North to Alaska

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During the summer of 1982 I had the privilege of working in Alaska’s Soil Survey Program. Nine soil scientists from the Lower 48 with as many biological technicians were detailed to survey locations throughout the State.

Each soil scientist had the opportunity to work in at least two soil survey areas—mine being the Yentna and Copper River areas. Both of these are order two surveys, and have as their main objective the identification and location of potential agricultural lands. Individuals own a very small percentage of Alaskan land and the State is concerned with turning over 50,000 to 100,000 acres per year to its citizens. The soil survey helps determine which parcels of land are to be released.

My first exposure to mapping soils in Alaska was in the Yentna survey area, which consists of 3,250,000 acres northwest of Anchorage between the Cook Inlet and the Alaska Range (Fig. 1). Less than 30,000 acres are accessible by improved roads and without a helicopter, the area would have been practically impossible to survey. About 125,000 acres remained to be mapped during 1982. Our camp was located at Skwentna, a thriving bush village with a population of 22, accessible only by air or water. Kim Olszewski, my party leader had aptly described our camp as “rustic but comfortable.” Lucky for us, the abandoned FAA outpost, turned school, loaned us their shop for office space. Incidentally, this 17-pupil, one-teacher school graduated three last spring—two from high school and one from kindergarten.

Soils in the Yentna area were quite different from those I had become accustomed to in Mississippi, more than 4,000 miles to the southeast. They were mostly Histosols and Spodosols (Fig. 2). Layers of volcanic ash were common in most of the soils. The entire area had also been glaciated. Never having mapped soils in glaciated areas before called for a crash course just to become familiar with some of the terms seldom used since college days. The Yentna survey is remembered by all soil scientists who worked there for its muskegs of all sizes and degrees of wetness.

We were cautioned about bears. At first hint that I might go to Alaska, my co-workers started blitzing me with all sorts of bear tales. It was not unusual to come in from the field and find two or three magazines with scary bear stories on my desk. Although we were always conscious of bears and saw them in the field, our biggest threat to human life, it seemed, was the lowly mosquito. If that was not enough, we were attacked from all sides by devils club and alder bushes which had knitted an almost impenetrable cover across our transects.

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