



DRAWINGS BY WILLIAM MICHAEL SCHUSTER

## THE PRETTIEST MOUNTAIN

The way popular history has of getting things confused it will probably be common knowledge in a few years that Harry Truman, who was once President of the United States, died in the spectacular explosion of Mount Saint Helens on May 18, 1980.

At least sixty people died in that blast, which had the fury of several nuclear bombs. Thousands of animals were killed. Entire forests were obliterated. Spirit Lake disappeared. Mudslides and logjams flooded the Toutle River and knocked out several bridges. The Columbia River channel had to be dredged because mud washed downriver blocked ships. Eastern Washington was covered with volcanic ash as far as Spokane and pumice littered ocean beaches. Millions of tons of dust was hurled into the sky and it was thought a ring of dirt and smoke would form around Earth and reduce sunlight.

Mount Saint Helens was the prettiest mountain in the Pacific Northwest. Its shape was almost a perfect cone like Japan's Mount Fuji and was usually wrapped in snow. The first eruption was in late March 1980, and there have been numerous others in the 22 years since the cataclysmic May 18 blast, though none have approached its intensity or destruction. Lately the mountain has been quiet. No one is certain if it has shut off its fires or preparing for another blow.

Walt Curtis wrote in an article for the *Times Eagle* (June 1982) that male TV newscasters spoke of the Saint Helens volcano as being an unruly female, and told a corny joke: "Do you know why Saint Helens erupted? She didn't take her earth control pills." Curtis said his 65 year old mother responded, "They're so stupid! The volcano is really named after a male,"

an obscure British ambassador whose first name was Allen, spelled in "an old fashioned way."

"I must admit I have always felt this gorgeous mountain possessed a feminine quality," Curtis wrote. "The Klickitat Indians also thought of the volcano as a woman. She was 'Loo-wit', the snow witch, consigned by the great spirit to reside in snow and ice. Uneasy magic has always been associated with Saint Helens. Miners in the 1920s claimed they were attacked by a family of Bigfoots, hairy apes. These apocryphal creatures threw rocks and broke out the windows of their cabin. In March 1980 as the mountain began to rumble, spew ash and soot, belch pumice and broken ice blocks, we never dreamed these minor eruptions would come to a cataclysmic conclusion.

"Everytime I look toward the north, enjoying the spectacular scenery of the snowcapped peaks of the Cascades, known as the 'ring of fire', I see one lone decapitated natural shrine. Observing the serene and beautiful sentinel, leveled by a cosmic bulldozer, my thoughts become gloomy."

Harry Truman, who was not President (but was a drinking companion of Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas), became an authentic folk hero when he refused to leave the mountain that had been his home for half a century as proprietor of the popular Spirit Lake Lodge. He might not have thought he would actually die, but that is incidental to legend. He will most likely be remembered as William Michael Schuster has portrayed him, eternally linked with Mount Saint Helens as the man who exploded with the mountain.

~MICHAEL McCUSKER

SHALLON

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1598 DUANE ST. ASTORIA, ORE 97103

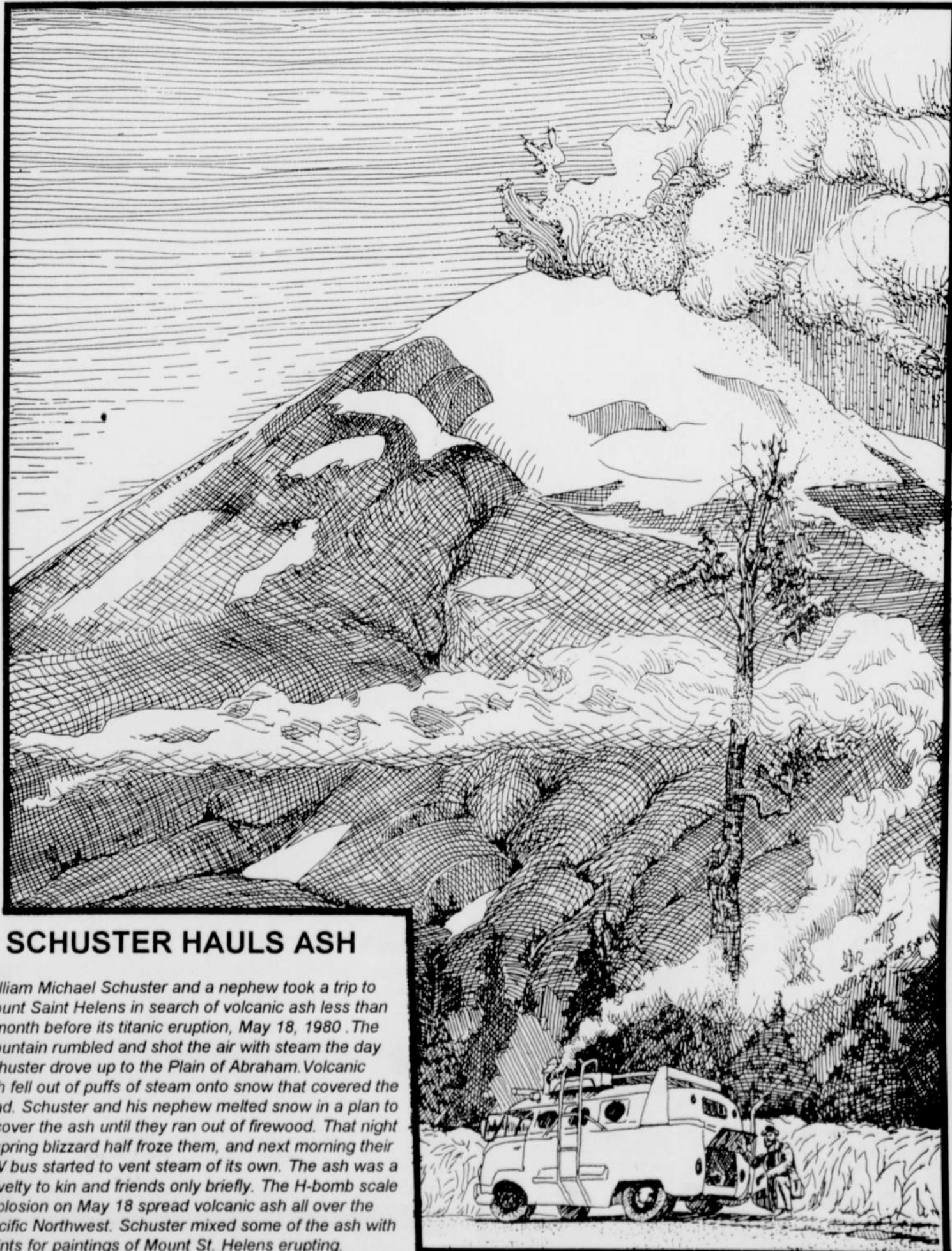
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### SCHUSTER HAULS ASH

William Michael Schuster and a nephew took a trip to Mount Saint Helens in search of volcanic ash less than a month before its titanic eruption, May 18, 1980. The mountain rumbled and shot the air with steam the day Schuster drove up to the Plain of Abraham. Volcanic ash fell out of puffs of steam onto snow that covered the road. Schuster and his nephew melted snow in a plan to recover the ash until they ran out of firewood. That night a spring blizzard half froze them, and next morning their VW bus started to vent steam of its own. The ash was a novelty to kin and friends only briefly. The H-bomb scale explosion on May 18 spread volcanic ash all over the Pacific Northwest. Schuster mixed some of the ash with paints for paintings of Mount St. Helens erupting.