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GLACIER BAY NATIONAL MONUMENT - Golden Anniversary 1925 - 1975

1925 GLACIER BAY NATIONAL MONUMENT 1975

By Mike Miller

The year was 1925; the President, Calvin Coolidge. The occasion: the signing of the proclamation which made Glacier Bay, at the top of the southeast Alaska panhandle, a U.S. National Monument within the National Park System.

At the time of the signing, the creation of the Monument was considered a wise acquisition for the U.S. Park Service — but it was not greatly noted nor heralded.

This year, half a century later, the considerable wisdom of the Coolidge decision is conceded enthusiastically by virtually everyone, and is nowhere more apparent than in the great bay itself where — protected and preserved for the enjoyment and appreciation of countless generations to come — the awesome beauty of the Monument now attracts thousands upon thousands of waterborne and air borne visitors each year.

And awesome is indeed a mild word to describe the beauty of this place.

Spectacular, glistening blue and white glaciers, some of them miles wide and many miles long, descend from mountain top spawning places down granite-rimmed valleys to sea level. Icebergs, many as big as office buildings, float within the sprawling confines of the watery expanse, sharing oceanwaters with humpback whales, seals, sea lions, porpoises, salmon, halibut and trout.

In certain places, where the ice receded decades ago, towering forest of lush, verdant spruce and hemlock have grown up, covering great expanses and sheltering Sitka blacktail deer, brown bears, black bears, lynx, wolves, and wolverine.

High on craggy mountains, looking down on the glaciers and the waterways and the forests are mountain goats. And higher still, flying and soaring above even the goats' domain are magnificent bald eagles, geese, ducks, cranes, and dozens of other species of birdlife.

Historic country this, first sighted by Captain George Vancouver as he sailed through the ice-choked waters of Icy Strait in 1794. At that time Glacier Bay was hardly a bay at all. It was instead a small indentation in an unbelievably huge single ice shelf which extended more than a hundred miles to the St. Elias Range. Over the years, as the ice has receded and opened up more and more of the bay, other explorers have taken note of the region, including, a century after Vancouver, the indomitable John Muir whose reports on the geology and the stark overpowering beauty of the place brought Glacier Bay its first prominence in modern times.

Because of the federal protection afforded Glacier Bay during the past half century little or none of the natural pristine beauty of Glacier Bay has been erased or eroded. To the contrary, the bay is, in a very real sense, as wild and as wildly beautiful as it was near the turn of the century when Muir and his friends cruised and climbed and marveled at the spectacle within it.

Many hope that long, long before another half century passes, the Monument will be elevated by Congress to full status as a National Park within the U.S. National Park System — a status which it richly deserves.

(Editor's note: The cachet was designed by R.T. (Skip) Wallen, a distinguished Alaska artist known particularly for his charcoal sketches and stone lithographs of Alaska wildlife. The design depicts the humpback whale, an endangered species of this mammal, diving beneath the crystal blue waters of Glacier Bay; an ever present iceberg is in the background. Mr. Wallen is the owner of the Kayak Gallery in Juneau. The text enclosed in the envelope was written by Mike Miller of Juneau, a noted free-lance writer on Alaskana, and the Majority Leader in the House of Representatives of the Alaska State Legislature where he represents the Juneau-Lynn Canal district.)

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