

The Last Two

A Sojourn to and Contemplation of Alaska and Hawaii

Story and Photos by Christopher Cussat

The plane left Seattle and I was flying to Alaska for the first time, balancing expectation with wonder. I had heard of the forty-ninth state's awe-inspiring beauty, but no mere words could prepare me for Alaska's pristine beauty.

As one approaches Anchorage, the topography of the ground radically transforms into white, wrinkled, mountainous splendor. The Aleutian Range cradles the city and creates a protective and caring womb for its inhabitants. Out in the distance, halfway between here and Fairbanks, stands Alaska's sentinel, Mount McKinley. At 20,320 feet, it is the highest mountain in North America. Barely visible even on clear days, its misty visage is a constant and ghostly presence that makes one feel not only miniscule, but entirely too young.

Even before Alaska's admittance into the Union on January 3, 1959, there was always something particularly American about this gigantic landscape.

In the early 1900's, the rush for gold drew tens of thousands of prospectors seeking fortune and adventure. There are also reminders of our country's frontier past, when wagons of pioneers traveled west to seek a better life and create a connected and sprawling United States. Alaska is known as the "Last Frontier," and with the largest land mass and nearly the smallest population of the entire country, it truly may be.

There is truly no other part of our country like Alaska, but that is only one thing that makes it special. It is also places like Mendenhall Glacier in Juneau, which is carving out a national park-worthy mountain and valley before our eyes and reflects the truest color of blue from inside ancient ice. It is Fairbanks, with its

months of darkness and the inhabitants who do not seem to mind. It is the small fishing town of Ketchikan, with its quiet, Winslow Homer-perfect harbor, known for holding the largest collection of totem poles in the world.

In a few days, I found myself heading southwest over the Pacific Ocean, to Hawaii, a place that is perhaps the most polar opposite of Alaska. This island chain, which forms our fiftieth state, is often referred to as paradise.

On the most populated island, Oahu, Waikiki Beach in Honolulu is perhaps more distinctly modern America than any other part of the island chain. Tourism and a sprawling urban downtown have built a massive city on top of a tropical beachfront. With its main-street shopping malls and commercialism budding everywhere, there is a definite sense that the American ideal of bigger and more has forever transformed the once secluded, rural island.

But there are parts of Oahu, like the North Shore, that remain as they have for decades. The town of Haleiwa remains a traditional surfer village that still smacks of the Beach Boys' music and 1950's convertibles. But there are more beautiful, less scathed extremes as well. The small island of Kauai is relatively unchanged since its volcanic and vegetative formation. This "Garden Island" houses dozens of thousand foot waterfalls, myriads of flora and an abundance of sea-life. Approximately eighty percent of Kauai is preserved as parkland. Many of its most beautiful areas, like the Na Pali Coast, can only be reached by hiking two or more days. Mark Twain called Kauai's Waimea Canyon the "Grand Canyon of the Pacific." The "Big Island" or Hawaii, with its white, black and green sand beaches, lava flow "highways," and active volcano, probably has the most unique landscape in the country with its South Point being the southernmost tip of the United States.

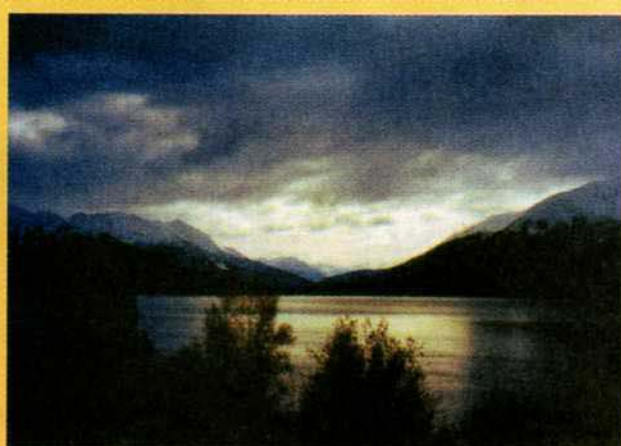
The citizens who live on the Hawaiian Islands are an interesting microcosm of the American melting pot. There is a great mix of native Hawaiians and displaced mainlanders residing there, as well as internationals. Native Hawaiians are able to hold onto their colorful traditions, and generously allow outsiders to witness and learn about their unique past.

Perhaps the most somber evidence of America in Hawaii is at Pearl Harbor, Honolulu. The remnants of the infamous Japanese attack during World War II are all too powerful and





Mendenhall Glacier in Juneau, Alaska



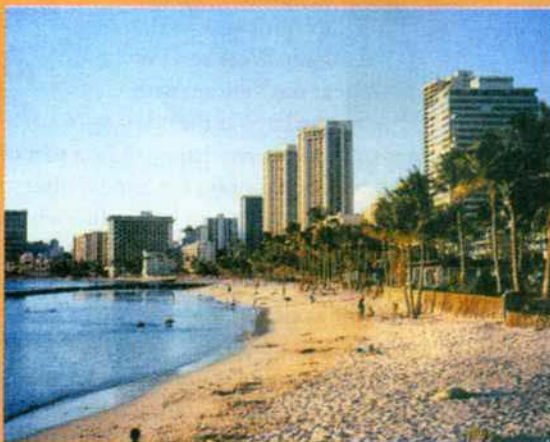
Turnaround Bay in Anchorage, Alaska

humbling visages. The U.S.S. Arizona Memorial floats majestically above the sunken hull of the befallen ship and the patriots whom forever rest within. Although this historic event transpired over a half-century before I stood there, the past and present seemed indiscernible for a frozen moment in time. The Arizona still, to this day, leaks oil from its tank, which was filled to capacity when sunk. A pinhole in the ship's hull occasionally releases a drop, and the rainbow translucence ripples and disperses among the waves in a slow, rhythmic, almost sacred dance. It is an eternal wound that bleeds as a constant reminder of those who bled and died for freedom and this country.

This Fourth of July, we remember a time when our country examined itself and wanted something better for its people. As Pennsylvanians, we are the posterity of one of those first thirteen states who had the courage to demand and fight for change and betterment. From thirteen we grew into fifty. Fifty states and over a quarter billion people are now united under a simple belief: the freedom of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. As a nation, we survived a Revolution, Civil War and two World Wars, and as a nation, we continue to grow and fight for the truths we hold. The last two states admitted into the Union are separated from the other forty-eight by half a continent and an entire ocean, yet they still, through our collective beliefs and more so, by our intangible bond, are connected and integral to the welfare and solidity of our country. ▲



Dusk falls on Ketchikan, Alaska



Waikiki Beach in Honolulu, Hawaii

The northwest coast of Oahu, Hawaii

