

DARK NOON

Eyewitnesses to the Cataclysmic Eruption of Mount St. Helens

8:45 a.m.

Gene Palmer photo

By Richard Waitt

After weeks of earthquakes and a swelling of its north crown, Mount St. Helens erupted on the sunny morning of May 18, 1980. The outburst flattened 200 square miles of forest, killed 57 people, and flooded several valleys. Downwind, ash clouds turned bright day into dark night. The US Geological Survey sent many scientists, including me, to document volcanic phenomena, assess hazards, and learn from the mountain. Soon after the big eruption, I encountered two people who had narrowly escaped a hot ash cloud. Their story added extraordinary details to the hard data we scientists were gathering.

I began interviewing many other survivors and witnesses—recording in detail their observations and adventures. It helped the science and helped us understand the mountain. I sought out close witnesses, people downstream, search-and-rescue teams, people far downwind. To work through the inexactness and discrepancies that often pervade eyewitness accounts, I

found another witness, then another. And still others.

After more than three decades and hundreds of interviews, these stories are published in *In the Path of Destruction, Eyewitness Chronicles of Mount St. Helens*, offering a new glimpse at a defining cataclysm in Northwest history. A few excerpts from the book follow.

Early on May 18th, Dale and Leslie Davis and Albert Brooks rode in a Ford pickup truck 13 miles north-northwest of Mount St. Helens. They bumped up Shultz Creek Road toward a high view of the volcano.

Dale: In my old red Ford pickup we were showing Al Brooks around and photographing wildlife. From Winters Mountain, Mount St. Helens looked peaceful.

Leslie: We set a spotting scope on the hood to watch the mountain and tried to photograph a rare albino deer.

Dale: We drove down to Green River and crossed the bridge.

Leslie: Dale was driving, Al on the right. The mountain lay behind ridges,

We'd go to Gilbert Lookout for a view. A mile beyond Green River on road 2810 we drove south through a clear-cut, only brush and very small trees. We rounded a bend and started up a steep hill.

Dale: A plume rose from behind the ridge. Then east toward Hanaford and Fawn Lakes the cloud rose all at once. It looked like that range exploded.

Leslie: Dale stopped the truck, got out, and took a photo.

Dale: The cloud then rolled over from Coldwater drainage toward us. There was no wind. It looked like a boiling mass of rock. It threw trees out at the front. The front came to a little valley and followed the contour of the ground. It flowed like water over and down a stump.

ABOVE: View east or southeast underneath the huge anvil cloud of the eruption, rising from the area just devastated by the outburst and blowing toward eastern Washington.

FACING PAGE: View southwest from Bear Meadows overlook showing an early stage of the eruption, about 8:34 a.m. This scorching fast-surge cloud downed forests and killed people and animals. Miles farther out it enveloped the Davis-Brooks party.

Leslie: The high billowy cloud had been far back behind the ridge. It now rolled over hill and valley, and so fast, the front only 60 feet high. "Dale!" I hollered, "It's coming fast!"

Brooks: It looked like the ocean rolling, huge and fantastic, following every wrinkle in the ground. "We better get the hell out of here!" Dale said.

Dale: I jumped in the pickup and backed into an old spur but jammed against a bank and stuck [truck facing east]. "Roll up the windows!" I said. In 30 seconds the cloud was on us—simultaneously a blast of wind, noise, heat, and total darkness.

Leslie: When it hit, the right wing window broke in. The heat was intense.

Brooks: I wore short sleeves. Pain slapped my bare right arm. I stuffed a rag into the broken window, but ash blowing through it burned my right arm. The pickup rocked like it was balsa.

Dale: We yelled through the roar. A sound like large hailstones beat on the pickup some minutes. Later I saw it melted the pickup's grille, ripped a chrome strip and mirror from the right side, and sandblasted the windows.

A minute after it hit, the air lightened a little for ten seconds, then total darkness again. I saw no lightning but very loud thunder crashed for half an hour.

Brooks: Heat neared the unbearable.

Would the gas tank explode and the pickup be our coffin?

Leslie: Ash piled on us. I felt I'd suffocate.

Dale: I was choking, the way ammonia shuts your wind off. Dust like talcum powder stuck in your mouth and couldn't be spat out. We rinsed our mouths with coffee from the thermos. Chunks pounded the side and top of the pickup.

Leslie: It hit on the right side five minutes. Some was ice, for the windshield felt wet despite the heat. I rubbed some of the moisture on my face. The noise dropped off. "Let's drive!" I said.

Dale: I got out and wiped off windows and headlights. With headlights I saw only a dull glare—barely saw the hood. Ash still fell steeply from the south.

Leslie: But the truck was stuck.

Brooks: Worried about a gas tank explosion, we left the vehicle. We brought the thermos.

Dale: The air was warm. I held a flashlight low to see the road edge.

Leslie: The ash fell warm. The five inches of ash on the ground was hot but not scalding. Dale and I had on only tennis shoes and socks.

Dale: Particles peppered hard from the southeast. In the dark and blowing ash we veered off the road. We came to Shultz Creek. I fell into hot mud, but Al pulled me out. Beneath a crust

it was hot as hell and blistered my leg.

Leslie: Al and I waited on the road while Dale looked for the bridge. Now around ten o'clock, still dark, Al was getting weak.

"You two go on," he said.

"No way," I said. "Three of us came in, and three are going out."

Dale: I stumbled down through smashed brush to Shultz Creek and followed a rock bar toward Green River. I heard mud in the creek running fast, but it was too dark to see. I jumped from rock to rock. I fell into hot ash again but it didn't burn through tennis shoes. The air lightened a little: I was under the edge of the concrete bridge.

We crossed the bridge. I heard the water rolling and rocks rumbling.

Leslie: We turned west onto road 2500, and the air lightened more. This had been a forest, but now the trees were down.

Dale: Les stepped into a pocket of hot ash. We tried walking on logs to stay above it.

Leslie: Ash was thicker here—a foot deep in spots and hot.

Dale: On logs upslope from the road the ash was only six inches deep. We walked up one log, stepped to another.

Leslie: It was tough going—steep and scary, some logs 20 feet from the ground.

Dale: About 10:30 it grew light enough to see 20 feet. "We should be on the road in case someone's looking for us." We climbed down, still a foot of ash there.

Leslie: This finer ash blew and hurt our eyes.

Dale: The mountain rumbled at times. I tried to drink from Green River but it was hot enough to scald hogs. Deer lay in the road, noses full of ash, eyes matted, hair burnt.

Leslie: Alive but didn't move. A burn on my backside broke open and ran down my leg. Searching for water we found only mud. At 3:30 we came to a water tank. It too was muddy water, but we rinsed our faces and Al's burnt arm.

Dale knew the roads. From road 2500, we turned up the 2566 a few miles north to roads 1100 and 1130. We heard aircraft but the air was too ashy to see far. The top of Winters Mountain was thick in ash.



Kathie Reinholm photo



Chuck Rosenfeld photo

Aerial view showing the head of the flood and the direction of the flow down the lower Toutle River on May 18. The flood passes under the Pacific Highway bridge (top of photo) and is just starting under the Interstate 5 bridge (at bottom). Southbound traffic on the interstate was stopped (top left). The evening flood in Kyle Ward's story was much larger and muddier than this one.

We walked west down roads 555, 553, and 550, then northwest on Winston Creek road 200. Ash on the ground got thinner. Around six, two guys drove up in a pickup but went on to Winters Mountain. We hiked farther down, and they came back about seven. From the truck we'd walked 17 miles. They drove us home to Mossyrock.

High on the volcano's flanks the scorching ash current—the one the Davises and Brooks encountered miles out—had melted snow on the volcano. Slush flows and muddy floods poured off into the South Fork valley. And along with rock, the initial landslides had carried off the volcano's groundwater and glaciers. This water leaked from the lumpy deposit in the upper North Fork, and a muddy flood raged down the Toutle River valley in the afternoon, smashing bridges, logging camps, and houses. Kyle Ward, his wife, and their three-month-old daughter lived on the Toutle River's south bank, three-quarters of a mile below Tower Bridge. Cline Creek joins it from the north, where Ward's uncle had a house.

Kyle Ward: Our rented A-frame was glassed on the north where a deck hung out toward the river. The water looked clear and normal. From fishing I know this time of year its temperature is about 62° F. About 11:45 we heard a big rumble like log trucks going by.

The rumble grew, the ground shook more—like a coming flash flood. Helicopters closed from the east. The noise and shaking grew. From the deck we watched the front of the flow sweep by—abrupt and all logs, mostly sawed. You felt its force from the shaking and the roar. The water then rose twelve feet or so in half a minute. It came up within six inches of the house foundation, last winter's high. Cut logs streamed by for half an hour. I moved most of our stuff out of the house to the driveway in case it came higher. But after 45 minutes the logs thinned and the flood began to subside. It dropped gradually eight feet and stayed there, five feet above normal.

On the scanner radio the sheriff said a logjam had clogged Hollywood gorge three miles above us and ponded the river 40 feet. For three hours the flow past us stayed the same. A deputy watching the gorge radioed he saw no change. I moved our stuff back inside.

About half past four the river began to rise and go muddy, a definite shift by five o'clock. This one looked heavy. Over the next hour it got thicker and thicker. By six o'clock I'd again unloaded most of our stuff from the house. The river got very thick, like wet concrete without aggregate, its height up to morning's level. The light-gray surface was flat, not rippling like water. I saw no water: it was like a sandy beach streaming by. Tree debris floated by. A car came by, strangely on the surface. A little steam rose. I watched fish struggle up through and flop on top.

It backed into the plain the house is on—like a series of little lava tongues, one every five or ten minutes. A six-inch tongue came in and the sand set up like cement. The next came farther and buried the earlier one. It kept building a deposit. I heard windows popping across the river—my uncle's place. The mud lapped high on the sides of our raised driveway. I drove out a load and stashed it.

When I got back, the low part of the drive was under the wet sand flow. I drove around on a farm road from higher ground. Now about 7:30, the rising flow licked the house foundation. We'd recently put in a new washer, dryer, and freezer. I waded through the mud to the house, the mud warm like our hot tub, 100–104° F. Many fish flopped on top—mostly steelhead, five to seven pounders, a good spring run.

The laundry room had been added to the south side, away from the river. I was pulling hoses off the washer and dryer when the house lifted a little, snapped wood, and ripped from the addition. Mud wasn't flowing into the house, but it lifted. I felt mud bump the floor beneath me. The house broke loose and drifted out 10 feet. Now mud flowed just below, past the open wall, only this little addition left. It stayed because the freezer was heavy with a side of beef. On my back I carried the washer to the truck, then the dryer. The freezer was much too heavy. I wrestled it over, opened its door, and dumped the load of frozen beef through the open wall where the house had been and into the mud. I dragged the freezer out through warm mud and pushed it onto the truck.

The house had stuck against trees by the river. Now it turned slowly out into the flow, sped up with the current, and was gone. Around nine o'clock I drove the farm road out in the dark.

Just minutes into the eruption, an enormous cloud 15 miles wide rose from the devastated area. Within minutes it reached 50,000 feet, then 80,000. It unfurled into a mushroom cloud bigger than the one at Hiroshima. The uprush carried millions of tons of sand, silt, and tree litter. Winds spread it east. Ellensburg and Yakima were the closest cities. By noon, bright day there sank into blackness. This story is from Ellensburg, 95 miles northeast of the volcano.

Richard Stearns: My wife Katharine and I lived on the west edge of town. Sunday was sunny and windless. About 9:15 a.m. I saw a bulbous dark-gray cloud poke above Manastash Ridge, 13 miles south-southwest. I stretched my arm and it was two thumbs wide—beyond the ridge maybe a quarter mile wide. A hellacious storm brewing.

I joined an old neighbor outside. We watched it grow taller and wider. It was almost black—not a gray weather storm or beige dust storm. Its base was several thousand feet above Manastash Ridge.

"Mount St. Helens has exploded," my neighbor grinned.

I laughed at his joke. "If it rains I won't have to mow the lawn."

The cloud grew in bulges—a big bulge on the east, then on the west, then on top, the middle pulling near. The cloud edge was sharp against blue sky. In 15 minutes it swelled to a large pile over the ridge.

After 9:30 I went inside. An AM-radio talk show told of Mount St. Helens erupting: the cloud was no weather storm. Katharine worried about dust coming in through cracks in this old house to our three-week-old baby. We laid towels under doors and on windowsills.

I went back out. The cloud grew higher and wider, elongating northeast toward us. It spread over eastern Kittitas Valley. The line between black cloud and clear blue sky, now nearly overhead,



Joe Rosenbaum photo, USGS

Aerial photo, looking east, of the ascending ash column and hot ash flow running down the north flank of Mount St. Helens during its May 18, 1980, eruption.

Living in the Shadows

Learn about the geology of Washington's active volcanoes, the human history of people living in close proximity to them, and the future hazards they pose for all Pacific Northwest residents.

On the occasion of the 35th anniversary of the eruption of Mount St. Helens, the Washington State History Museum presents *Living in the Shadows*, an exhibition that chronicles native legends, scientific discovery, contemporary environmental management, and disaster preparedness in our explosive Cascade Range. On view through May 17.

stayed sharp. Spectacular bulbs sagged, enlarged, shrank, danced on the cloud's underside. I heard ash falling—too fine to see but felt it pepper my face. The cloud blotted out the east sky. The air darkened. Thunder rolled from the southwest, but I saw no lightning.

Blue sky narrowed to a sliver on the northwest horizon. Then it closed. Streetlights came on. They and neighbors' windows looked as at night. The ash was too fine to see. I heard a steady, soft Shhhhhhhh falling on street, sidewalks, roofs, and partly leafed trees. It felt like fine sand. It stayed dark two hours, ash accumulating like snow.

The sky lightened gradually. After an hour it looked like a cloudy day. In afternoon the sky gradually darkened again: another cloud coming over. This time outside I neither heard nor saw falling ash. It went entirely dark more than two hours.

The air lightened in evening but stayed hazy. Ash kicked up like silt but

didn't billow like powder. It looked more than an inch thick, but on our outdoor table I measured five-eighths of an inch. Its basal quarter inch was dark gray, the top very light gray, the contact sharp. Morning's cloud dropped the dark sand, afternoon's the fine gray.

In the evening I saw in the ash a beetle's tracks and, two feet away, a bird's. The bird had landed, hopped three times, and left a scuffed spot where it snatched up the bug. I saw many other tracks of insects and birds. During the ash fall people huddled inside, but outside the lives of birds and insects—eating and being eaten—went on. 🐛

Richard Waitt has been a field geologist with the USGS for over 40 years. He specializes in volcanoes, glacial geology, and gigantic prehistoric floods. This article is based on excerpts from *In the Path of Destruction—Eyewitness Chronicles of Mount St. Helens* (Washington State University Press, 2015), with the publisher's permission.

COLUMBIA

The Magazine of Northwest History

A quarterly publication of the



VOLUME TWENTY-NINE, NUMBER ONE

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THE MAGAZINE OF NORTHWEST HISTORY ■ SPRING 2015

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COVER: Front cover of *Toyko Vignettes*, by Zoe Kincaid. "Tokyo has not yet learned the value of making itself known," wrote Kincaid in her foreword. "Only after long and sympathetic acquaintance is its hidden worth revealed." By 1933, when this book was published, Kincaid had lived 25 years in Japan, becoming a notable interpreter of Japanese culture to Western audiences. See related story beginning on page 10. (Courtesy Linda Teresa Di Biase)