

Traveling TO ALASKA



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Table of Contents

Introduction	vii
Planning	1
Making Reservations	5
Last Minute Plans	11
Odon to Chicago	15
Chicago Train Station	19
Chicago to Minnesota	25
Through the Western States	31
Seattle to Vancouver	37
Vancouver	41
Beginning the Inside Passage	49
Ketchikan	53
Juneau	61
Skagway	67
Glacier Bay National Park	73
Yakutat Bay & Sailing North	77
Whittier to Anchorage	81
Anchorage	87
Wasilla	117
Train to Fairbanks	121
Dalton Highway to Yukon River Camp	127
Yukon River Camp to Coldfoot	135
Wiseman & over the Brooks Range	143
Galbraith Lake to Deadhorse	151
Arctic Ocean to Fairbanks	161
Fairbanks	167
To Denali National Park	171
Denali National Park	177
Alaska Railroad / Anchorage	185
Bus to Whittier / Boarding Crown Princess	189
Yakutat Bay	197
Glacier Bay	201
Another Day in Skagway	203
Whale Watch in Juneau	207
Ketchikan & Southward	211
Vancouver & Seattle	213
Empire Builder Eastward to Home	217

Introduction

According to Mark Twain, “Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness, and many of our people need it sorely on these accounts.” Unlike Mark Twain, I don’t claim to speak for many of my people, but I know it is good for me to get out of Daviess County, Indiana, every now and then.

My name is Leroy Stoll, and I am a member of the Old Order Amish faith. Old Order Amish is a Christian religion with beliefs similar to the Mennonites. Our traditions are similar because we share a common heritage. Most Mennonites drive automobiles while Amish use horses and buggies for local transportation, so we are considered the more conservative sect.

I was born on August 26, 1957, in Washington, Daviess County, Indiana. The first four years of my life must have been unremarkable—at least, from my point of view. Apparently, I saw no reason to speak until after I was four years old. In fact, my sister Magdalena and I learned to talk at the same time, and she is two years younger than I am. (Here is where about half the people say, “Perhaps Leroy didn’t speak until he was four, but he sure made up for it later!” And the other half will say, “Yes, it’s the truth; and furthermore, he has been a little slow his whole life!”)

On March 1, 1979, I married Esther Raber. Our seven children are all married—which leaves Granny and I empty

nesters. Although we live in a rural setting, we are not really farmers. We have about 20 acres in grass at our home property, which we mow and bale for hay in June and use for horse pasture the remainder of the summer and fall. We also have what we call our “ranch” property just a half mile down the road, and our haymaking on both properties probably classifies us as hobby farmers.

Stoll Bros. Lumber is our three-generation family business. Dad and Mom, my two brothers, and I make up the first two generations. The third generation of ownership includes my three sons and four nephews.

By the time our children were grown and married, Esther and I had traveled quite a bit with different members of our family and extended family, but there was one frontier we were still dreaming about seeing. Perhaps you know the quote, “A journey of 1,000 miles begins with one step.” Well, for Esther and me, a journey of *10,000* miles began with a dream—a dream of visiting the last great frontier of Alaska.



Planning

FINALLY, WE WERE going to Alaska! Soon after the first of the year in 2014, Esther and I decided that the coming summer would be our “Alaska window.” By window we meant a special time that had opened in our life, allowing us to plan our trip to the last great frontier—that northern state almost three times the size of Texas.

Esther and I had been thinking and talking about this trip for a few years, and it seemed our window had opened for the summer of 2014. Esther’s parents, Herbert and Geneva Raber, were both around 80 years of age and in good health, as far as we knew. My parents, Amos and Katherine Stoll, were about the same age and also had no serious health issues. Our three sons and four daughters were all married, leaving us as empty nesters.

We needed a fairly large window, not only because of the size of Alaska, but because, of course, we would not be flying there, and the travel to and from, plus taking in all the sights we wanted to see, would require over a month’s time.

As we tell our friends and neighbors, we are planners. We make plans far ahead, with the clear understanding that this may not be God's will. Something may turn up, and if so, plans can be changed.

It was also important that I wasn't planning only for my dream. As the plans developed, we saw it would be a complicated agenda. I knew that I was committed to doing the trip, but if my wife would not have been "all in," I was not going to drag her all the way across North America and to the Arctic Ocean just to make my dream a reality. She assured me that she was "in." So we began to plan.



My parents were travelers; when we children were small, Mom and Dad started their traveling adventures with trips west to Yellowstone National Park. As empty nesters, they went to Europe by ship; and twenty-two years ago, they planned a trip to Alaska.

Their trip to Alaska was a typical long-distance Amish trip; they hired a van driver and shared expenses with a few other passengers. The advantage of van trips is the flexibility of schedule. If you see something interesting along the way, you can stop anytime—that is, you can stop if everybody or at least the majority of passengers wants to stop.

But the other side of group van trips is that somebody has to be the boss. Somebody has to run the show and try to keep the rest of the passengers reasonably happy, or at least satisfied. The idea is to stay somewhat on a schedule but still be flexible so that people can have the trip they envisioned. For the boss or trip manager, this can be stressful and not much of a vacation.

Going on a trip without a driver is something most

of my Amish friends and neighbors would not choose to do; but because of our business, my family has traveled by public transportation for years. To many people, “public transportation” means going to the airport and flying to some other city by commercial airline. Because our people don’t fly, the public transportation we use is travel by Amtrak passenger railroad, bus, and taxicab. Now I also add cruise ships to my list of public transportation possibilities.

Traveling by way of public transportation can enhance the experiences of a journey. After reaching the first destination, instead of driving from Point A to Point B, we use local transportation. We may be seated next to people from far away, who live in states or countries of which we have little knowledge. Their life experiences and stories are usually interesting and, in some cases, almost priceless.

I always appreciate having the highlights of the area described by a native with a local accent. It adds a little spice to the education process. The locals’ word pronunciation and speech may seem totally incorrect, but they think we talk funny, too!

Also, I walk as much as I am able and when I feel safe. It is usually safe for a small group of people to walk in daylight hours. However, walking alone or walking beyond downtown areas of big cities is generally not wise.

As Mark Twain reminded us, traveling broadens our minds and can help battle our prejudices and bigotry. Oftentimes, the journey is more valuable than the destination, and the people we meet are a big part of our traveling experiences. Launching out into the world using public transportation gives our journey new dimensions and larger perspectives.

In early March, a friend of ours drove us to Nashville, Tennessee, to attend a dealer market. Howard and I had been talking about going to Alaska for at least three years, and he had always said that when Esther and I were ready to go, he wanted to drive us. On the way home from Nashville, we discussed the trip and that our window was open for the summer. But Howard now had some health issues, and he and I agreed he wouldn't be able to handle the driving duties alone. It is almost 4,000 miles from Loogootee, Indiana, to Anchorage, Alaska, one way; and we knew that some cities in Alaska are not even accessible by car.

So it wasn't long before Esther and I were discussing an adjustment to our plan. Instead of a driver, we would take Amtrak to the West Coast and then a ferry to Alaska and use trains and buses to travel on the mainland of that state.

We were finally going, and we would travel the entire time using public transportation.



Making Reservations

PLANNING PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION for the whole Alaskan adventure was a major undertaking. Some might think it a bit extreme; and, as we worked through the details, I admit to having some of those same thoughts myself.

I already had experience putting together trips in the lower 48 states using only public transportation. Several times and with different family members we had taken Amtrak from Indianapolis to Chicago, then traveled west on the *Southwest Chief* train, arriving in Flagstaff, Arizona, on the second evening. We'd stay one night in a motel in Flagstaff and the next morning take a connecting Amtrak bus to the Grand Canyon. After a full day at the Grand Canyon, it was back to Flagstaff to again board the *Southwest Chief* and go west to Los Angeles, California. In L.A., we would switch to the *Coast Starlight* train, go north to San Francisco, and spend a couple of days there. Over the years, we had made several trips west,

usually going this southern route with stops at both the Grand Canyon and San Francisco.

Years ago, I had a business trip on the West Coast and wanted to see the giant redwoods—by train, if possible. I did a little research and found a grove of coastal redwoods in Muir Woods, an area designated as a national monument. Tours leave daily from the Pier 39 area of Fisherman’s Wharf in San Francisco. The first time I took this trip, our son Jesse and my nephew Andrew were with me, both teenagers at the time. After San Francisco, we headed north on the *Coast Starlight* to Seattle, Washington. Our Amtrak trip package (I believe it was a North American Railpass) required at least one stop in Canada, so the next part of our trip was on an Amtrak bus north to Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. From Vancouver, it was back to Seattle, where we caught the *Empire Builder* train back to Chicago. On that trip, we had gone west on a southern route, traveled north along the Pacific coast, and then returned to Chicago along a northern route.

But none of those trips had been as long as this Alaska trip would be. And none of them had as many details of lodging and transportation to sort out. We would be traveling for over a month, by car, bus, train, ship, and van.

First, we had to plan each day of the trip and schedule the different types of transportation available, ideally with a cushion of time to make connections for our next destination. We started with the first leg, from Indianapolis to Chicago, and made reservations with Megabus for that leg. From Chicago, we’d travel to Seattle, Washington, on Amtrak’s train Number 7, *Empire Builder*.

From Washington State, we planned to go north on the Alaska Ferry. The Alaska Marine Highway—a “highway” on

the water—operates a ferry terminal in the town of Bellingham, just north of Seattle and close to the U.S.-Canadian border. Since a great deal of Alaska is not accessible by road and we do not fly, the ferry seemed the best way to go. It travels the watery highway along the western Canadian and southern Alaskan coast for 3,500 miles, sailing all the way to Dutch Harbor in the Aleutian Islands (the “tail” of small islands stretching out from Alaska toward Russia). Stopping at more than 30 cities along the way, the ferry is an excellent way to travel to any of Alaska’s port cities. We would then travel inland by bus or train.

But here our reservation-making process hit a snag.

As it turned out, the ferry dates for July—when we planned to travel—were sold out. We should have made our reservations for the ferry in January, but it had been March before we finally decided to take the trip.

Well, what about a cruise ship? We knew that cruise ships went up the Inside Passage of Alaska, a waterway along the coast of western Canada and the “panhandle” of Alaska. (The panhandle is a strip of land extending southeast of mainland Alaska. It is wedged between Canada and the Pacific Ocean.) Offshore of the panhandle are dozens of islands, and these islands give some protection to ships as they thread their way through, creating the route known as the Inside Passage. Many cruise ships sail along this passage and visit the panhandle cities of Ketchikan, Juneau, and as far north as Skagway. We did not know, though, if any cruise ships went farther north, continuing to the mainland of Alaska.

Our son Jesse usually makes travel arrangements for our business. He gave me an 800-number for Expedia, a travel company that does business mainly on the Internet. I dialed the number and reached a man by the name of Harry Aquino.

Harry and I “clicked,” and in our conversation he mentioned that he was based in Las Vegas, Nevada. This worked out well for our future discussions. He was in the Pacific time zone, three hours behind Indiana; with the time difference, I could call Harry in the evenings, after I was home from work but while he was still at his desk.

Harry was very helpful. He assured us that cruises were available as far north as Whittier, on Prince William Sound. From Whittier, we would then have about a two-hour bus ride to Anchorage. It was not uncommon for people to board a cruise ship leaving Vancouver, sail through the Inside Passage and up to mainland Alaska, and then fly back to Vancouver. Or, they might fly to Alaska first and cruise their way back.

Taking into consideration that we don’t fly, Harry booked us passage northbound on *Norwegian Sun*, a cruise ship that would leave from Vancouver. Our return trip would be on another cruise ship, *Crown Princess*. Each cruise was a seven-day trip. The ferry would have been only four days in travel, but the cruise ships make stops to spend full days in three southeastern Alaska cities and then also cruise through Glacier Bay.

So this new plan required adding another leg to our journey; we needed to get from Seattle to Vancouver, where we would board *Norwegian Sun*. Amtrak has both a bus and a train that make the short run from Seattle to Vancouver. The bus schedule fit our new plan better, and so we made those reservations.



Once on mainland Alaska, what were our transportation options? Alaska is almost three times the size of Texas, and one of the areas we wanted to visit was the Prudhoe Bay oil fields on the extreme north coast of the state, almost 900 miles and

20 hours from Anchorage. The Alaska Railroad would take us from Anchorage to Fairbanks, but Fairbanks is less than halfway to Prudhoe Bay. The rest of the trip to the oil fields would have to be by van on the only road going to Prudhoe, the Dalton Highway.

I made reservations to Fairbanks with the railroad and found the Northern Alaska Tour Company, which offers round trip tours from Fairbanks to Deadhorse, a work camp at the end of the Dalton Highway. The tour, called Arctic Ocean Adventure, is normally a trip traveling by van one way and by bush plane on the return leg. The tour company makes exceptions for people who would rather not fly, and so we made van reservations with them for the return trip to Fairbanks.

We wanted to see more of Alaska than oil fields. Denali National Park was definitely on our list. The Alaska Railroad makes a stop there, so we scheduled Denali on our way back from Prudhoe Bay, making reservations for an all-day trip through the park with Denali Backcountry Adventure.

There was another necessity to take care of—hotel or motel reservations. Those were made long before our departure date, so we were sure to have a place to sleep each night!

It looked like we were all set.