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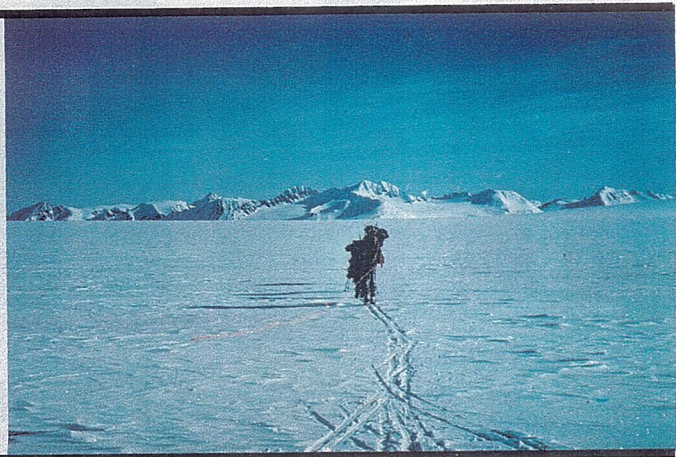
THE MAGAZINE OF

LIFE ON THE LAST FRONTIER®

49



Crossing the HARDING ICEFIELD



Dave Spencer

Dave Spencer

Seven Alaskans ski and snowshoe across one of the world's largest icefields, the Harding, which straddles the Kenai Mountains on the Gulf of Alaska. They find a wilderness of clean white, lonely beauty and wild storms.

By J. VIN HOEMAN

The Gulf of Alaska is a birthplace of storms. The mountains surrounding the Gulf catch the storm moisture as snow and here they have formed the world's greatest icefields and glaciers outside Antarctica and Greenland.

Even the comparatively low mountains of the Kenai Peninsula have formed the great Harding and Sargent icefields. The Harding is the larger and better known of these and the crossing of the Harding Icefield has long been a challenge.

There is no record of what the Eskimos, first known people to have lived on the Kenai Peninsula, thought of the Kenai Mountains or what names they used for them or for the icefields there.

The oldest reference I can find is from the Tanaina Indians whose name for the range was recorded by Ilia G. Wosnesenski in 1842 as Truuli. The meaning is unknown to me.

In 1962 I searched new maps for the highest mountain on the Kenai Peninsula and found a nameless peak that stands 6,612 feet above sea level which I began calling Truuli Peak, and which I began dreaming of climbing, together with a crossing of the Harding Icefield from which it projects. By 1966 the name was official but it had never been climbed. It



Top right—The Harding Icefield is one of the world's largest, outside of Greenland and Antarctica. This vast layer of ice straddles the relatively low Kenai Mountains next to the Gulf of Alaska. Lower right—The author, the late Vin Hoeman, with his wife Grace, during the first ascent of Truuli Peak, which juts out of the huge Harding Icefield on the Kenai Peninsula.

rises between the Chernof Glacier and what is now officially known as Truuli Glacier, at the southwest edge of the Harding Icefield.

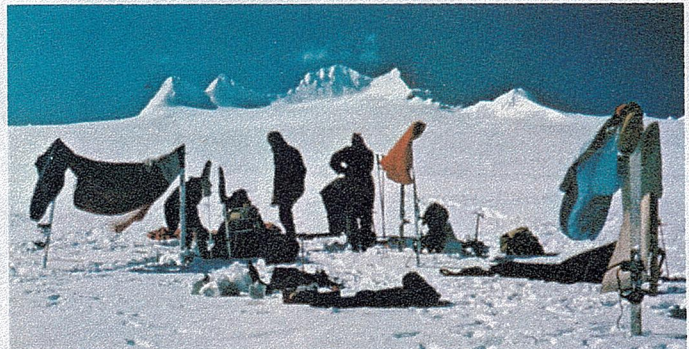
In early 1936, Yule Kilcher stepped off a boat in Seward and soon determined to get to the fabulous area around Kachemak Bay. That the Kenai Mountains blocked the way bothered him not at all, for he hailed from Switzerland where mountains and travel among them are taken for granted. About July 25 he set out alone up Lowell Creek to reach the white blob on his map that would later come to be known as the Harding Icefield.

The first glacier he reached was the one east of Paradise Creek where he fell part way into a concealed crevasse. He was stopped by his pack with a rifle tied to it. Undaunted, he fashioned a sled from hemlock branches to pull his load and set foot on Bear Glacier which leads to the Icefield proper. On the fourth day a wet storm so typical of the area caught him and he went astray into mountains protruding from the ice that his map did not show. He was unable to find Tustumena Glacier, his intended exit, so he retraced his steps, arriving back in Seward August 2. He then made his way around to Kachemak Bay via Moose Pass and Skilak Lake but the Harding Icefield had not seen the last of him.

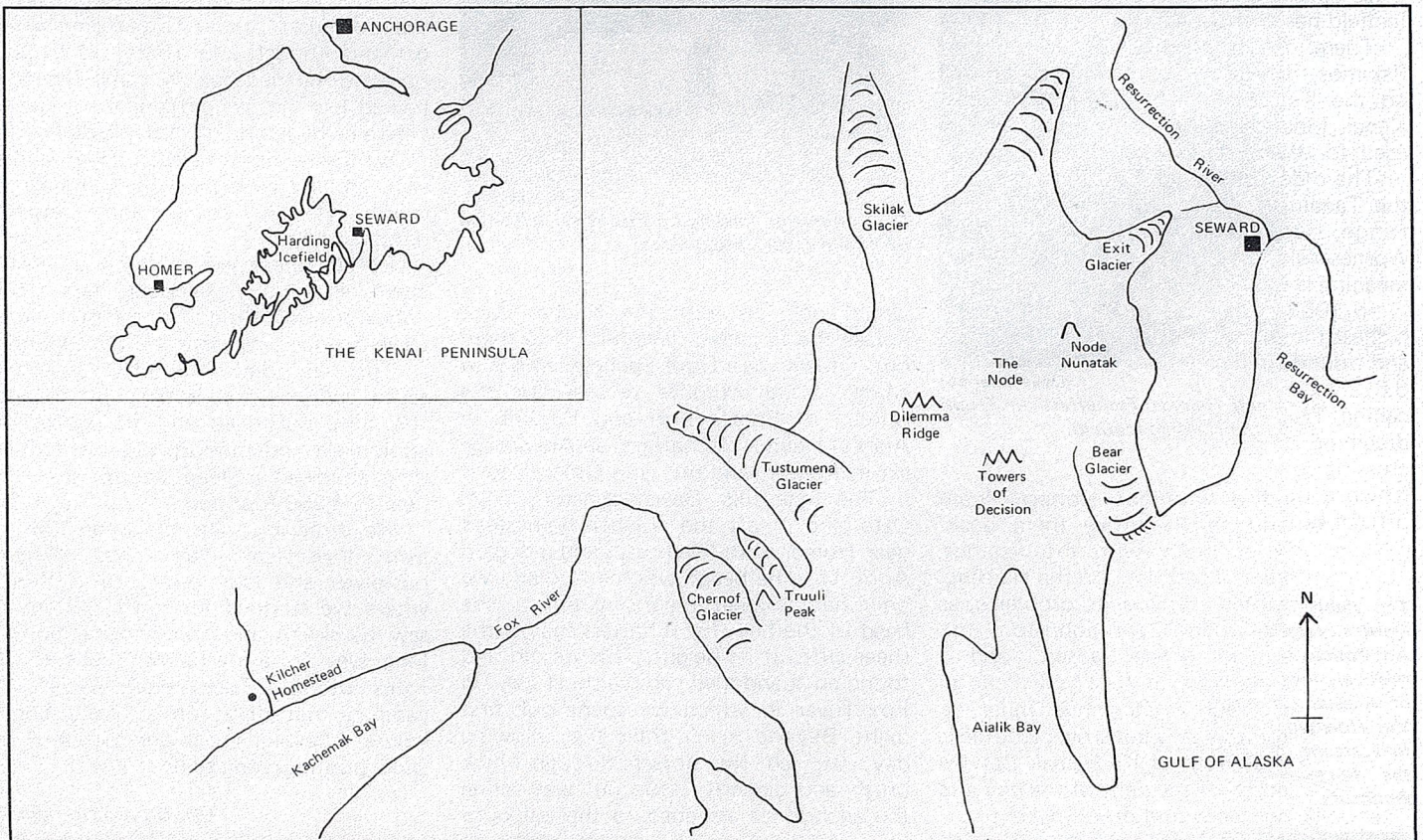
The next known challengers of the Harding Icefield were Eugene ("Coho") Smith and Don Rising who, according to Mrs. Smith, crossed on skis from Bear Glacier near Seward up over the node and

The striking view from Node Nunatak looking across the Gulf of Alaska, early morning of April 25. Bill Babcock stands alone in the vast loneliness that is the Harding Icefield. Below—Lunch break on the Harding Icefield, near the Towers of Decision.

Dave Spencer



Bill Babcock



out Tustumena Glacier about 1940. They never reported their feat. Eugene Disco Smith was a well-known Kenai Peninsula fisherman, who first came to Alaska in 1929. Smitty and Don enlisted in the service together in 1942 and they were stationed in New Orleans prior to going overseas. After the war Smith returned to Alaska, married, and the last years of his life were spent trying to develop a freshwater fishing industry.

During summer, 1963, Don Stockard of Seward led Tom Johnson and Carl Blomgren in an attempt to cross but

In 1968 we were determined to succeed. The best time seemed to be April, the driest month with plenty of daylight, but good beach and snow conditions and no mosquitoes. Ten people were involved: Bill Babcock who would snowshoe while the rest of us used skis; Erik Barnes, a Kenai veterinarian and our pilot, who is also a mountaineer and would join us for the Truuli ascent; Bill Fox, an Anchorage writer; Dave Johnston, who had just returned from Antarctica, and Yule Kilcher, former Alaska State senator. Kilcher's son, Otto,

Fox River. The going was tough on man and beast and that evening, as we made camp on a spruce-covered point, Bill Fox decided to go back with Otto and the animals since his feet were badly blistered and one of his ski tips broken.

On April 19 the four of us left had to carry full loads including skis and snowshoes as we walked up the ice and gravel of the narrowing Fox River Canyon, wading the open stream in several places. We saw sheep, some big brown bear tracks, and Dave killed a trout when he broke through anchor ice and stepped on it. It was a welcome lunch snack.

Steep cliffs gave us problems, but we eventually reached the snout of the Chernof Glacier where we roped together to negotiate the crevassed area. Beyond, on the easy, sloping glacier, we put on skis and snowshoes and moved two to three more miles up to the 3,000-foot level opposite the base of Truuli Peak, which we intended to climb the next day. At a place where a plane can easily land, we pitched our camp.

Early on April 20 the drone of a Supercub engine awakened us and Erik Barnes soon landed with Dave Spencer as his passenger. Then Erik flew back to Cooper Landing to pick up my wife Grace and Helmut. As soon as Grace arrived we were off to climb Truuli while Erik went back for Helmut and would follow our tracks up the mountain later. By mid-morning Erik and Helmut caught us and all eight of us, after negotiating a steep gully, reached a broad ridge leading to the summit. The weather was still clear as we enjoyed the solemn beauty of the Harding, which stretched below and to the northeast of us. Threatening clouds gathered though and a fierce wind came up as we hurried back to camp. There we helped Erik get his airplane out of a hole where he had parked it for the day.

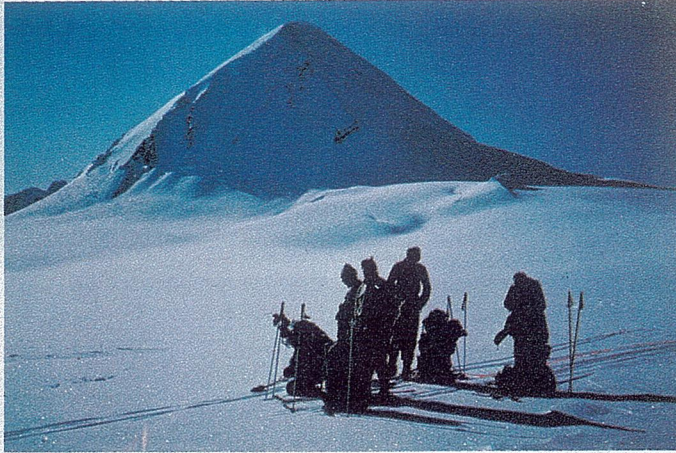
By then a storm raged and we watched with anxiety as Erik took to the air. He made it skillfully and presently disappeared.

For us there was nothing to do but crawl into our sleeping bags. Dave Johnston, Bill, Yule in one tent, Helmut, Dave Spencer, my wife and I in the other.

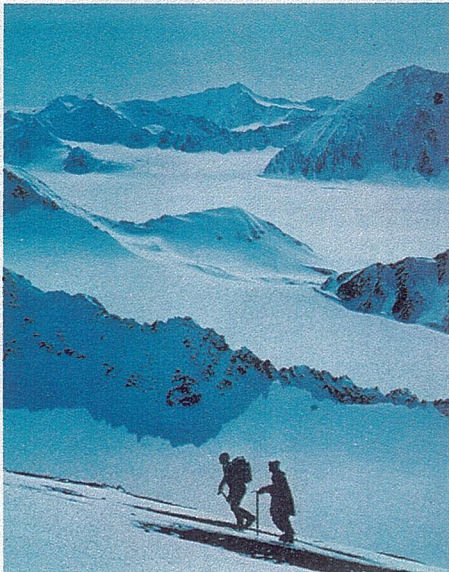
The next day, a Sunday, a blizzard raged and we were stormed in. Monday the wind slackened and we packed our equipment and food up Chernof Glacier, then followed a steep side glacier to its head, a 4,950 foot pass.

We threw our skis and webs down an almost-vertical wall, then lowered ourselves and our packs to a trench, where we stopped for lunch. Afternoon saw us skiing and snowshoeing down a long way in a partial whiteout to the forks of the Tustumena Glacier. We camped that night on a rocky bench, where a few green things sprouted and snow buntings sang to us.

Dave Spencer



The climbers with Node Nunatak behind them. This projecting peak stretches to 5,912 feet.



Dave Spencer

Erik Barnes and Helmut Tschaffert on Truuli Peak, high on the Harding Icefield.



Bill Babcock

Dave Johnston heading up Fox River with one of Yule Kilcher's packhorses.

storms and a whiteout stopped them midway and finally drove them back. Unless one is lucky with the weather, summer seems a bad time on the Harding.

Deep winter also has its problems, as we learned when Dave Johnston, my wife-to-be, Dr. Grace Jansen, and I attempted to walk in to Truuli Peak in December, 1966. After five miles of scrambling with heavy loads over iceblocks piled on the beach of Kachemak Bay we had used much of the light of the day and we could see we would never make it.

would help us with the Kilcher pack horses the first two days then take them out. Others were Dave Spencer, who is in charge of all wildlife refuges for the Bureau of Sports Fish and Wildlife in Alaska; Helmut Tschaffert, an Anchorage ski instructor, and my wife Grace, and I.

The two Bills, Dave Johnston, Yule, Otto and I left the Kilcher homestead near Homer with five horses and a dog on April 17. The beach was ice free and we only had to beat the rising tide to the head of the bay, for it batters against the sheer cliffs at its height. This we did and found an abandoned cabin a short way up Fox River in which we spent our first night. Beyond man's trails the following day, we led the horses through thick brush and gingerly made our way along the anchor ice attached to the banks of

Continued on page 63

bled! Hanky dropped for Hat Showers




The Guide Post (CONTINUED)

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We try to keep these lists clean of disreputable guides and services and will appreciate hearing of any criticisms (as well as compliments). We guarantee none of these services nor will we recommend any. We urge prospective users of these services to insist on references—and be prepared to offer your own in return.—The Editors

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CROSSING THE HARDING ICEFIELD Continued from page 47

On April 23 we started up the northern branch of Tustumena Glacier but after we had gone less than two miles a whiteout made us stop and pitch tents again. There we sat while the 60-mile wind buffeted our tents, piling snow against the sides. This melted through and we mopped water all day.

After a bad night with much storm, it cleared in the morning and we once again gave it a try, heading toward the middle of the icefield. On the left a fantastic granite ridge reared. I called it the "Horns of Dilemma," since I could not identify it with certainty from the map. To our right there were equally spectacular "Towers of Decision." The weather by now was magnificent and we were strung out in a long line, Yule, Grace and I in front, Dave and Dave, Helmut and Bill behind.

Light planes flew overhead. One was Erik, dropping peanuts and a message to inquire if anyone wished to be flown out, to which we answered, "No." The other plane held a Seward Chamber of Commerce pilot who promised us a fine welcome in Seward with steam bath and dinner.

The endless icefield, like the desert, completely fooled our sense of distance and not until late afternoon did we reach our "Node Nunatak" where we had intended to have lunch. Node Nunatak was the second mountain we had planned to climb. At its base we dropped our packs, gathered strength with a hot milk drink and moved up the node in early evening. Yule stood on top first and we watched the spectacle of the setting sun playing its darkening rays on the icefield and on the nunataks. As night fell it became cold, and Grace's overboots, which she had hung high on the tent center pole froze stiff and she couldn't get them on in the morning.

The last day, April 25, we broke camp, cached what was no longer of use to us and set out on our long downhill trek. We skiers had easy going, but Bill, behind us, virtually churned the snow with his webs, amazing us with his strength and speed.

Clouds gathered and the weather started to turn bad again but, luckily, we seemed to be ahead of it.

At the first crevasses of our exit glacier we stopped to rope up with the exception of ski instructor Helmut who elegantly weaved down and around crevasses and soon disappeared downhill. Several times we had to take skis off as rocky terrain interrupted our run. Eventually we hit brush and the cottonwoods of Resurrection Creek.

Seward treated us to a steam bath and a fine dinner to conclude a memorable expedition.

