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## Why Alaska? A Sudden Job Offer Changed a Woman's Life

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# Why Alaska?

*A sudden job offer changed a woman's life*

**Debra McKinney**



GOING TO ALASKA HAD NEVER CROSSED MY MIND. UNLIKE MANY who transplant here, I was not one of those kids who grew up on Jack London stories and fantasies of crossing frozen landscapes wrapped in caribou hides while poised like a warrior princess upon a wolf-powered sled. The only reason I ended up here is because the phone rang one night at my place in Missoula, Montana, and instead of one of my housemates, I got to it first.

The woman was trying to track down a couple of friends of ours who'd been hired by her company to stake mining claims in Alaska. They weren't around, but somehow she and I stayed on the phone and started chatting and laughing and generally hitting it off. Then she tossed me a proposition:

"The crew is short one person. Would you be interested?"

I wish I could say I didn't have to think about it, but I did. The first images in my head were of small planes crashing. Then of big bears. Then of precipitous mountains. Then of small planes piloted by big bears crashing into precipitous mountains. Still, I knew that if I turned this opportunity down, I'd better have a good reason. I came up with one. I'd just started a new job as a waitress at the Old Spaghetti Factory. That one good reason not to go was the same good reason I had to. I had a degree in journalism and was working as a waitress at the Old Spaghetti Factory. So my first day of that job was also my last.

I spent that spring and summer hopping out of helicopters alone in the middle of nowhere, surveying along a grid and staking claims every quarter-mile for a minerals exploration company. At the time, I wasn't thinking about any implications this might have for the land. I was in my 20s and having the adventure of a lifetime. When moments after I'd climbed out, our helicopter crashed on a mountainside and we all had to be rescued, I didn't take it as a sign to bail; I took it as something to write home about. Same when I had my first bear encounter inside our kitchen Quonset hut armed only with mosquito repellent.

After three field seasons in various Bush camps from the Interior to the Alaska Peninsula, I considered myself seasoned. But Alaska time doesn't count until you've stayed a winter. I got a job at the *Anchorage Daily News* and planned to stay for two years max. That was in 1984.

*With scenery like this (near the Toklat River in Denali National Park), the author began to feel that the lower 48 seemed pedestrian.* JERRY AND MARCY MONKMAN

I found stories here of people and places unlike any other. People like Cordova's "mayor" of Hippie Cove, a man who came from privilege but spent the last 11 years of his life immersed in his own anthropology experiment, living off the land as a prehistoric man. Places like Ferry, a cabin community with train tracks running through it and a long-standing Fourth of July tradition of mooning the 5 o'clock northbound train, exposing white-haired Princess tourists to the other kind of Alaska crude.

The paper sent me by snow machine to a remote, abandoned orphanage north of Nome to write about its past, by dog team into the boreal forest beyond Talkeetna to write about living off the grid, by plane to Yakutat to write about a fishing guide who was so cantankerous that when he got stabbed in a bar fight, the town rallied in support of his assailant.

But I found more here than other people's stories. Alaska has given me a trunkful of my own. Once you've witnessed a current of caribou parting around you in the Arctic Refuge, once you've ridden a wave in a kayak after a glacier calves in Harriman Fjord, once you've walked through the Valley of Ten Thousand Smokes, life Outside, as we call the lower 48, feels pedestrian and predictable. Especially for those who seek places asphalt doesn't go.

Winter chases off a lot of people, but my first one cinched it. I'd become inseparable from the land and the kinds of people drawn to it.

I could think of one good reason not to stay—distance. I was far from family and all its trimmings. That one good reason not to stay was the same good reason I had to. With distance comes freedom from convention. If I burn the Christmas turkey in my cabin's wood-fired oven, my kindred-spirit Alaska friends aren't going to give a rat's patootie. And in the summer, if my husband wants to mow the cabin lawn naked, there's not a single person around to offend.

Life in Alaska is like driving along a lonely back road. When you have enough space all to yourself, you tend to ignore the yellow line. Here, no one thinks ill of you for it.

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DEBRA MCKINNEY is a fourth-generation journalist, the great-granddaughter, granddaughter, and daughter of the former publishers of the *Hillsboro* (Oregon) *Argus*. As a writer for the *Anchorage Daily News* for many years, she won many awards. She was also part of a team that won the Pulitzer Prize for a series on the impact of alcoholism and despair on Alaska Natives.

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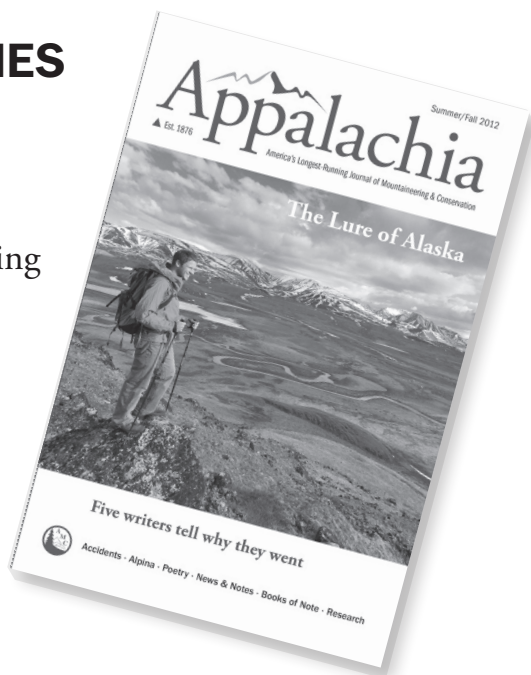
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