

TRENDS AND OBSERVATIONS

White-water Beaver

BY RAUNO PERTTU



Rauno Perttu

I thought I could get away with one more story from my days as a younger geologist. As I mentioned in my last column, exploration geology can be risky and exciting. I've had several close calls over the years. The one I'm about to describe gave me a lifetime appreciation for old, experienced pilots.

I like white water. Over the years, I've run numerous rapids. For years, I ran rivers in my inflatable kayak and raft, and also ran rapids on other peoples' rafts. I've also run rapids as a passenger in jet boats. While trying to see underwater geology, I even snorkeled a river through white water, which was an exciting experience. However, I've only run a rapid once in a floatplane. It happened in Alaska, and was done because there was no other option. I can't recommend it as a thrill ride.

One of my first projects as a geologist was working on the site evaluation for a planned pulp and paper complex on Berners Bay in southeast Alaska, about 30 air miles north of Juneau. The complex was never built, and I had something to do with that. I'll explain later. Personally, I believe the scenically spectacular area is much better left as wilderness.

The project workers lived in trailers that had been brought to the beach site by barge. We slept in bunk beds. I shared a narrow segment of a trailer with a dozer operator, who was always drunk in a "dry" camp, but that's another story. The camp also had a kitchen trailer and bathroom trailer. Our only means of transportation to and from the camp was by floatplane.

The development plans for the pulp complex included building a dam across a small glacial melt river. The proposed dam would need a large volume of gravel in its construction and I was assigned the task of reviewing possible gravel sources in a larger stream to the north. The plan was to barge the gravel to the proposed dam site.

I used a Beaver floatplane for my gravel search. The Beaver is a sturdy and reliable single-engine aircraft. My pilot was a grizzled 63-year-old with many years of bush piloting experience. I like older, veteran pilots. They don't try to impress or take foolish chances. There are enough dangers in bush piloting without the additional risks created by the daredevil stunts of some younger pilots showing off.

I was the only passenger, and sat in the copilot's seat. While we flew north along the coastline, I asked if he had ever crashed a plane. He answered, "Three times."

"Was anyone killed?"

"A couple of passengers. Once I was lying on a glacier for three days before they found me."

As we talked, we came to a river that was fed by a glacier that reached sea level from the nearby rugged mountains. The river was lined with promising gravel bars, so we turned to fly up the river. Between white-water rapids, the pilot saw a stretch of calm water that looked deep and long enough for us to land. He carefully landed the plane in the calm water and guided the plane to rest against a large gravel bar. After I evaluated the gravel and determined it was suitable, we re-boarded the plane to head back to camp. He floated the plane on idle to the lower end of the calm stretch, then gunned the engine.

As we gained speed roaring up the stretch of calm water, he exclaimed, "We're not going to make it."

When a floatplane is angled nose-up for takeoff, the back ends of its pontoons

can be three feet and more into the water. He quickly reacted and pushed the plane to level again so the pontoons would skim along the water surface. He skillfully water-skied the plane up the rapids, avoiding the bigger rocks. As we swerved and bounced to the next calm stretch, he maintained most of the plane's momentum and, as soon as we hit the calm water, he again gunned the plane.

We lifted off before the next rapid. I breathed a sigh of relief, but as I looked over at him I noticed the pilot was frantically scanning left and right. I asked what was wrong.

He replied, "I have to turn the plane around before we run out of room."

We were flying up a narrow canyon toward a mountain wall. The canyon was too narrow to turn, and the sides of the canyon were too high for the plane to clear. As we neared the mountain wall, the canyon walls were getting higher faster than the plane could climb. I stared at the rapidly approaching rock face of the mountain.

Abruptly, a side drainage appeared on the left, and the pilot quickly banked the plane hard in the wider space. We completed the turn, cleared the canyon walls, and headed back toward the inlet.

As I again sank back into my seat, the pilot said, "We have to go to Juneau. I don't know what condition the pontoons are in, but we may have holed or damaged them on the rocks we hit, which means we could sink or flip when we land."

We made small talk while flying down to Juneau. I knew both of us were thinking

how unpleasant a swim in the Alaskan ocean water would be. However, we landed uneventfully at Juneau, taxied to the dock and got out to inspect the damage. The floats were badly banged up, but still watertight.

A couple hours later, we were flying back to our camp in a different plane. It had been an interesting day of geology.

As I mentioned earlier, I actually had a role in killing the Berners Bay project. When I arrived on-site, the project had been ongoing for at least a year. Before arriving, I had studied the project topography map and commented, "There must be an active fault that cuts through the dam site." I explained that the morphology strongly suggested a strand of the Denali-Fairweather fault system passed through the site. This fault system is similar to California's San Andreas Fault system.

The project managers said they had drilled several holes at the dam site and found no faults. The system's north-trending fault strands are vertical, so I asked if any of the holes had been angled. When I learned the holes had all been drilled vertically, I suggested drilling an angled hole to pass through where I projected the proposed fault. The hole was drilled and passed through four active fault strands, eliminating the dam site. The project subsequently died.

However, I lived to be frightened and thrilled other days, despite two more close calls on the same project. I also reinforced my prejudice that old, experienced pilots are the ones to use when flying in extreme conditions.

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Applegate Grange update

BY JANIS MOHR-TIPTON

The Applegate Valley Community Grange (AVCG) has been moving steadily along since our last update. After our successful brunch in November, the holidays came along and most of the membership took time to celebrate, rest and enjoy friends and family. We showed *The Grinch* movie in December just before Christmas. Despite the small turnout, it was a fun event, and we hope to have more film screenings in the future with a wider attendance.

Most importantly, we are launching a new website (applegategrange.org). You can go to the website to keep updated on what's happening at the Grange, learn about upcoming events,

find information on how you can get involved. It is a work in progress and we're slowly adding content as we go, but it is a starting point for more information. We will begin renting the building for events and classes in the future, so go to the website for more information on fees and how to rent the building.

The membership of the Grange met in early February for a retreat in which we came together as a group to define our short-term and long-term goals for the Grange. This was an important event for the Grange—a chance to retreat and take a look at our priorities. It was an important team-building exercise and we feel energized



Members of Applegate Valley Community Grange at February retreat.
Photo by Claude Aron.

and excited moving forward in 2013.

Expect some interesting events, talks and other community celebrations from the Grange this year. To get involved, check

the website: www.applegategrange.org.

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