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The Hard Way Home

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The Hard Way Home
The Hard

Outdoor Lives
Way Home
Alaska Stories of Adventure, Friendship, and the Hunt

STEVE KAHN

University of Nebraska Press • Lincoln & London

Buy the Book
For Anne

For my parents, Gus and Ann Kahn
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Introduction

Being born in Alaska during territorial days was none of my doing and all of my fortune. I thank my parents for deciding to live north, but do I stop there? Without my mother's family fleeing from Germany after World War II to Wisconsin, without my mother catching the eye of a young man newly enlisted in the Air Force, who knows what might have happened? When my father asked my mother to marry him, there was a catch. He told her she had to fly to Alaska first. When she stepped off the plane in Anchorage and he wasn't there to meet her, she almost turned around and got back on the same flight south—and that could have been the end of my story before it even started. The flight had been delayed, and my father had been nervously sipping coffee all morning. They found each other when he emerged from the bathroom. Within a year I was born.

I wonder sometimes how far back my connection to the outdoors goes. My father was born into a family of hunters, fishermen, and resourceful women. They were rural, hard working, small-farm folks from the upper Midwest. My maternal grandfather climbed and hiked in the German Alps before the war broke out. My mother enjoyed getting outside to pick yarrow and other herbs for the soldiers' tea when she was sent to a German youth camp. Later, in Alaska, she made countless excursions in search of Alaskan wildflowers to complete a photo album and add flowers to her garden: shooting stars, iris, Jacob's Ladder, forget-me-nots.
Introduction

When I was nine years old, my family moved from the Anchorage suburbs to our homesite in the foothills of the Chugach Mountains. Running through our land was a tributary of Campbell Creek, and surrounding our home were wooded hills, trails, and wetlands. I belong to perhaps the last generation to understand such places as a child’s backyard, playground, and simply a safe place to be. I had the freedom and opportunity to say “I’m going to the swamp,” or “I’ll be at the creek,” before wandering off to explore by myself or with a friend. Even my mother checked her protective instincts and allowed me to roam at will.

The distance from the banks of the south fork of little Campbell Creek, where my fascination with the wild really took root, to my present home on the north shore of Lake Clark isn’t that far really, less than two hundred miles. For me, it’s been a decades-long journey from a tiny creek to the sixth-largest lake in Alaska. Like so many others, I have found it impossible to maintain a straight line from childhood to adulthood.

I grew up fishing, berry picking, and hunting, but I never considered being a big-game guide until the opportunity unfolded unexpectedly when I was in my early twenties. I was lucky to have one of the finest mentors in the business. His name was Stan Frost, and he was a man of confidence, integrity, and clearly defined values. Perhaps most critical for my schooling wasn’t the knowledge of mountains and flying he shared, but his belief in my abilities and his patience with my mistakes. I worked for or alongside Stan for fourteen years, and with his encouragement earned my pilot’s license and started my own outfitting business.

For almost twenty years I was a guide—it was my primary
occupation and source of adventure during my younger years—and other experiences, such as flying, crab fishing, and oil recovery work, grew from or dovetailed with the guiding. When someone asked if I wanted a job in a mill shop, on a commercial fishing boat, or as a carpenter, I said yes—as long as it didn't interfere with the spring and fall hunting seasons.

Many Alaskans enjoy jack-of-all-trades lives. We go in various directions, trying our hand at many things. There is an expansiveness to living a life that is not limited by specialization. It is empowering to be around so many folks who, when the pipes freeze or a trailer hitch breaks, think “I need a wrench or welding rod,” not, “I need to call a plumber or a welder.”

Some of the skills or lessons I am most grateful to have learned from guiding are not what folks might expect. When boots and packs fell apart mid-season I learned the value of an awl and needle. I became a decent chef and learned enough German to get my message across. Time on boats and in airplanes taught me the nuances of knots and control knobs.

During my years guiding and commercial fishing I kept a journal. Sometimes the entries were nothing more than “up the Earl River, saw 3 caribou, 2 black bear, 8 sheep,” or “dropped a load of pots in Viekoda Bay,” quickly scribbled before I zipped up my sleeping bag for the night. Occasionally the day’s events, my mood, or a surge of adrenaline made for longer offerings. The journals are stained, literally, with blood, sweat, and coffee. They have been an invaluable source for writing these stories, not only for names and dates, but also as a way to return me to a place; a time; the taste of saltwater on my lips; the strain of a heavy pack.
Introduction

There are challenges in arranging stories that span many years or that cannot easily be categorized under one subject. I opted finally for a loose chronological arrangement within each section, thereby offering a sense of changes happening not only within Alaska but also within myself. Still, I make liberal use of flashback and reflection—perhaps unavoidably for someone who didn’t begin to write nonfiction until he was in his forties. Elements other than time bind individual stories: a longtime friendship connects several episodes through decades of adventure in “Hats Off to Hal”; in “Getting There,” the urge to push on while traveling in the bush links incidents separated by years; while the transformation of my love of fishing propels the narrative in “One Last Cast.”

The book is divided into three sections. The first, Ranging Out, provides the background for my interest in the outdoors, and includes adventures in boats and airplanes. The stories in section two, Guiding Days, are focused on my early to mid-adult years spent as a big-game guide. Settled In, the final section, deals with my life since then, living on Lake Clark. I have given up guiding, commercial fishing, and trapping, but still engage in subsistence hunting and fishing.

My past goes with me every time I step onto a trail or into a boat or airplane. My experiences in the far reaches of Alaska are diverse and full of humorous, poignant, complex, and simple moments. I hope these pages offer more than stories of hunting, trapping, and fishing. I have attempted a portrayal of northern life—my love and connection to Alaska, its conflicts, wild places, plants, animals, and people.
One

Ranging Out
One Last Cast

Many go fishing all their lives without knowing that it is not fish they are after.—H. D. THOREAU

I remember gazing into a mountain stream near Turnagain Pass. Minute air bubbles formed along the backs of polished granite boulders hunched at the bottom, then rose in a swirl of motion to the surface. My little hands held tight their first fishing pole: a willow branch rigged with a piece of string from the glove box, a safety pin, and a half-ripe cranberry. I was four years old, maybe five. My folks tell me I was more interested in fishing than a potty stop.

Alaska proved to be paradise for a boy who loved to fish. My memories of our frequent family road trips along the Alcan Highway are fixed with two passions: counting animals and spotting places to fish. Of course, this meant a request from me to stop at every lake, creek, culvert, or bridge we passed. “Soon, Stevie,” my Dad would say, as the dust billowed behind our Rambler to settle on the quickly passing water that held, I imagined, swarms of ravenous grayling and trout. When I did fish (and it seemed like once out of every hundred opportunities), I got more bites from gnats and mosquitoes than from anything with gills and a dorsal fin.

When, in 1956, my folks purchased a homesite in the hills above Anchorage, with a creek running through the property, those ninety-nine untapped possibilities flowed
through my dreams, twisted, cut, sparkled, and finally coalesced into one stream: the south fork of Little Campbell Creek. Except during the spring when the creek would darken and swell, its waters were bubbly and sweet, and seldom deeper than my knees. The creek cut a silvery slice through birch and white spruce. I could step over it in a few spots, jump across it in many places, and wade from bank to bank with impunity.

Little Campbell Creek held small miracles in its folds. Not just fish, these were sleek goldenfin Dolly Varden sporting a splash of amber along their small-scaled sides. They found many places to hide. Sometimes, especially on warm afternoons, they rested under a spruce log bridge where two almost imperceptible channels lay. Or they found shelter under cut banks, an aqueous world of roots and shadows, which I glimpsed from downstream on the opposite side, or by leaning oh-so-slowly over a mossy overhang to peer below.

I baited my single hook with a salmon egg. I learned not to let the point of the hook pierce all the way through the orange-red rubbery globe. There was little need to cast. The line was more an extension of the arm, a gentle swing to will the bait to a spot just beyond reach.

I would fish for hours, alone most of the time. Though sharing toys came easily, my personal space was different. An only child, I relished time to myself. A friend’s mother tells how I would come over to play with her son, but when the neighborhood boys started showing up, she would suddenly notice that I’d disappeared.

One childhood friend spent his time pushing toy trucks around his yard, a rumble-whir sound in his throat as he
built overpasses and brought mini-highways up to grade. Another friend held a fascination with model cars and ships, spending countless hours redesigning a Model A’s suspension or the gun turrets on a battleship. I had a yellow dump truck and model cars and airplanes sitting on my dresser, but usually the waves that pulled me were not of sound or air, but gentle ripples coursing thinly over stones and gravel or teething through the twisted roots of a spruce.

Dangling a salmon egg on a hook in front of a six-inch trout for hours until the fish either bit or darted downstream like a bullet mesmerized me. I wasn’t old enough to define passion or know what forms it could take. It was just life, not divided yet into parts. The creek: a place to dam, to wade, to float wooden boats, but mostly a place to fish.

Mom would fry up my catch any time of the day I asked. There was never enough for a meal for the family, just a Dolly or two, hanging from a forked willow branch that I proudly hauled into the kitchen. I ate the tender flesh that peeled away easily from the delicate backbone, savored the crisp tail that was fried in butter until it was almost translucent. Sometimes I would cook the fish on a stick over a fire built near the water's edge. Without salt or butter, the soft white meat was accented only by a faint pungency of willow from the stick it was skewered on.

Before the magic of creek culture was lost to a growing boy, it was transformed. The south fork of Little Campbell Creek never relinquished its charm; it just passed it on to other waters. My uncle staked a homestead on Fish Creek north of Anchorage. The creek had more water, bigger trout, and salmon. Armed with a fly rod and my dad’s old wickerwork...
creel, I spent many weekends in a trance. I would let a dry fly drift with the current past riffles, over the swelling watery curve of a submerged log, onto the surface of a pool. The feathery imitation of a mosquito would disappear into the water when a fish struck, with a sound like a skipping stone thrown off angle. *Bluuop*. That sound was followed by a small fury, the leader slicing back and forth through the water, the tip of the pole nodding its approval, glimpses of color flashing ever slower until a rainbow eased into my waiting hand.

Occasionally I would fish upstream near the Mahoneys', my uncle's nearest neighbors, but it was mostly the downstream waters that I haunted. As I eased up to each familiar eddy, undercut bank, or rock, I replayed the scene of the last fish I'd caught at that spot. I was always hoping for a bigger one. Hours passed with only a handful of sounds: the gentle boil of water forming itself around my rubber boots, the faint whistle of flyline arcing past my head, my own breath.

Much as one stream's flow is diffused by others on its way to becoming a river, my interest in fishing diminished. Girls entered the picture, though not nearly as often as I would have liked. Music, cars, and climbing shared the spotlight with tackle and tippets. When I did fish, I chose secluded spots. On the banks of Moose River, just upstream from its confluence with the Kenai, was a quiet place shared with family and friends. But each year more boot tracks marked the soft shoreline and more brush was hacked from the water's edge. Even in the early morning hours it became hard
to escape the sound of heavy lures plunking the water like persistent hail.

My friend Jim told me about the sockeye salmon run at the Russian River. There were a lot of people, but even more fish, he assured me. It was easy to catch your limit. When I saw the numerous cars and trucks parked across from the river's mouth, I drove on. The joy of fishing was lost to me with the crowd.

When I was in my early twenties, I bought five wooded acres on the lower Kenai Peninsula. With the help of family and friends I built a small cabin. I worked a few short-term construction jobs and explored the area, trying to decide if I should stay beyond autumn. The chinook salmon run in the Anchor River, a short drive from my cabin, was well known and popular. Fishermen would stand along some stretches of the river's bank, not elbow to elbow exactly, but more like pines in a Christmas tree farm.

For a while I held to my conviction to avoid such places. As I became comfortable with the area and entertained thoughts of staying permanently, I became more proprietary. It was my new neighborhood and the fish that swam in its streams were equally mine. Maybe I could learn to endure the crowds. Acceptance and maybe enjoyment too, could be achieved through practice, I thought.

Early one morning, I loaded my hip boots and rod into my Volkswagon van and drove to the Anchor. Dampness intertwined with the dawn as I shuffled to the river. I watched the queue of fishermen cast their lines slightly upstream, each reel spinning furiously as the current swept the lures

For ten minutes or more I watched, caught up in the rhythm of flowing water and singing lines before I turned around and walked back to the parking area. As I set my rod inside the van I thought how ridiculous it was for me to leave without even getting my line wet. Returning to the water’s edge, I located the widest opening between two fishermen and walked in the river up to my knees. My lure fell obediently, exactly where I intended. I reeled in and the clear line dripped water until the spool was full. One cast. I left and never went back.

I think of how human interests developed early in life often stay with us. Adult passions seem like a modified version of a child’s delight. The boy from my neighborhood who pushed toy trucks around now operates heavy equipment for a living. The other friend, who mixed and matched model cars and ships, is an engineer. My diverse occupations included outdoor work as much as possible. I felt most at home when guiding in the backcountry or hauling crab pots from saltwater bays. The pull of streams never diminished; coming across even the slightest trickle in forested country still elicits in me that childhood sense of abandon.

These days, I subsistence fish for salmon with a net and put set lines out for burbot. Just a few times each year, usually in the spring when the ice is newly gone, or in early winter before the lake caps over, I’ll pick up a fishing pole and walk to the water’s edge. Standing alone, I’ll cast into the clear water. Ice often clogs the rod’s tip after a few minutes. I taste the glacial bite of line and steel as I place the tip in my
mouth to melt away the obstruction. Gloves keep my fingertips from turning white while I cast and vow to stop at some number—ten or twenty—that I snatch out of the air to suit my mood. But I seldom stop at my intended goal. I continue on, in a timeless present, savoring one last cast.