

TRAVEL

TODAY'S QUOTE

"One thing I noticed quickly was that Alaska was almost an obsession to many of the people living there. It was not simply a place in which they happened to reside." —

author **Joe McGinnis**



NEXT WEEK

Exploring the Inca roots of Cuzco, Peru

G

SUNDAY

March 2, 2003

R W B G Y

★

Beloved souvenir opens path to Sitka, past and present

By **Jim Buchta**
Star Tribune Staff Writer

Years ago I bought an antique photo album, a leather-bound souvenir with an Eskimo painted on the cover. It was the photographic account of a Minneapolis woman who traveled to Alaska by steamship in 1936, from Seattle to a tiny town on Baranoff Island: Sitka.

Big adventure for the times. Alaska wouldn't become a state for more than 20 years.

Every black-and-white photo had a caption. The story, told in photos, fascinated me. Who was this woman? Why Alaska? What was it about Sitka that drew her?

And what was Sitka like today?

When I opened the book, tiny flowers with translucent petals and faded leaves floated from between the pages.

"Me and the pansies," she had scrawled beneath one of the photos.

Another showed the woman standing at a woodsy trail head between two totem poles.

"Lovers Lane," the caption said.

I imagined the woman stopping along the trail to sniff, then examine the flowers, picking them in hopes of preserving something that wouldn't last forever: a moment in a magical, faraway place.

I followed her path to Sitka, and now I've stood on that trail, too, between the same tall totem poles. Maybe Sitka taught her something about herself and our world. It did for me.

I've been to Sitka twice now, collecting my own scrapbook of memories and photos. Both times my partner, John, and I planned the journey around the Sitka Symposium, an annual weeklong gathering of writers, poets, thinkers and seekers who come to discuss the big questions of our times — questions of faith and reconciliation, and how to understand the scientific and the divine in nature.

SITKA continues on G7
— *Six miles in a kayak — what could go wrong?*
— *Upcoming Sitka Symposiums, G8*

Kayaking the Inside Passage near sunset on one of Alaska's endless summer days.

Robin Hood/Special to the Star Tribune



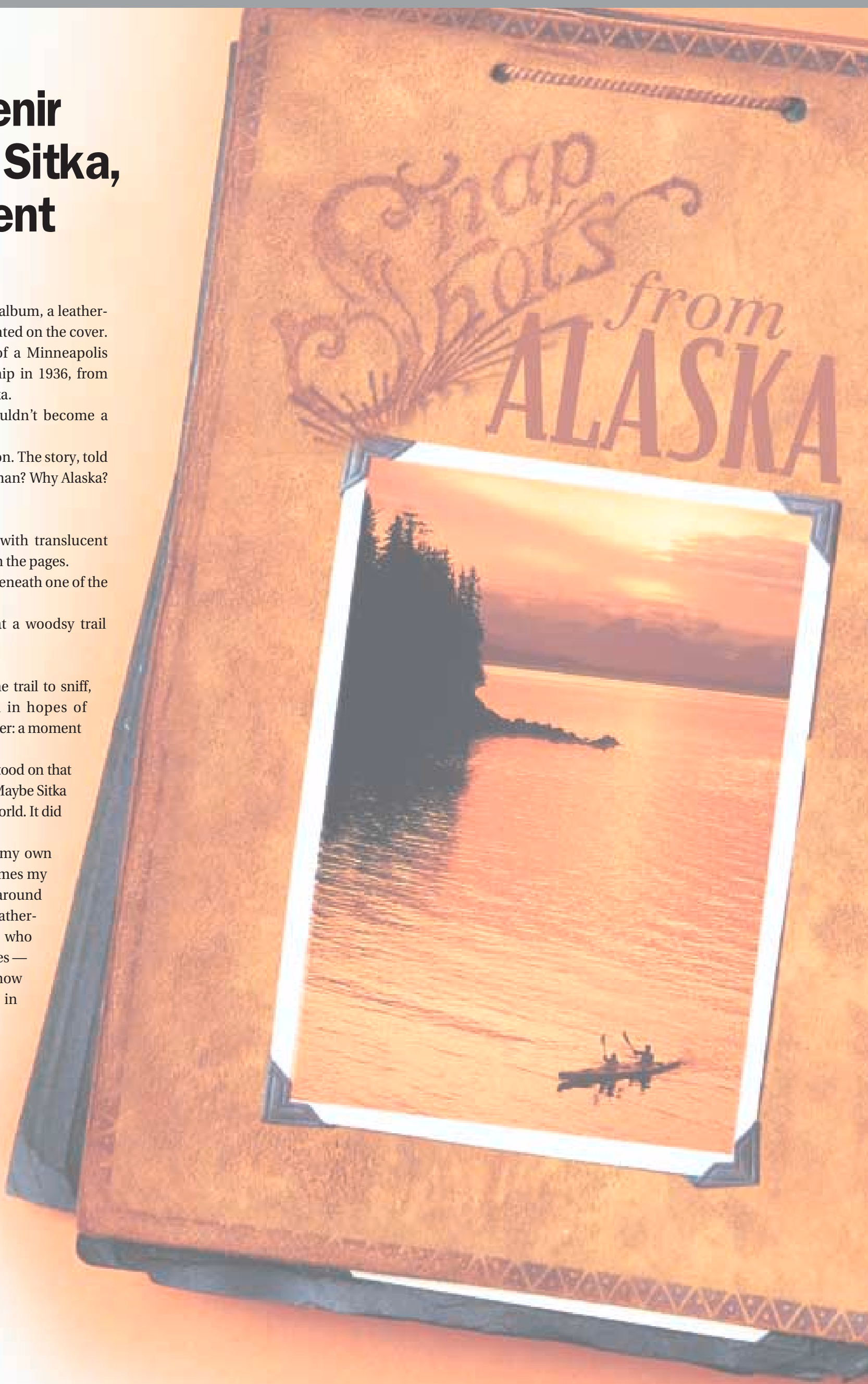
Alaska Division of Tourism
Denali often hides in the clouds; this day it was exposed in its full glory.

DENALI

Sometimes it takes patience to catch a glimpse of the continent's biggest mountain. **G5**

INSIDE PASSAGE

The number of Web sites dedicated to cruise ships is multiplying. Here are the pros and cons of booking a cruise online. **G4**



A breath-taking adventure on Alaskan slopes

By **Troy Melhus**
Star Tribune Staff Writer

Breathe. I was standing some 4,700 feet above sea level and could see the sea. It was maybe 20 miles away, at least a weeklong hike, across the rippling, snow-covered mountain-tops of Chugach National Forest.

Or, more practically, about seven minutes in the helicopter that just dropped me here.

I was straddling a rocky mountain ridge less than 4 feet across.

I had to remind myself to breathe.

Pilot Garth Eggl's landing

zone was maybe the size of a Volkswagen, and even the mountain goats we saw were struggling up this high.

Stretching for nearly 300 miles behind me was the forest, a vista of fluffy white peaks sprinkled with black rocks and dark streaks descending to the depths.

In front of me to the west, against a piercing blue sky, were more snow-blanketed peaks. In the distance, a break in the canyons made way for a fat waterway — in this case, the Turnagain Arm of the Cook Inlet, the sole ocean route from the Pacific to Anchorage's ports.

I was surrounded by beauty and silence. I was literally and figuratively as close to the top of the world as I had ever been.

Last spring, on a clear, picture-perfect Alaska day, I came to the western range of the Chugach Forest, south of Anchorage, to fly with the Chugach Powder Guides and snowboard down 19,500 vertical feet of glacier snow.

It was the single most exhilarating day of my life.

The forest stands on the Kenai Peninsula, stretching south of Anchorage along the Cook Inlet across to the Gulf of Alaska and Prince William

Sound. At nearly 6 million acres, the forest offers hundreds of square miles of back-country skiing.

Two years ago, National Geographic Adventure magazine ranked helicopter-skiing in Chugach as the 21st greatest adventure in the world. It sounded like the ultimate snowboarder challenge: off-the-chart runs fraught with endless avalanche dangers, heart-stopping vertical drops and jumping from hovering birds.

SKI continues on G3
— *Avalanche among the risks*
— *Options for first-timers, G2*

SKI from G1

Avalanche among risks heli-skiers might face

That's not quite the reality. "The reality is a lot of people tend to sell themselves short and tend not to go helicopter-skiing when they will do just fine," said Chugach Powder Guide Mike Davidson, my guide for the day. "The reality of most helicopter skiing is really nice, cruiser runs."

Not that heli-skiing is 100 percent safe, of course. In January, for example, four-time world-champion snowboarder Craig Kelly was among seven killed in an avalanche while heli-skiing in the Canadian Rockies.

While the Chugach guides warned of such risks, they also calculated them in ways that I never felt afraid.

One skier at a time

My day began early, with nearly an hour's worth of classroom instruction followed by another hour's worth outside. Instructors talked weather patterns, how to "swim" out of moving snow and how to locate and use the avalanche beacons with which we were all equipped.

While there was always a chance for avalanche, we were told, our guides would steer clear of unreasonable risk.

We would fly in groups no larger than five. The helicopters would always land — our gear was kept in baskets outside the door. One guide would lead four skiers and the guides would always ski out first. Just one skier would follow at a time.

While the runs were long — each taking between 20 to 40 minutes to descend — we'd always take short breaks throughout. We'd meet along the sides of the slopes, where



Troy Melhus/Star Tribune

The Alyeska Resort in Girdwood, Alaska. Before boarding the helicopter, back-country skiers learned how to huddle down.

Davidson would give additional instructions each time.

And at the bottom of each run we would wait for the helicopter, which would ferry us to our next run.

In flight

I have flown in a helicopter many times, but the takeoff from the tiny Girdwood Airport ranks among the most breathtaking flights of them all.

We had already been told how to huddle as the chopper landed in front of us: Down on one knee, our faces covered with one arm to protect us from the blowing snow and our other arm holding down the gear.

We loaded our equipment and climbed aboard. Slowly the helicopter hovered and turned. Eggl gave us a look, tipped the nose down and we shot down the runway like a taxiing plane as the helicopter lifted off. It felt as if our feet would skim the glades below.

My first run, "High Five," is still a blur. It was a 20-minute,

gradual descent, a bowl run through waist-deep, untouched powder, which I carved with wide, fluid turns.

It was an easy run, but still left my heart in my throat. It was, after all, my first time.

"It's just so much to take in all at once," Scott Van Timmeren later assured me. Van Timmeren, a member of my group, was a young heli-ski veteran from Michigan. "You're looking at all the scenery, you're looking at the runs, you're worried about listening to the guide and you're worried about your skiing. It's just information overload."

We skied nearly 20,000 vertical feet like that all day long. I traversed canyons, hiked mountain saddles and floated across the fine powder of the Chugach's untouched, isolated glades.

Recounting it now, I still have to remind myself the obvious:

Breathe, Troy. Breathe.

— **Troy Melhus is at tmelhus@startribune.com**

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By Troy Melhus
Star Tribune Staff Writer

Skiing in Alaska can be like a dream — a small, expensive one, that is.

While there are several small ski areas throughout the state, Alaska has but one full-scale, traditional ski area at Alyeska Resort in Girdwood, about 45 minutes south of Anchorage by car (the Web address is <http://www.alyeskareort.com>).

It's large — 68 runs — but even so, I'd hit every trail by my third day there. If you want a full Alaska skiing experience, you'll want to consider back country.

While many heli-skiing operations are based in Valdez and share a remote section of Chugach National Forest there, the Chugach Powder Guides are the closest heli-skiing business

IF YOU GO

to Anchorage and the only one affiliated with Alyeska.

Their location alone made Chugach Powder Guides the most attractive option to a first-time back-country snowboarder like me.

Prices run between \$650 for a one-day trip to \$4,475 for a weeklong package including hotel. Reservations and deposits are required. (Go to the Web at <http://www.chugachpowderguides.com>).

I didn't have reservations and opted to fly standby with Chugach for a slightly lower price.

As a standby customer, I could only fill an empty seat, most likely the result of another customer's last-minute cancellation. As standby, I also had to be at the resort early each morning with no guarantees that I would go.



offer a snowcat backup option for clients, guaranteeing some back-country skiing in case helicopters can't fly on a particular day.

Where to stay

Luckily — or perhaps not — I had relatives in Anchorage, which meant that my mornings and nights were largely spent commuting to Alyeska, about an hour each way.

Most of the heli-skiing passengers I rode with stayed as part of a package deal at the Alyeska Prince Hotel, an opulent, first-class hotel with more than 300 rooms at the base of the ski resort.

Other heli-ski companies, such as the Valdez Heli-ski Guides, also offer package accommodations closer to their base locations. Valdez Heli-ski Guides are on the Web at <http://www.valdezheliski.com>

Milwaukee to host Harley birthday bash

Associated Press

MILWAUKEE — Harley-Davidson Inc. will celebrate its 100th anniversary with events along Lake Michigan's shoreline, including exhibits sponsored at the Milwaukee Art Museum.

Harley originally planned to stage its centennial events at three sites in Milwaukee and Oshkosh. Now the motorcycle company has decided to keep all its ticketed events close together along Lake Michigan, said Joanne Bischmann, Harley's vice president of marketing. The events will start Aug. 28 and end in a birthday finale Aug. 31.

TRAVEL NOTES

The Labor Day celebration is expected to attract thousands of motorcyclists converging on Wisconsin after driving four routes from different parts of the country.

The celebration's first three days will have ticketed events at the art museum and festival grounds along the lake.

Harley will charge \$50, plus a \$5 tax and handling fee, for tickets, which will provide unlimited three-day access to the festival grounds, displays and a one-time admission to the art museum. Tickets go on sale Monday.

Harley, which expects to sell 150,000 tickets, will decide later whether to sell individual tickets to events, Bischmann said.

The festival grounds will feature Harley-Davidson exhibits, stunt and drill teams and 10 stages of live entertainment. The art museum will have exhibits on design, product styling and development. The celebration also will include a parade of motorcyclists Aug. 30.

Harley also has planned a free party with live entertainment for its Aug. 31 finale at Milwaukee's Veterans Park along Lake Michigan.

More information: Harley-Davidson Inc. <http://www.harley-davidson.com>

CURRENCY ADVICE

This chart shows the worth of the U.S. dollar compared with other world currencies as of Wednesday last week. The information comes from Oanda (<http://www.oanda.com>), an online service that updates rates daily.

These are not the rates you will get when you exchange your money. Banks, currency exchanges and credit card companies charge service fees, commissions or factor a profit into the rate they offer. What matters is the amount you net per dollar. The fastest, easiest and usually cheapest way to change money is by using an ATM to withdraw

funds from your own account at your destination.

The main sources of foreign currency in the Twin Cities are Travelex America Inc. at Twin Cities International Airport, 612-726-5187; American Express, 612-343-5500; USBank, 612-872-2657; and Wells Fargo, 612-667-9378 (both banks have high fees for non-members). Traveler's checks are available from banks and other sources, but the chief one for foreign-currency checks is AAA Travel (main office, St. Louis Park, 952-927-2525, plus other locations; no fee for AAA members).

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Russia	31.64 ruble
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