

Surviving Mount St. Helens By Terry Clayton

Mount St. Helens is part of a string of active, though usually dormant, volcanoes that are the dominant mountains in the Cascades. The friction caused by the Juan de Fuca plate being forced under the much larger North American Plate forms the Cascades. Volcanoes are the weak spots in that plate. The Cascade volcanoes are themselves a segment of a gigantic geological phenomenon, the Pacific Ring of Fire, stretching around the rim of Asia and the Americas in a giant arch like a brilliant necklace of over one hundred and sixty fiery volcanoes. Mount St. Helens is a unique volcano for at least two reasons. It is one of the youngest and most active, volcanoes on earth, and it erupts laterally through its side rather than through the top as most other volcanoes do. Artist, Paul Kane, painted it erupting from the side in 1847. Prior to the arrival of Europeans, Native Americans experienced the mountain erupting many times. The last major eruption was in 1800, comparable to the 1980 blast, with a number of smaller blasts since then. One eruption five hundred years ago was over ten times greater than the 1980 blast. There have been many Mount St. Helens and Spirit Lakes built up then obliterated over the eons. Pam and I had talked about going to Mount St. Helens and Spirit Lake ever since the mountain rumbled back to life in early March 1980. Earlier in her life she had spent a few years in Centralia and Chehalis and had gotten to know the surrounding area, including, Spirit Lake and Goat Rock. She said that Goat Rock was one of the most beautiful and serene places she had ever been. Spirit Lake was located, and is reforming, at the base of Mount St. Helens in a saddle between the mountain and a high ridge and Goat Rock was a hike away. She wanted to visit there one last time and to say goodbye before it was obliterated by the eruption. My reason for the trip was a little different. I did want to experience Spirit Lake and Goat Rock. But the main reason for my visit was to get as close as I could to experience an active volcano near eruption. It was the opportunity for the adventure of a lifetime.

We talked about the best time to go but something always seemed to come up. Geologists had predicted that the main eruption would occur the following Wednesday, less than a week away. This was probably the last weekend left to see Spirit Lake and the mountain before it erupted. It was this weekend or never. Predicting when volcanoes erupt, however, is a lot like predicting a birth; it is partially based on observing the swelling, as well as the frequency and intensity of the contractions. Like a pressure-cooker, it takes time for the magma to build up in the caldera putting sufficient pressure on the cone for it to blow open. Again, like a pregnancy, it isn't an exact science. Mount St. Helens blew prematurely. Kidd Valley

Saturday, May 17th was a warm, bright Spring morning full of promise for the weekend. As I prepared breakfast for myself I thought about phoning

Pam to see if she was ready to go on this adventure. Just then there was a knock on the front door. It was Pam, asking me if I was ready to go. It took only a few minutes to pack our camping gear into my new Honda Accord, along with Schotzel, my beautiful Alsatian Shepard dog.

Mount St. Helens is about one hundred miles south of Seattle. By mid afternoon we had reached the Kidd Valley store, some five miles up the North Fork of the Toutle River from the town of Toutle. The store was really a converted log cabin with a gas pump in front. The proprietor introduced himself as "Stanley Lee ,À Stan Lee, for short." He was a relatively short man, hunched, 5'4" or 5'5", probably in his sixties, with a white stubble beard. He looked like he came directly from Central Casting in a Hollywood movie. He was a little crotchety, like a character from Grapes of Wrath or The Beverly Hillbillies. We bought some snacks and went outside.

Pat "Snakeman" Kilgore

Across a patch of gravel was another, younger, man. Like Stan Lee, he also looked like he was a movie character. His name was Pat Kilgore, though he preferred his nickname, Snakeman, because of the five-foot boa constrictor he wore around his neck. From a homemade booth Pat was selling vials of Mount St. Helen ash (ash had been intermediately released since March) and T-shirts that read I lost my ash on Mount St. Helens and it's A Blast, Mount St. Helens, 1980. Pat was about my age, in his early forties, and already a grandfather. Like me, he had a full-beard. He was wearing a blue work shirt, with wide red suspenders holding up his work jeans. He was gregarious with a sense of humor. He was colorful, bombastic, rich in language and fit the stereotype of a latter day mountain man. I liked him. A Strapper for the Weyerhaeuser lumber company, he secured loads of logs on flatbed train cars at the logging camp that were hauled to the finishing mill forty miles away. Pat was also a friend of Harry Truman, the mountain man living at Spirit Lake who was often interviewed in the press and on television since the mountain had rumbled back to life in March. At the time I thought that Harry must have been an old drunken fool to stay in his cabin on Spirit Lake knowing that could mean his certain death when the mountain blew. Perhaps he got caught up in his own braggadocio saying that the mountain could not drive him out. Maybe he felt he would lose face if he left. I bought Pat a beer and we spent some time visiting. Pam and I were being introduced to a subculture that stretched the length of the foothills of the Cascades. Many of these people were transplants from the hills of Appalachia of West Virginia, Arkansas, Oklahoma and Texarkana. Here they made their living primarily as loggers and stump farmers. They made their own whiskey and grew their own marijuana. Pat told us that revenueurs had been known to disappear and never to be heard from again if they came snooping around. They tended to be distrustful of outsiders, resented being looked down upon by city slickers, but were gracious hosts if they trusted you. Pat's sixteen-year-old son lived in a shack behind the store with his common-law fifteen-year-old wife, their baby, and her

parents.

After we finished our beer we said goodbye to Pat and drove up the road for a couple of more miles. We couldn't proceed further because the State Patrol had the road blocked with a gate that allowed access to the few locals who lived beyond the blockade. We were at the base of the north face of the mountain, that part of the mountain with the big bulge. There were a few cars and campers parked there. It was a nice warm day, but not much to see. After about an hour we decided to leave.

Pam was disappointed that she was not going to be able to see Spirit Lake and Goat Rock one last time, but it was a pleasant trip just the same. She had friends in Cougar, another small logging town about an hour away, so we decided to alter our plans and visit them. Pam thought that we would arrive too late in the evening to be polite. We decided to camp that night. Half way between Toutle and Cougar I spotted a paved road going down towards a lake. That road was the original highway. It had flooded out when the river was dammed after World War II, creating Rife Lake. I drove a few miles before the road disappeared into the lake, a logical place to camp. This is where we pitched camp. It had an impressive view, unlike Kidd Valley. Now we could see the lake, a shimmering blue surface with a wooded ridge and Mount St. Helens directly beyond. From here we could see the whole mountain, about fifteen miles directly south of us. It was a perfect camping place.

May 18th: 8:32AM

The next morning began as another great day, bright, warm and promising. The smells of the woods, the scurrying of chipmunks, the chirping of birds reminded me of why I chose the Pacific Northwest as my home. It was 8:30, plenty of time to have breakfast and get to Cougar at a reasonable hour. Pam had gone to wash her face in the lake while I was putting away the camping gear. Something didn't feel right, though I couldn't quite put my finger on what it was. Then it dawned on me. It was absolutely quiet. There was no twittering of birds or scurrying of chipmunks or other soft sounds that are usually in the background. I heard Pam gasp, then cry out, "My God, the mountain has blown!" I whirled around, looking towards Pam, the lake and the mountain. Pam had naturally curly hair worn tightly around her head. It now stood out like an Afro in the musical, Hair. For that instant her hair blocked the view of the ridge so that the erupting volcano appeared to be coming directly out of her head, like an angry cartoon character blowing her top. My beard and arms were tingling. As I looked at my arm, the hair was standing straight out. It gave the impression that my arms were as thick as my legs. I pressed the hair down on one arm. It rose back up again, like it had a life of its own. The quiet was unnerving. At that catastrophic moment the energy equivalent of twenty-four megatons of thermal energy was released. Though the sound of that explosion was heard all the way to Canada, for us there was no sound at all. Similar phenomena have been reported on battlefields of the Civil War and World War One. Somehow the sound gets cancelled out for those at

the epicenter. The north flank of the mountain had collapsed on itself. In that moment three-quarters of a cubic mile of the mountain was pulverized, sending a plume of ash into the atmosphere thousands of feet high, creating a crater two miles wide and one-half mile deep. People were killed that were farther away from the epicenter than we were. On the other side of the ridge the trees had been knocked flat by the impact of the blast. Apparently the blast had skipped over us, like a stone skipping over water. The plume of ash, traveling in excess of sixty miles an hour, was heading directly towards us. It took a couple of minutes for the cloud to overtake us. The huge cloud rolled over us like a sand storm during the Dust Bowl of the 1930s. The cloud was a dark, seething mass of ash and energy. Lightning flashed repeatedly in the cloud. I threw the remainder of our gear into the car and we drove out as quickly as I could in the murky light. Pam leaned out the window, took a picture of the cloud as it rolled over us. The cloud looked something like Princess Leia from Star Wars. It had become as dark as night and the air temperature had dropped from warm to cool. There was an odd feel of electricity in the air and a slight metallic taste in my mouth.

Instead of evacuating, I headed back toward the mountain. I was not so much afraid as excited. I have the type of personality that is attracted to dangerous situation. I am not afraid of death, as I know that at the consciousness level, I don't die.

A steady exodus of vehicles dashed away from the mountain. We were the only one heading back toward it. At one point it was rather tricky. A stretch of a narrow two-lane road elevated over a marshy area. It presented a beautifully bizarre view of Mount St. Helens. Before March, Mount St. Helens was called San Fuji of America or Mount Fuji of America, for its balanced conical shape. Now over a 1000 feet of the mountain's top was gone as well as a good portion of the north face, which now belched a steady dark grey plume. It was as awesome as it was eerie. I didn't have much time to look. I had to concentrate on driving. I was driving as fast as I could and still keep control. The vehicles approaching were also traveling very fast. At that speed and with only a couple of feet separating the on-coming vehicles, particularly campers, it created a vacuum which tended to suck the vehicles toward each other. Only a couple of feet separated us from head-on collisions.

A few minutes later we passed the Kidd Valley store. Ash was beginning to fall like snow. Minutes later we reached the blocked road. We were prevented from going on by a State Patrol officer who said, "There's lava flowing over the road. Everyone has to leave immediately or they will be killed!" Other than that short alarmist statement, he said nothing else. We turned around and started to head back. I remembered seeing Kilgore in his booth when we passed by earlier. I decided to stop again at Kidd Valley and talk to Pat to see if I could find out any more. As it turned out, we knew more than he did. He knew that something was up due to all the

traffic speeding away. Like us, he had not heard the explosion. He was also out of actual sight of the North Slope. We told him what we knew. We were both reluctant to leave. I was sure the State Patrol would roust us out any minute now, but couldn't think of any reason to stay. I think that Pat felt the same, as he invited us to meet his son and his family in a shack behind the store. We spent about a half an hour drinking coffee and making small talk. Everyone other than Pam, me, and the baby were smoking. The smoke irritated our eyes. We made our excuses and left. We were not prepared for what we saw. It was like we had entered a strange, parallel world.

The Twilight Zone

Our visit had only been less than an hour but outside it had become another world. The ash was falling heaven now, like snow, though a light gray, with a layer of ash an inch deep on the branches of the trees and on the ground. It was strangely quite, in a similar way when snow is following with no breeze, except warmer, perhaps in the mid-80s or low 90s. There was a yellow/amber cast about everything, like an antique picture in sepia. I had experienced a similar effect years ago when I drove next to a forest fire east of the town of Forks. In the short period of our visit we had been out of the sight of others. The State Patrol had evacuated everyone they could see, but since they hadn't seen us, they didn't linger. Kilgore left when we did to check in with his mother and stepbrother who was immobilized in a cast from a recent motorcycle accident. The problem was that where he and his family lived was beyond the blocked road. Just as we were leaving the store parking lot, Pat returned in a spray of gravel. He leapt out of his truck and asked, "Terry, I can't get through. The gate is locked. Can you drive me home?" Pat knew ways to bypass the main road, but with his old truck with bald tires, he couldn't get traction driving in the ash. Since my car was new and had front-wheel drive, could. I said, "Sure, let's go." Pat directed me to a logging road. It was quite steep with a lot of switchbacks, but I had no problem. I found that it was actually easy driving in ash. The silica or grit in it gave me traction.

A few miles up the mountain we arrived at a meadow, perhaps four acres of grass. At one end was an old trailer where Kilgore lived and at the other end was a log house where Pat's mother lived with his stepbrother. We first had a cup of tea at Pat's trailer, finding a little bit more about each other. We then went to his Mother's house and had another quasi-normal visit with her and Pat's stepbrother. By this time, I think I was getting a little antsy and Pat picked up on it. Still wanting to keep the adventure going, Pat suggested that he show us a livery stable and roadhouse from those days when teams of horses would bring back wagons of wheat from eastern Washington. Pat had an Irish setter that stayed with his mother when he was working. We drove a couple of miles to a prairie. The grass

in the prairie was knee high yet bowed nearly in half by the weight of the ash. Our two dogs delighted themselves and us by chasing each other serpentine the prairie, throwing up rooster-tails like two hydroplanes in a race. In the meantime, like in *Apocalypse Now*, we found ourselves avoiding detection from the helicopters flying overhead. We would dodge from tree to tree to avoid being seen. We didn't want to be "rescued" and have our adventure end prematurely. There was not much left of the old livery station that had deteriorated by time and weather. It was still possible to see the outlines of the building from the remaining foundation stones. It had been two rooms, one for the men and one for the animals. It was also still possible to see the slight depression of the narrow road/trail used by the teamsters. I was again feeling the need to leave. I had no way of determining the state of the destruction of the roads and the impact of the ash on my car I was concerned that I might not be able to drive out my car if conditions continued to worsen.

Camp Baker

At the moment that Pam and I had decided to leave, Pat remembered that he had a friend with an unreliable car who was night watchman at Camp Baker, where he and Pat worked. He might be stuck at the camp.

Great! We again had a legitimate reason to continue the adventure we were on. Pat directed us up a road on the ridgeline between the North Fork and South Fork of the Toutle River. I was a little nervous heading up the mountain, but I rationalized that if there were going to be additional pyroclastic flows they would be in the two valleys below us. As I looked around me I was starting to have doubts about the wisdom of our decision. Part way there we stopped the car at a point where the road presented a panoramic view of the mudflow of the north fork of the Toutle River. In my travels I have witnessed some awesome displays of natural power, such as logs tossed in the air like match sticks in a winter storm at Shi Shi, the waves of a tropical storm off the Pacific coast of Colombia, a forest fire and other events, including some that happened hours before. Instead of having a sense of fear I felt detached, and like someone else. Here I was driving directly for the summit as if I were driving to the Gates of Mordor and the Cracks of Doom. The view of the crater rim dominated the horizon. The ground trembled under us. The ash fell thicker and hotter. The heat was now near stifling. I was sweating profusely and it was running into my eyes with the windows closed. It was less hot with the windows open, but then the ash billowed in, stinging our eyes and causing us to gag. I thought to myself, "How much farther are we going?" At that moment Kilgore pointed down the ridge to a logging camp below. "Go down there," he said. Below us, down a steep road, was the logging camp in the ravine created by the upper North Fork of the Toutle. That caused me to focus. Pyroclastic flows are heavy. They flow down valleys, not on ridge. My heart leaped to my throat. I gasped and then gulped. "Okay," I said, "Let's make it quick." I pointed my Honda down the road, gunning it as fast as I thought the car could handle. By this time I had become accustomed to driving in

the ash. It isn't like driving on any other surface I have ever driven on. The car would slide like driving on snow when turning, but in a right angle motion instead of a curve. Through the billowing ash kicked up by the vehicle I could see steam venting from the ground and around stumps. It seemed like we were going through a miniature geyser forest. At last we reached the bottom and we crossed a bridge over a creek some 30 to 35 feet below. This was not an ordinary bridge. It was built for heavy-duty machinery and oversized logging trucks that are too large to operate on public roads. Before me the road spread out into a massive work yard. This was Camp Baker.

Facing me were three massive log piles I would say they were over fifty feet high and a quarter mile long. All in all, about 250 thousand logs. The area between the piles was wide enough for the oversized logging trucks and a huge tractor rig with a tall boom with a giant clam-scoop, which dwarfed the logging trucks. It reminded me of a scene from Star Wars. This tractor/clam rig was located next to a railroad tracks. There were flatbed cars, some of them loaded with logs, strapped in, probably by Pat himself on Friday before the workweek ended. In one part of the yard were parked in a row a half a dozen of these logging trucks. I could see down the canyon between the first and second log piles to a rambler house that was the camp headquarters and sleeping quarters of the watchman. Here was our destination. It seemed like several miles away through a gauntlet of pieces of splintered logs and large chuck holes. It was like driving through a slalom course, and I drove carefully, avoiding the larger splinters scattered by the clam shovel when picking up the logs to place on the train and from and the deeper potholes. The difference was that instead of turning graceful arcs around obstacles, I would slightly move the steering wheel a little to the right or left and the car would slide the intended direction at a right angle, then slowdown enough to catch and then shoot forward in another right angle. I had it down pat.

After what seemed like fifteen or twenty minutes, though actually probably less than a minute, we popped out the other side of the canyon by the house. At that moment we heard a deep rumbling. My friends gasped in unison. For a fleeting moment I toyed with the idea of taking a picture, and then Pat shouted, "He isn't here! Get out of here!" I did not linger. I wasn't sure what happened but I sensed that we were in grave danger. I turned the wheel sharply and gunned the engine. The car spun in a tight circle. I headed back the way we had come, on the outside of the first pile, the one closest to the steep hill we had just descended. Pat and Pam were looking up at the hill to our left. I was totally absorbed in driving as fast as I could without losing control while at the same time avoiding splinters and potholes as much as possible. I was right on the edge in total concentration. Like a dream, every millisecond slowed down. That quarter of mile race was a series of split second maneuvers; one mistake would cost us our lives.

After what seemed like an hour at last we sped onto the bridge.

Afterwards, Pam told me at that moment she thought we were about to die. The whole side of the ridge we had been on gave way. Riding a cushion of steam the whole side of the ridge, estimated at over a one-quarter of a millions tons of dirt, stone, stumps and debris careened down on us at over a hundred miles an hour, a wall of mud thirty to thirty-five feet high. On the outside of the first log pile, I drove parallel to the slide back the way we came. It traveled about a mile and we had to travel two or three hundred yards. When the wall of mud was higher than what Pam could see, she thought that we would be dead in the next moment. She only wished that it would be quick. At that instant we drove onto the bridge as the mud slammed into the support pillars of the bridge. The impact almost knocked my car into the opposite guardrail. It filled up the gully to the guardrail with such force that the guardrail was bent at a forty-five degree angle. An expansion joint opened up so wide I was afraid that the front wheels of my vehicle would get caught in it. We bounced over that as the car careened over the bridge. Still, everything was in slow motion. The bridge was perhaps eighty to one hundred feet in length, but it seemed like an eternity for us to cross. Behind us the mudslide swept by us and above us like we were in a deep trough in a small boat. Dream-like, mega seconds passed in extreme slow motion. The bridge seemed like it stretched for a mile, disintegrating as we crossed it. The impact of the mudslide flattened the guardrail and started to cover the surface of the bridge while the sections of the surface buckled as the bridge began to break apart. At long last we made it to the other side and the relative safety that it provided. Seconds later the entire bridge was destroyed swept along with the mass of the slide that was taking all before it. A quarter of a million logs, like a giant jumbled ball of pick-up-sticks, swept away all that was in its path; the clam tractor, the railroad cars, the oversized row of logging trucks, all swept away as if they were toys. As we drive back up the hill to the ridge, a coastguard helicopter that was hovering some thirty or forty feet above us. Apparently it had been above us this whole episode, but I hadn't heard it. I had been so focused on escaping the slide that I had been unaware of anything else, even a noisy helicopter. At the top of the ridge and to the right was a home. I found out later that it was the last remaining dwelling that close to the crater. There was not enough room for the copter to land. A young man was being lowered by boson's chair to presumably to take us out. Kilgore's response was, "God damn it! He is scaring the chickens!" The rescuer was a kid from the Coast Guard, about 19. I'm sure that he was thinking he was going to save us. He was not prepared for this mountain man's wrath. I still had my car here and was not prepared to leave it if I could still drive it out. I told him, "We don't want to leave yet but can you keep an eye on us if it becomes necessary for us to be evacuated?" He said that he would pass that on to the pilot.

As the helicopter flew off to rescue other, more receptive, people, we were greeted by the homeowner who invited us into his house. He was a company

foreman. His home looked out on the volcano through the kitchen window. His wife offered us coffee and cookies. In the living room the television was on a baseball game. I gave him as much information as I knew about the surrounding conditions. He had the foresight to have two suitcases packed with essentials for him and his family when the eventuality of evacuation came. He was now convinced that the time was at hand. Suddenly there was an odd sound coming from the woods to the right and downhill from us. It was like nothing I have ever heard, a crashing sound that was moving through the woods at a tremendous speed. This was more like something moving very fast, snapping trees as it went, but we couldn't see what it was. Pat ran out of the house, stating, "I have to check on my family." We had made a full circle. The meadow with his trailer and his mother's log house was just a few hundred yards downhill. I followed Pat down the hill. Fortunately, everything appeared as we had left it. Except for the big double rotator Chinook helicopter landing in the grassy area between the trailer and the house. In an angry voice, Pat exclaimed, "God damn it. This is my property. Where is my rifle?" I didn't want Kilgore speaking for me. I ran past him and reach the copter before him. I spoke to the pilot, a captain. I asked if it was still possible to drive out? He told me, "No, all the roads at the base of the mountain were washed away by the mudflow. The only way to get out was by air." I replied, "Okay, there was a family up on the ridge behind us, but there was not enough room to land this copter. Can I go back and get them?" He replied, "Affirmative, but I can only wait ten minutes." I ran back up the hill. The foreman, in anticipation, had his family ready with their suitcases. I asked if I could leave my car at his place until I was able to retrieve it. He said I could. He gave his word that it would be safe. They and Pam followed me back down the hill. Kilgore still didn't want to leave. He asked, "Terry, can I borrow your car? I will drive it out." I reminded him what the Captain had said that it was impossible to drive out so refused. Leaving Kilgore and his family, we flew off.

The view from the helicopter was even more spectacular and surreal. We saw the devastation from the mudslide we had escaped only an hour before in its totality from the air. All the thousands of logs from Camp Baker were balled up in a huge ram with the force of a side of a mountain reaming the valley in front of it as it flowed on. It boggled my mind to see a pristine valley in front of that wrecker ball and complete destruction behind it, with parts of bridges, vehicles, machinery, roads, and buildings all mixed together with the mud, stumps and trees. The giant logging crane was upside down, moving with the mass. We saw the backside of the ridge that probably first saved our lives. The trees were knocked flat, in patterns like hair follicles on the back of an animal, while on the other side the trees were still standing.

The Chinook made a number of rescue stops on the way back to the staging area in the town of Toutle. At several stops I helped evacuate stranded people. On one occasion we witnessed the mud flow at another logging camp,

moving much slower now and only about three feet deep, slowly move underneath and through two somewhat smaller piles of logs, lifting them intact and moving both piles in unison like two giant slugs. At another spot two men riding horses moved other horses downhill. They moved slowly and calmly. Others fled when they saw us approach.

When the Chinook had a full load of people, the captain headed toward the town of Toutle. I have never seen such destruction. It appeared that the whole north fork of the Toutle River was now mud and four or five times its size, filled with the remains of houses, bridges, sections of road, floating like rafts on the surface. The volume of the flow was unimaginable. Mud and debris reached within three or four feet of the surface of the two bridges that spanned Interstate 5 highway. It would take weeks for the Toutle and the Columbia River to be dredged. To this day, just west of I-5, there is a huge hill of ash, the pulverized rock that was part of Mount St. Helens.

Back to the mountain

The copter landed at the Toutle High School football field. It had been converted to a makeshift staging area for the helicopters. I was afraid that the Kidd Valley store, Stan Lee and Kilgore's son and extended family were swept away as well. I told the Captain that we would like to go back to convince Pat and his mom and stepbrother the need to leave. I told him, "These people have a natural distrust of the government. They see a uniform and they will resist. They know me. I think that I can convince them for the need to leave." The captain relented and we flew back to their meadow. I ran to Pat's mother's house and burst in. Pat swore, asking me, "Jesus Christ, don't you knock before you come in?" I told him, "Pat, I think everything was gone. You need to come now." He turned ashen and responded, "Yes." It took a few minutes to get his mother and stepbrother to the waiting copter and then we flew down the Toutle. Fortunately, the Kidd Valley store was located on higher ground and was spared along with the people there. We stopped to pick them up. After quick hugs all were evacuated back to the town of Toutle.

Pam and I decided not to take the bus provided since it was in the opposite direction we wanted to go. We decided to hitchhike north and west to Interstate 5, then north to Seattle. I phoned a friend who met us at a rest stop. This was the first time that I had looked at my watch since 8:30 that morning. It was 11:30 pm. In my life I have had moments where time ceased being a factor. This had been fifteen hours of being in a timeless dream. We were now out of the twilight zone and back to our normal life.

Five weeks later:

My car was still on the side of Mount St. Helens. School was in session and I was too busy to invest the time it would take to try to drive it back, if I even could. Pam and I decided to try on the first week after school was out for the year. It was very difficult to get permission to go into the Red Zone, that area that was most directly impacted by the

eruption on May 18th. We went first to see officials in Olympia. We were told to get permission from the sheriff's office in Centralia. They, in turn, sent us to Vancouver. No one wanted to be responsible for letting us into the Red Zone. I knew that I had a right to try to retrieve my car. Finally, an official in Vancouver phoned the sheriff in Centralia suggesting that they give us permission. We drove back to Centralia where we were finally issued the permit. An hour later we were at the barricade with our permit in hand. We stopped by the Kidd Valley store to pay our respects to Stan Lee as well as locate Pat Kilgore and the owners of the house where I had left my car. All that Stan lost on that monumental day was a freezer full of frozen food because the power went out. Still, it gave him a reason to grouse. I thanked the man for keeping my car safe and got his permission to retrieve it. We checked in with Pat Kilgore's in-laws to locate him if we could. Pat had moved but he was easy to find. He said he would be happy to accompany us into the Red Zone to go back to what was left of Camp Baker. There was not a trace of the bridge, camp headquarters, log piles, crane or even the railroad. There were parts of the oversized logging trucks, some buried in the ground, others twisted around boulders and trees. Tree branches and even the trees themselves were reduced to pinpoint sticks caused by the abrasion of the ash and soil that passed around them. We didn't see anyone else at Camp Baker but several people had apparently died there. I forgot to ask Pat if his friend had made it out.

The house was still there and my car undamaged other than a fine silica glaze covering the entire surface of the car. I could get my key into the lock and even turn the key, but the door would not budge. I was afraid the only way I was going to get in was to break a window. I body-slammed the door a couple of times before the seal was broken and I opened the door. All of the roads on the mountain were severed. The only way out was to drive my car over a railroad trestle. Had I waited another week the trestle would have been torn down. Crews had already removed the rails. The trestle was maybe a half-mile long, several hundred feet high in the middle, and the about two feet wider than my Honda. It wasn't my idea of a good time, but I wasn't going to leave my car if I could help it. If I was careful I should be okay. Pam declined my offer to ride along, which I fully understood. I screwed up my courage and drove onto the trestle. I opened the driver's side door so that I could judge how close to the edge I was. As long as I kept the right front wheel a foot from the edge I should be safe. Each tie was just far enough apart that they acted as cogs, giving the car more stability. I drove as slowly as I could, basically from tie to tie. I held my breath for each cog. Each cog I looked to see how close I was to the edge. It was slow going. I have no idea how long it took me, but it worked. Every now and then I would pause to break the tension. On those moments I would look around primarily to check that I was not drifting too close to the opposite side. Except for the narrow ribbon of the trestle that arched in a slight curve to the right, it

appeared that I was floating in air, like on some sort of magic carpet ride. At last, I made it to the other side. I didn't realize how much tension had built up in me. Surprising since I don't recall experiencing any tension on May 18th when we were in mortal danger. Perhaps it was because I didn't have time to think about it. Events just unfolded and there was no time for fear.

The car drove perfectly. I had it steam cleaned at a dealership in Seattle. Most of the vehicles that drove more than a half hour while the ash was still falling were completely totaled because the ash was fine enough grit to get into the piston chambers, destroying them. Apparently the ash that fell on and near the mountain was coarser and the particles were too large to cause problems. The only damage I sustained were fine scratches on the paint surface where curious onlookers ran their fingers along the surface before it was cleaned. My insurance company sold my car back for ten cents on the dollar.

What I have come to understand over the years:

In the thirty years since I experienced that fateful day I have had time for reflection. What I have come to realize is that there are things worse than dying. This is particularly true as one approaches death. I think I now understand what motivated Harry Truman to stay on the mountain. He lived in an ideal place for a long time. He was an old man and had planned on dying there. To be moved to a foreign and, for him, a sterile environment where he would be restricted in what he could do was a prospect he probably did not want for himself. It would be a slow death. Death by the volcano, however, would be, and was, quick. With that attitude he would be able to enjoy the moment. It reminds me of the final scene when Jodi Foster and her father in Deep Impact walk to the beach to experience the huge tsunami before it killed them. Harry Truman made a choice. I respect him for that.

I look back on my time on earth with wonder and awe.

My own disregard for my safety and that of Pam's is a little harder to explain. Through my life experiences, I have come to realize that at my essence, I am an immortal being. Once I realized that I don't cease to exist at death, it allowed me to take risks that I would not have taken if I thought that all we had was our current life. Back then I had no responsibility for others who would grieve for me if I were to die. Since then I have had two children. They are why, if this event were to happen today, it is unlikely that I would have gone back to the mountain. In hindsight I see that I have had many close encounters with death for the sake of the adventure. I appear to enjoy the adrenalin high. I have no regrets about that.

This story is my best recollection of what happened that day. Pam and I have maintained a friendly relationship, mostly through correspondence, as our lives have taken us our separate ways. In our correspondence and talks, we realize we have somewhat different remembrances of that day. I find with myself, that past events became somewhat larger than life when I

revisit them.

An event such as this, which is significant in one's life, becomes etched in memory while at the same time tends also to become distorted by time.

This is my experience on Mount St. Helens as I remember it on that faithful day, Sunday, May 18th, 1980. It has been nearly 30 years since that event, but it is still the most exciting day of my life.

Terry Clayton

May, 2010