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40 YEARS LATER, echoes of an eruption

Former Cowlitz deputy says events of May 18, 1980, 'embedded on my brain'

BY ERIC TRENT
For The Reflector

Editor's Note: May 18 is the 40th anniversary of the eruption of Mount St. Helens. For the first time, Bob Nix, a former Cowlitz County Sheriff's Office deputy, has shared an in-depth account of his memories from that day. Visit thereflector.com to hear more than 60 minutes of radio and dispatch traffic from the day of the eruption as provided by Nix.

March 27, 1980, Longview, Washington. Four Cowlitz County Sheriff's Office detectives, including 30-year-old Bob Nix, are walking out of a restaurant after having lunch when they hear a blast in

the distance. The detectives don't know it at the time, but it's the first of a series of small discharges over the next two months leading up to the eruption of Mount Saint Helens.

"We heard this tremendous explosion," Nix said. "It was a kaboom. We determined later that it was the mountain."

Thirty-five miles west of Longview, a steam explosion has created a 250-foot wide crater on the mountain, signaling its first eruption in over 100 years. The U.S. Geological Survey has been monitoring Mount St. Helens for 11 days at this point following an initial flurry of 100 small earthquakes that began on March 16. Over the next two days, 105 small eruptions shake the mountain, a warning of something bigger and more dangerous lurking.

Cowlitz County Sheriff Les Nelson assigns Nix to work the Toutle Lake area

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Mount St. Helens: A northwest source of history and tradition

Washington's most famous volcano, 40 years after its big day

CAMERON KAST
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Not everyone can say they grew up with an active stratovolcano in their backyard. Many different generations, people and cultures usher in the new with stories, experiences and lore surrounding the

many different mountains that make up the Pacific Northwest's Cascade Range. One mountain in the group, however, has obviously been more active in its recent history.

"Vancouver, Vancouver this is it," United States Geological Survey (USGS) Volcanologist David A. Johnston famously said in a radio transmission at 8:32 a.m. on Sunday, May 18, 1980, as a magnitude 5.1 earthquake came with the Mount St. Helens eruption.

The earthquake caused the weakened northern face of the mountain to fall away, creating the largest landslide ever recorded and the deadliest volcanic eruption in United States history. As it destroyed everything within 230-square-miles, more than 7,000 big game animals and 57 lives were lost in the eruption, including Johnston's. Prior to 1980, there had only been two deaths in the United States by volcano, with one in Hawaii and the other in Alaska.

Ash from the volcanic eruption was found around the world in the days and weeks that followed the blast. According to the United States Geological Survey, the volcanic matter didn't fully settle until the summer of 1980.

USGS Volcanologist Alexa Van Eaton said the 1980 eruption helped scientists

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History

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learn a lot more about volcanic eruptions, with some unexpected lessons. Throughout history, scientists believed that most volcanic eruptions released through the top of the mountain, causing a relatively low amount of damage. The 1980 eruption changed that hypothesis.

“The (first) thing it revealed was that lateral blasts are a more common eruptive hazard than previously recognized in the geological record,” Van Eaton said.

Another thing scientists learned was how fast the surrounding ecology bounced back.

“The biosphere bounced back much more quickly than expected,” he said. “Entire fields of research emerged from just these two topics.”

In a recent forum, USGS scientists also discussed how prepared the Southwest Washington area is for a large-scale eruption. According to Heather Wright, a physical volcanologist and a member of the international Volcano Disaster Assistance Program, many of the efforts to safely monitor the 1980 eruption and correctly forecast it were a great success. However, the lateral explosion of St. Helens taught researchers more about how to correctly prepare for and forecast future volcanic eruptions. Wright said the best way people can prepare for future volcanic eruptions is to “learn more about the eruptive history about these (Cascade Range) volcanoes” as well as helping communicate the potential hazards of a volcanic eruption — such as the subsequent floods and landslides — and to continue to develop understanding of volcanic systems.

In a live-streamed discussion with the Clark County Historical Museum (CCHM), retired Columbian journalist Gregg Herrington recounted his experience of May 18, 1980, from waking up to going to sleep the following morning.

“I remember we had eight advertisement-free pages to fill in the front section with stories about nothing but volcanoes,” Herrington recalled, mentioning Columbian photojournalist Reid Blackburn, who was one of the 57 people killed in the eruption. “It was a hellacious day but, there was nothing we would call fun about that day, no. I’m glad that I was there if it was going to happen.”

Blackburn was a dedicated photographer and outdoorsman and Herrington said that, if Blackburn and the 56 others were to have survived the eruption, he may have different opinions of the day.

“It was a tragedy, there’s no questions about it,” Herrington said. “I kind of get chills and anxious when I talk about it.”

Before the eruption and as it is today, Mount St. Helens was a place of recreation, hiking and a destination for mountain climbers to explore their passion. During the CCHM live stream, museum Director Brad Richardson talked about the fact that “Mount St. Helens was just a regular place for people.”

With outdoors people like Blackburn and Harry R. Truman, the founder of the Spirit Lake Lodge, and countless others, Mount St. Helens became and remains a place for people to visit, learn and explore. Now in the National Register of Historic Places, the Mount St. Helen’s Volcanic Monument remains a touchstone for the people of the Pacific Northwest.

However, the mountain has been a topic of interest and lore long before European people began exploring it. While numerous Native American legends explain the eruptions of Loowit and other Cascade

Volcanoes, perhaps the most famous of these legends is the legend of the Bridge of the Gods told by the Klickitat people. In their tale, the chief of the gods and his two sons Pahto and Wy’east traveled down the Columbia River to find land to settle on. After both Wy’east and Pahto fell in love with a beautiful maiden named Loowit, the two chiefs began to fight over her love. For punishment, the chief of the gods struck down each of the lovers and transformed them into mountains where they fell. Pahto became what is now known as Mount Hood and Wy’east became what is now known as Mount Adams. The beautiful Loowit became Mount St. Helens.

Traditions like these are just the beginning in a long list surrounding Mount St. Helens. Each year, thousands of people make the trek towards the mountain to explore its expansive system of lava caves, set up camp near the new Spirit Lake (the old one was destroyed in the 1980 eruption) or go hiking for a day. But one tradition is more colorful and vibrant than the rest: the annual Mother’s Day Climb of Mount St. Helens.

Each year, on the weekend of Mother’s Day, climbing permits for Mount St. Helens are sold out and hundreds of people summit the mountain wearing bright, colorful dresses and taking pictures near plastic pink flamingos. Any outdoorsy Pacific Northwest native has probably heard of the tradition, but few know how it started.

After the momentous 1980 eruption, Mount St. Helens was closed to recreational hiking and summing until spring of 1987, and one of the first people back on the mountain was Kathy Phibbs. Sporting a red chiffon dress and a white pillbox hat, “That Kathy Girl” was easily spotted on the mountainside. When a photo of Phibbs appeared on the front page of The Seattle Times the following day, few of her friends were surprised.

“That Kathy Girl,” Phibbs’ friend Annette Frahm said in an interview with Oregon Public Broadcasting. “We figured she would do something like that.”

Oddly enough, the Mother’s Day tradition of wearing bright dresses didn’t start out as a way to celebrate mothers, it just happened to be the last day you could climb the mountain without a permit. “We didn’t want to have to pay for a permit,” Frahm said.

However, creating a tradition out of climbing the mountain in colorful dresses wasn’t the original plan. Phibbs and her troupe of women — known as Women Climbers Northwest — set out to climb mountains and break stereotypes. But, above all, they wanted to have fun.

When Phibbs started Women Climbers Northwest back in the 1980s, most climbing groups were led by men and the culture revolved around having a man lead the path.



The Plinian column from the May 18, 1980, eruption of Mount St. Helens towers into the sky. This is an aerial view from southwest. Mount Adams is in the background (right).

PHOTO BY ROBERT KRIMMEL / USGS

The assumption was that women “weren’t strong enough” or “weren’t good enough to do things on their own.”

“There was an unwritten sexism in the climbing community that she wanted to break down,” longtime friend of Phibbs Ross McFarlane said. “Specifically, her passion was getting other groups of women out on their own making things happen.”

Phibbs became an unstoppable force in the community of women climbers. “The idea was that not only are we going to do it together as women, but we’re going to do it together in a different way,” Frahm said, mentioning that all of the climbing books took an engineering and serious approach to mountain climbing. “We thought that we wanted to do it in a way that was much more light hearted and team oriented.”

Phibbs and her group of women started a movement to be fun in the mountains.

“Kathy was also a phenomenal climber,” Frahm said, explaining how Phibbs climbed mountains all over the world from summiting Mount Denali in Alaska to spending time in the Himalayas. “I remember when she was in the Himalayas, she took pictures of her and her friends making weird hairdos ... She had a great smile and was just enthusiastic about everything.”

In 1991, Phibbs and her friend Hope Barnes went ice climbing in Central Washington at a peak called Dragontail.

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For more than nine hours a vigorous plume of ash erupted, eventually reaching 12 to 15 miles above sea level. By early May 19, 1980, the devastating eruption was over.

PHOTO BY DONALD SWANSON / USGS



The direction of the blast, shown here from left to right, is apparent in the alignment of the downed trees. Over four billion board feet of usable timber, enough to build 150,000 homes, was damaged or destroyed.

PHOTO BY LYN TOPINKA / USGS



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History

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According to the story by OPB, Phibbs was a cautious climber by nature and turned back when conditions didn't feel right. She was one of the first people to start using trekking poles as a way to save her

knees. Phibbs and Barnes' plan was to enjoy the snowy silence of the Washington backcountry and were in no hurry to get back.

While climbing up their second couloir — a steep, narrow gully on a mountainside — a piece of snow or ice broke loose, causing an avalanche

which swept them off their holds and they fell. Both survived the fall, though Barnes was knocked unconscious and Phibbs suffered a few broken ribs and femur. Phibbs wrapped a spare coat around Barnes to delay hypothermia and started crawling back downhill to get help. Both women were 33

when they died.

The spirit of Phibbs lives on in the hearts of every Northwest climber on Mother's Day Weekend as they trek up the mountain in dresses having the time of their life.

"I think it's so cool that they're still doing it over 20 years later and they sell out of

those permits every year and I think it's just great there's a whole movement towards having fun in the mountains and being playful," Frahm said. "(Kathy) would love it. Especially the fact that the guys were wearing dresses too."

Kathy Phibbs' story can be read in full at bit.ly/2TaCVNA.

Echoes

Continued from page A8

wrong. So he leaves the office and heads back north up Route 411 toward Toutle, which runs parallel to Interstate 5.

8:30 a.m., May 18, Vancouver, Washington

USGS research geologist Don Swanson, a Centralia native, is stationed at Gifford Pinchot National Forest office in Vancouver, Washington. Swanson has been monitoring the mountain since its first small eruption on March 16. He is waiting on a shipment of supplies before he heads to Coldwater II camp, an observation post near the mountain where colleague David Johnston had camped the previous night.

8:32 a.m., May 18, Mount St. Helens

A magnitude 5.1 earthquake rattles the mountain as the northern bulge rips away from the volcano, creating the largest debris avalanche ever recorded. It travels north and then west down the north fork of the Toutle River.

Thunderous eruptions burst laterally, overtaking the debris landslide at 300 miles per hour and scorching 230 square miles of forest. Within 15 minutes, ash, gases and smoke have risen 15 miles in the air. Pyroclastic flows pour out of the crater at 50 to 80 miles per hour. The wind eventually carries millions of tons of ash east, turning day into night in some parts of eastern Washington.

Swanson is waiting in the seismograph room in Vancouver when he and a colleague see the seismograph needles begin jumping.

"I ran to the radios and tried to contact David and couldn't, so I knew something big had happened," Swanson said.

Johnston had radioed a message to the USGS headquarters in Menlo Park, California: "Vancouver, Vancouver, this is it!"

He was never heard from again.

8:33 a.m., March 18, Kelso, Washington

Sheriff Nelson is the first to call the Cowlitz County 911 Dispatch. He tells dispatch his chandeliers are swinging at his home on 30th Avenue and Ocean Beach Highway in Longview, and he can see the biggest cloud of smoke he's ever seen coming from the mountain.

Dispatch soon begins receiving calls of people describing a giant cloud of black smoke, asking if the mountain has exploded.

Before long, they're overwhelmed with callers.

At this time, Nix is in his squad car still heading north on Route 411 and begins to hear radio chatter of a possible eruption. He reaches Route 504 East and guns his car to speeds of 90 miles per hour toward Toutle. His wife and kids are there at the family home and he knows the town needs to evacuate immediately.

"I drove to my house and told my wife at the time to take the kids (to his father's farm in Chehalis)," Nix said. "So they drove (to Chehalis) and stayed with my mother for a couple days because we were too close."

Nix soon arrives in Toutle while ambulances and fire trucks begin to block the right lane of Route 504 leading closer to the mountain, only letting traffic out. Nix begins canvassing roads with his high-low siren alerting townsfolk to the eruption.

"We got everybody out of there in 20 minutes," Nix said. "It was absolutely spectacular the way those people took it seriously. They were calm and orderly and I couldn't have been prouder of those people."

9 a.m., Mount St. Helens

Swanson and the forest service pilot arrive near the mountain in the air. They can't get around to the north side where most of the destruction took place, so they circle back and forth around the south side and watch lightning storms flicker around the mountain as a gigantic ash plume rises up.

"It was kind of an eerie sensation because all this energy was being released but we couldn't hear anything," Swanson said. "It was almost like being at a silent movie... I had never seen any explosion of that size anywhere else, and I haven't since then."

10 a.m., Two Miles West of Toutle, Washington

Nix arrives at the intersection of George Taylor Road and Route 504. Officers have set up a command post with Tri-county Search and Rescue's old green school bus. They don't know it yet, but the first lahar (volcanic mudflow) is barreling down the north fork of the Toutle River.

It is now about an hour after Toutle has been evacuated and the Cowlitz County undersheriff, who Nix will not name, instructs Nix to start the evacuation procedure for the Toutle River Valley.

"I said, 'There's nobody in Toutle,'" Nix said. "We got everybody out. He was not real happy I had gone around the



The landscape around Mount St. Helens was reduced to rubble following the eruption the morning of May 18, 1980.

comprehensive plan."

The undersheriff spent the next year attempting to bring Nix up on insubordination charges.

Soon after, Nix spots a Bell Telephone Company truck heading out the blockade to evacuate and he stops the driver. Nix orders the driver to climb a nearby pole and hook up a telephone to the search and rescue bus. There are no cellphones, no laptops in 1980. The driver, visibly shaken from the eruption, complies.

"I don't know who's phone number it was, who he assigned the bill to, but he climbed that pole and got us a phone," Nix said. "Then he climbed down, ran to his truck and took off. I don't even know his name. But there's a guy somewhere telling that story to his grandkids."

Not long after, helicopter pilots radio the command post telling them a 100-foot-tall wall of debris is careening toward them down the Toutle River. Everyone other than Nix and Sgt. Doug Mayfield retreat back to Interstate. 5. Nix and Mayfield look over at a nearby hill and ask each other if they think it's 100 feet tall. They both agree it isn't.

"He says, 'You go on back to I-5, because you've got kids,'" Nix said. "I says, 'We're doing this together. Ain't no way I'm leaving you up here.'"

10:30 a.m., two miles east of Toutle

The first lahar reaches the north fork of the Toutle River a half-mile west of Toutle where Nix and Mayfield are parked. They aren't prepared for what they spot coming down the river.



A house on the north fork of the Toutle River that was hit by one of the lahars that careened down the river following the eruption.

"I saw road graders, log trucks, houses, chunks of ice and logs on fire go down that river," Nix said. "That was absolutely mind-blowing."

Three billion cubic yards of material is deposited in the upper 17 miles of the north fork Toutle River valley. It eventually reaches the Cowlitz River where it drains into the Columbia River.

The aftermath

When all is said and done, 27 bridges and 200 homes have been demolished and 31 ships in the Columbia River are set to a standstill.

In all, Fifty-seven people died, making Mount St. Helens the most deadly volcanic eruption in North American history. Nix would receive an award from the Cowlitz County Sheriff's Office two years later on March 20, 1982, for his efforts in helping evacuate the Toutle River Valley.

He recalls when the Spirit Lake property owner called

him the morning of the explosion to reschedule the time to head to the lake from 8 a.m. to 10 a.m. A call that likely saved his and the other property-owners' lives.

"If it hadn't been for that battery," Nix said. "It takes a half hour to get to the mountain. We would have been right there when it blew up."

Years later, Nix would check his police notebook, a log of his police activities, during the time of the eruption. It was one of the most important times of his 10-year law enforcement career. There was only one entry during a two-week period: "Kelso north, 8:28 a.m."

Nix can still remember the day vividly, four decades later. He still dreams about that day. The good and the bad.

"When you have been through something life-threatening it changes ya," Nix said. "I remember it like it was yesterday, and it's been 40 years, because it was well embedded into my brain."

Reflections

Op-Eds • Letters to the Editor

This Memorial Day will be unlike any that have come before

BY BATTLE GROUND DEPUTY
MAYOR PHILIP JOHNSON

The last day of May is a very solemn day in the United States, a day that we pause from our everyday activities and remember those that gave their last full measure of devotion to this country. This Memorial Day will be unlike any that have come before. Normally people gather, converse, remember and perhaps shed a tear for those who have left us way too early. However, due to the situation we find ourselves in, our ability to gather and remember will not happen this year. Nonetheless, we will as a grateful

community, not forget the names of those men on our remembrance wall this Memorial Day, or for that matter any other day. What they did on our behalf and for their nation is beyond our grasp, and we will always be in their debt.

May their families and friends find hope and solace in the realization that we as a community and a nation acknowledge their loss, and hope that they find peace.

We ask that at 11:00 a.m., wherever you may be on this Memorial Day, that you take a moment and remember those from the Battle Ground area, and all across this land, who gave their all in the defense of this country.

Listed below are the names of local Battle Ground-area men who died in service and whose names are engraved on the wall of the Battle Ground Veterans Memorial.

World War II

Julius J. Bergman, Otto O. Burgstahler, Edmond H. Condon, Jack O. Freel, Bruce C. Green, Joe J. Pancoska, Elmer E. Pellett, William A. Pelto, Archie C. Peru, Albert E. Sarkinson, Paul H. Snider, Sheldon E. Tessororf, William A. Uskoski, Leonard A. Wallace, Milton E. Winston, Walter G. Wright

Korea

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Global War on Terror: Afghanistan

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Global War on Terror: Iraq

Cedric E. Bruns, Kane M. Funke, Jeremiah J. Johnson