstable ground conditions and the hazards associated with working in close proximity to an active volcano, Duane enjoyed his work in the blast zone.

I was a concrete truck driver. And the owners of the company, they were loggers before they became concrete people. Of course, they knew that area up there like the back of their hand, and they liked to do the hard stuff. They liked to take portable plants and set them up on the worst places, and do the nastiest jobs that nature could throw at us. So, consequently, we put a plant right on the side of Mount St. Helens.

That night they decided it was becoming very dangerous to be there, so they wanted to evacuate us. The fog had moved in so bad that we couldn’t see, but they put us all in four-wheel-drive rigs and we headed out. Well, we didn’t get a hundred yards up the road and this big landsliede came washing across the road and there was no road anymore.

We had to get out with flashlights and walk along the road, and the cars had to follow us, which took an exceedingly long time to get out. All of our crew got out, but there was one gentleman that was in a pickup that worked for one of the contractors that was up there, he didn’t make it. He drove off of the road and went over a bank about four or five hundred feet down. He was really lucky; he actually survived it without hardly any injuries.

So they had two big CATs, and they followed the CATs until we could get through that part. They’d get a couple of rigs through and there’d be another slide and the CAT would have to go back and make more road for the vehicles behind us. We were driving on top of these big ridges—along the sides of them actually, and it was pitch dark, and the fog was so thick that we couldn’t see where we were going.
We were working out in the yard and we got a call putting us on standby, and we said “Standby for what?” They said, “Don’t you know the mountain’s blowing?” “Oh, no, we’re working out in the front yard.” We walked around to our backyard and sure enough, We sat there and watched the plume get bigger and bigger and higher and higher. Pretty soon you could see it starting to drift towards the east—all that ash.

The thing that amazed me was the air pockets along the riverbed. You’d walk along and see mounds of dirt and rock. They were up about a foot and a half and you’d step on ‘em and they were just air pockets. That was where the trees were and the heat just deteriorated the tree, but the ash was still sitting there where it had been—where it had originally fallen. It just sort of held itself up over the hole. You had to walk along with a stick and poke the ground in front of you so you didn’t step in one of those holes.

In October, we had everything all together in base camp to search after the May 18th blast. We split into teams and drove up the roads that they wanted us to search. They sent us into those areas where they knew people had been camped to see if we could find any remains. The deputy that I was with was from Cowlitz County, and he had been a deputy for about twenty years. He brought us up by where Spirit Lake was; there was nothing there. Up on Windy Ridge we were just sitting there watching the steam come out of the mountain. They kept calling him and saying, “it’s venting, you need to get out of there!” He replied, “Oh, we’re on our way back” and instead we were on our way to go in closer. He said, “What they don’t know won’t hurt them. I’ve lived my whole life up here and I know this mountain and it’s not going to blow today.” We kept getting closer and closer until we were just practically right up there on it.
Ten years of construction

At night I would go out on the freeway with the water truck. We had three water trucks running side by side washing the ash off the road. We would get done with that, and then during the day we would do it on the streets of Longview. I was working 36-38 hours straight, and then I'd go home and sleep for 8 hours and go back and do it again.

Michael LaFave

On May 18th, 1980, Michael LaFave was camping at Lake Mayfield. He has vivid memories of driving home in a whiteout caused by heavy ash fall. By the next day, his job had him out in a water truck, washing the ash from the roadways.

I remember coming out of my camper and seeing this huge, huge plume. There was this big lightning storm going on inside the plume, and thunder, man it was loud. All of us loaded up our campers and took off. By the time we got from Mossy Rock to just east of Toledo, it was a white out—you couldn't see from the ash fall. We went the back way to I-5 and then headed south. The State Patrol was trying to stop the traffic across the Toutle River Bridge, because the mudflow was coming down the Toutle River Valley. Oh, man, it was like an 80-foot wall of mud and debris. It was pretty nasty. We were the very last ones to get across the bridge before they closed it. When I got home, I unhooked the truck from the camper and drove over by the Hall of Justice in Kelso and watched the mudflow come down. You could see the river level start to rise and this big wall of mud coming down, with houses and debris.

The very next day the state gave us the contract along with other companies to start the repairs. I went out there the next day, and there was so much ash on the freeway and there weren't any cars out there. But people, including myself were putting nylon socks over their air cleaners because the ash and dust would be sucked in and kill your car. It was weird, during the day people would be walking around with facemasks; it was like a plague or something.

We built 40 some miles of Spirit Lake Highway. 1983 is when we started rebuilding. They built the roads on the dredge spoils that were pumped from the rivers. It took over 10 years of construction to get the roads and center open and safe for the public. I worked on 37 miles of the highway up there. There were a few ash sprays while we worked and it slowed the process. We had someone watching in case the mountain blew again. They had big horns like air raid sirens in case another spat would occur.
Assessing the hazards

I think it is important to recognize that volcanologists are trained in a broad range of sciences. They are people who study hydrologic flow processes, and geologists who study lahars deposits. They are also gas geochemists, seismologists, and petrologists who look at the chemistry of rocks. We have people who study water and magma interactions, and we have a number of geophysicists who are very good at equipment development and instrumentation.

Carolyn Driedger

In the spring of 1980, Carolyn Driedger was working on Mount St. Helens helping a colleague with a glacier study. When the mountain became active, it provided her with the opportunity to study how volcanoes affect glaciers. In an observation flight she took two days after the May 18th eruption, Carolyn wrote in her notes that the volcanic environment was so hostile that she could never bear to make it her life’s study. Today, she laughs when she reads those comments because she is still studying the mountain through her job with the United States Geological Survey.

We are going in and assessing the hazards on the different Cascade volcanoes because it is very important to understand what the future may bring. Each of the volcanoes seems to have a different personality or way of erupting as cataloged in its eruptive history. We assess the hazards, and monitor those volcanoes by setting out equipment and looking for signs of volcanic unrest. We also develop new tools—new instrumentation for monitoring the volcanoes, and develop new ideas about how volcanoes work. Another important thing is communication. We communicate with people outside of the volcanology discipline. We work with emergency managers, public officials, and communities at risk. We recognize the necessity to work with others.

I went up to Coldwater on the afternoon of May 17th. There were four of us who went up there together. We had hoped to use the helicopter to get up to Shoestring Glacier, but it needed servicing, so we were unable to make the flight. We thought of staying overnight until the next morning when the helicopter would be available. David Johnston noted that there was risk being up there, so he said to go and come back up the next morning, and so we left. On the evening of May 18th, after the eruption, we stayed up nearly the entire night in a hotel room laying out our thoughts and feelings over everything that had happened throughout the day, and the loss of David was indeed a part of that.
Bringing home the bacon

The Volcano Crisis Team [VDAP] at Cascades Volcano Observatory basically cut its teeth on the Mount St. Helens eruptions and since then has applied that expertise around the world. VDAP has worked in at least 14 different countries and managed 22 different crises since 1986 when the team was formed. The experience gained at Mount St. Helens has been applied in numerous places to try to mitigate the consequences of eruptions.

C. Dan Miller

Dan Miller has always been interested in volcanoes. In 1980, his job with the United States Geological Survey afforded him the opportunity to experience and study a volcano up close and personal. He remembers the months before and after the eruption as the busiest of his life. The long days and staggering responsibility have had a lasting impact.

In August of 1980, after several months of working day and night we decided we needed something to relax ourselves. Mike Doukas and I talked about cooking a pig. We had these hot pyroclastic flow deposits, which were out north of the crater—the older ones were cooler and the younger ones were hotter. One of the things we were doing out there was probing these deposits with temperature measuring tools to find out how hot they were at what kinds of depths. We realized that there was plenty of heat out there to cook almost anything. I bought a pig and stuffed it with chickens that were stuffed with fresh oysters. After stuffing the pig we wrapped it up in burlap and banana leaves and we flew up there and landed. We ran out onto the pyroclastic flow and threw the pig in the ground and poured two six-packs of beer all over it to try and saturate it. Then we put a thermo couple in it, buried it and flew off to work for the rest of the day. We came back about six in the evening, measured the temperature, and knew it was cooked. We picked it up and put it in the back of the helicopter and I called up Vancouver. I said, "Vancouver, this is five six Yankee, we have completed the temperature experiment and we're bringing home the bacon." We flew back to Pearson Field and we did a victory pass over the park and everybody was down there screaming and yelling. We landed and they came running over to us, and we hauled the pig out of there and ate it. That is the first time in the history of mankind that a pig has been purposely buried in a pyroclastic flow, recovered, and eaten.

Everything had changed in the blink of an eye. Instead of beautiful forests there was just this lunar gray—the whole thing looked like the surface of the moon. We landed up in the valley by Coldwater Two and it was like walking on the moon. It was the strangest situation that I have ever been in. There wasn’t a living thing for 230 square miles and the steam was coming out of the ground all around us. The ground was hot, and you had to be careful where you were walking because you could sink in and burn yourself. It was a scary place to be. My first reaction was, "My God, this beautiful place has been destroyed." But right after that my response was, "But look what we have in its place. This too, is remarkable and beautiful and spectacular in its own way." We had the most exciting summer, scientifically, of our lives, looking at what had happened in that first three or four minutes of May 18th.
Ron Fields worked for the United States Forest Service for nearly thirty years. Twenty-five of those years were spent working in the midst of Mount St. Helens and Spirit Lake. He was an appreciative eyewitness to the pristine beauty of the mountain prior to May 1980, and worked within the blast zone for many years after. Ron was on duty the morning of May 18th, 1980, and personally experienced the eruption.

That morning I went to work at six or seven o'clock. I was on the southwest side of the mountain and I had just left Ape Cave. I was right in Red Rock Pass and the mountain erupted at that moment and the first thing I knew about it was when I got a radio message from dispatch that I was to evacuate the area immediately. I could not see the mountain erupting because I was surrounded by all the trees. It took another four to five minutes before I could actually visualize the eruption process. Well, that was the first time to be afraid, and it was time to know that you had to get out of there. To get out, I was told not to go back the way I came in, because it was possible that the dam could go. By that time things were beginning to change. The sky was becoming dark. It was beginning to manufacture its own weather its own lightening. Heavy ash was coming down and bits of pumice. Lightening was all over and it was fairly nasty. Then it began to take on a very eerie setting. You could see the trees the branches were starting to drape over because they were getting heavy with ash.

I remember driving back down around to the west side of Cougar where I was told to stay and keep everybody from coming back up the road and trying to go in to see what was going on.

There were people from all over the world who seemed to be fearless, and didn't really understand that by trying to go right in, right up to the crater how hazardous that was. We had to go in and locate people by helicopter and then drop down, get out of the aircraft and arrest them, and take them over to the Skamania County Jail.

We were allowed to fly close to Mount St. Helens, but not directly over it. You had to stay out of the restricted zone, but we were close enough that when the weather was right we could see the devastation. We could see all the trees blown over on the ground. They were like toothpicks scattered on a wooden floor just lying in all sorts of disarray. Steam was all over the place.
A Shangri-La

I think I just always had such a vision in my mind of that beautiful lake and all the campgrounds and the trees. I used to say to myself when it was threatening to blow, "Just don't take my lake." And then afterwards, that was the thing—it took my lake. It was a big, big, big hurt. Jackie Miller

Jackie Miller is a retired teacher who has lived in Ridgefield, Washington since 1964. For her, Spirit Lake was Shangri-La.

She has many fond memories of vacationing there with her family. Since May 18th, 1980, those memories have been clouded by loss.

The chapel was on the far end and the north side of the lake at the YMCA camp. It had an altar and cross, and an amphitheater with the seats made out of logs that were cut in half. If you were sitting in the amphitheater, you would be looking out toward the south. You would look up at the altar and cross, and then behind that was the lake and Mount St. Helens. If the sun was shining down through the trees it was absolutely spiritual. It was an absolutely magnificent place. My husband and I always thought that when we were married 25 years we would go back up and get married again there. But by the time we reached 25 it was gone because of the eruption.

The two storied outhouses were located up on the side of the mountain. They looked like just a little building, but it had what looked like a chimney on one end of it. When the snow was deep you could go in through a window up in the top of the chimney and climb down the ladder into where the potties were.

I never went back up there until most of the interpretive centers were done and the new highway was built. My husband worked for the Highway Department, and so he was in on a lot of the building of the new road. He would be in and out of there. But, I didn't want to go, and I didn't go until the road was done.

When I saw it, I was truly just shocked. I was in a different place. When we used to take the road, it was down in the valley. It followed right along the river and the new highway is up on the hill, so you are up there looking down. It was kind of like being in a different location. All the trees being gone—and the trees lying over. I didn't want to see it for a long, long time. It was maybe ten years before I ever went up there. I think I just always had such a vision in my mind of that beautiful lake and all the campgrounds and the trees. It was absolutely a Shangri-La for me.
The smell of timber

Oh, it was like you were in heaven. There's nobody around and it was quiet, and the smell of the timber and every once and a while we'd run across bear tracks and there was a lot of deer and elk in that area at the time. We would see herds of elk on the way up. They would be grazing in the early morning. It was quiet up there. It was serene, very serene, and it was a blessing to be able to work in that area at that time. —Alvin Pietz

In 1948, Alvin Pietz went to work for the Lawrence Johnson Logging Company of Amboy, Washington. He fondly remembers the long hard days he spent using a springboard and misery whip to fell the old growth timber that grew on the slopes of Mount St. Helens.

My day started early. I was getting up at three o'clock in the morning and driving up to Amboy. We started working right away. There were no coffee breaks in those days; we just worked. We had to leave around two o'clock in the afternoon because of the fire danger. We always had to keep shovels and picks and a sizeable amount of water at the site. In those days we didn't have chain saws. Everything was by hand—the bucking and the falling. It was hard work, but it was good work.

We logged up beyond Cougar on the hillside previous to the dams that were built up there. That was the main reason for logging, to clear a right of way for the dams, because water was going to be backed up in that area. Our job was to just take everything off the hillside. Most of it was old growth cedar and at that time we used spring boards and a misery whip to dump everything over.

After we fell it, we'd hook on to it with a choker attached to a CAT. Then they'd start to peel all of the bark off, but we had to use a choker, otherwise when you'd turn it over the tree would slide down the hill. After they got it peeled they would skid it the rest of the way up the hill where they'd put it on a truck. The logs were transported over to Beaverton, Oregon where they went through a treatment plant for high line poles.

A lot of times we'd stop at Ole Peterson's. He was an old fella who lived up there all by himself. He had some old cars and he was quite a gentleman and we'd sit up there and talk to him for a little bit. Cantankerous old fella. I heard a story that he packed a stove on his back all the way from Cougar to his house. He was quite a guy.
Living in history

One of the commentators on television made the comment about, “Oh, we are living in history.” And I remember thinking, if this is living in history, I don’t want to live in history, because this is scary. It was the unknown. —Pauline Meyers

Pauline Meyers grew up in Vancouver, Washington where she had a beautiful view of Mount St. Helens directly out of her kitchen window. In 1980, she was living in Yakima, Washington, an area that experienced heavy ash fall after the May 18th, 1980 eruption of Mount St. Helens. She and her family were attending church on the morning of the eruption.

Well, first of all, it just kept getting darker and darker and darker and darker—we just thought, “Oh my, what a storm! This is really crazy!” Then, because we were at church we thought, “Oh, Jesus is coming back!” [Laughs] The sky is getting dark, you know, Jesus is coming back. And so we just kept looking out the window—watching. Then the Sheriff came to the church and he said, “Send all your people home that can get home in less than thirty minutes. If not, you'll have to keep them here because there is no way they’re going to get home safe.” After that you could hear the ash starting to fall.

We lived about a mile from our church. It took us nearly thirty minutes to drive that mile. It was very dark and very quiet—eerily quiet. There were no dogs barking. There wasn't any honking of horns or any other city noises normally heard. It was really, really quiet. And we would drive about five, ten feet and then get out and brush off the ash, because we didn't know—we really didn't want to run the windshield wipers because we thought it would damage the car. So we would drive ten or fifteen feet more then get out and brush off the ash again, so that we could keep driving. It was very choky—a lot of particulates in the air. And it continued—the rustling sound of the ash dropping was very, very unique.

Everything was all the same monochromatic color—your flowers, your trees, your grass, the ground; your house roof—everything was gray. We had about five inches of it. It was all over everything. Every time you walked it would billow up around your feet like the Pigpen character walking in the Charlie Brown cartoon.
If you just listen

The sky was like something out of a scary book or something. The lightning was flashing all through the ash. The whole thing was alive. The ash was falling and the sky was darkening. The most intriguing of all was the way the sparks flew and the way that there were electric currents all over. It was frightening, because how do you know when it was going to end, whether there was going to be lava flowing or whether it was just the ash that was coming out. It was the most awful yet fascinating sight that I've ever seen.

Wanda Bafus

Wanda Bafus has been a resident of Vancouver for most of her adult life. She has vivid memories of watching the eruption of May 18th, 1980 and especially of the intuitive behavior of her daughter's yearling horse that would kick up a ruckus before each eruption.

When our children were small, my husband and I wanted a place that we could go early in the morning, cook our breakfast and have a safe place for the children to play. We decided on Spirit Lake, because it was the most beautiful lake we had ever laid our eyes on. It was blue green. From the center it was darker green and at the edges it was so clear that you could see the bottom of the lake. The children loved to go there and fish. Sometimes, if they forgot their fishing rods, they could catch the fish on a safety pin tied to the end of a string, there were so many of them. I remember the air and the smell of the early morning freshness mixed with the bacon and eggs. It was a wonderful place to be.

In 1980, my daughter Valerie lived on the other side of Lewisville Park. She had 2 1/2 acres and a barn where she put her horses to bed every night. Cola, the baby horse was a year old. She and her mother lived out there on the farm with Valerie and all the rest of her animals. For about a week before the mountain blew, Cola would kick the boards in the barn so loud at night, it would sound like someone was shooting a gun. Valerie would get up and tell her to quiet down, and then she'd go back to bed. Sometimes Cola would stop and sometimes she wouldn't. But she kept that up almost until the night before the mountain blew. Each time the mountain would erupt, Cola would know it was going to happen and she would kick and kick, then in just a few days the mountain would blow again. It seemed as if she could feel what was happening in the earth below her and it frightened her (she didn't know what was going on and she didn't know what to do about it, so she would kick and as soon as the mountain would do what it had to do, she was fine again. So we realized that horses and animals really have a sensitivity to disasters. If you just listen, they'll try to tell you. So, Valerie always knew after that, that there wasn't going to be any kind of eruption unless Cola knew it first.