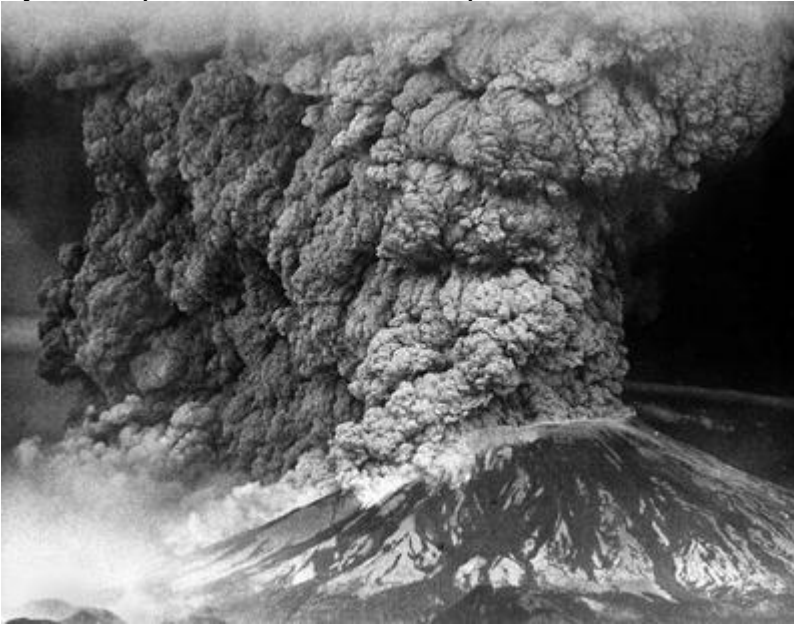


For Spokesman-Review photographer, the St. Helens eruption is seared in the memory

By Christopher Anderson For The Spokesman-Review



The 1980 eruption of Mt. St. Helens sent a plume of ash that blotted out the sun in parts of Washington and North Idaho. The ash fell like snow, drifted as deep as 2 feet, and crushed crops, halted transportation and caused schools and businesses to close. (Christopher Anderson / The Spokesman-Review)

Editor's note: In May 1980, Christopher Anderson was a staff photographer at The Spokesman-Review. He shares with us his recollections of covering the monumental story of the Mount St. Helens eruption.

In most everyone's life they will experience an event so overwhelming that it defies comprehension. You just have a hard time wrapping your brain around what is happening in front of you. For me, that event was early in my career at The Spokesman-Review when Mount St. Helens exploded on a nice sunny Sunday morning.

Up until then my work as a staff photographer was pretty typical. Chasing crime and fires and covering local sports, working days, nights and weekends recording all types of events for the paper and for history. Then Mount St. Helens blew up. Who would believe a volcanic eruption could happen in

Washington state even though all those peaks in the Cascade Mountains are part of the Ring of Fire? The Ring of Fire that circles the Pacific Ocean and is made up of volcanoes?

Now you know.

We had been covering the “burps and belches” from St. Helens over the months leading up to May 18, 1980. Some steam would blow out the top, or some mudflow would dribble down the side. The Spokesman would charter a small plane out of Felts Field and fly a reporter and photographer to take a look at the action.

My boss called me that Sunday and said there was a plane at Felts waiting for me but no reporter available and just fly over to see what was going on. The pilot could drop me off in Longview if it was anything of importance.

So off I go to Felts, and we head off. As soon as we get to altitude and get a few miles out of town you could see the huge cloud of ash pouring out of what used to be the top of St. Helens. We had to fly north around Wenatchee and Mount Rainier and then south down the coast to come in from the southwest. The torrent of ash and debris was blowing northeast and heading directly to Spokane. Right where I had left my car and home with the windows open. Thankfully, a friend rescued my dog.

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Chuck Nole is framed in a helicopter windshield displaying the plume of Mount St. Helens during a search and rescue mission. (Christopher Anderson / The Spokesman-Review)

The entire horizon was filled with the eruption and everything was a shade of gray. No color. No beautiful forests or lovely lakes. No backwoods roads or logging camps. Total destruction from the mountain blowing the top 1,300 feet off and throwing out 3.7 billion cubic yards of debris at temperatures above 600 degrees. The mountain literally turned to liquid and everything downhill, downwind and downstream was buried in a mudflow estimated to be over 500 feet deep. Fifty-seven people died.

I was looking at a vertical stream of junk rising 15 miles into the air, and the ash was rolling and boiling like it was alive. An estimated 200 square miles of timber was blown over like a giant hand had swept over the forest laying trees

down in perfect symmetrical waves. It looked like I was going to be staying at the mountain for few days.

We landed in Longview, and the pilot left with my black-and-white and color film while the Spokane newsroom hunted up a rental car. I drove that car like I stole it and I made sure to take out the supplemental insurance but didn't tell the rental company I planned on running it up the side of an active volcano. I had \$20 in my pocket, no change of clothes and no idea of where to go or how to get around the roadblocks. I started at Interstate 5 and worked through the side roads and even some areas of no roads. Huge trees were being carried down the mudflow that had overwhelmed the rivers. Bridges acted like dams with mud and debris piling up against them. I had to drive to Portland to develop and transmit photos at the Associated Press bureau. I raided their lunchroom for food and bummed some film. Then back to the mountain.

The next two days were spent at the Longview Airport and thank God for the National Guard. Its helicopter crews were up and running immediately after the eruption. The Guard did search and rescue for a day, but it was obvious nobody could survive the force of that eruption. The next few days I hooked a ride on several of their flights to get closer images and show the efforts of the National Guard. There were a few people camping or hiking in the area and were far enough away to miss the blast but had to be airlifted out of all the fallen timber and ruined roads. People who escaped the initial blast were wandering into the airport staging area to get disaster help. Virtually every single one of them looked dazed and confused and just having difficulty wrapping their brain around what just happened to them. Stories of driving 80 mph down winding forest roads and just running for their lives. Just drop everything, grab the dog and run like hell. Lots of head-shaking and 100-yard stares.

Back in Spokane the Sunday eruption had turned day into night ... cars drove with headlights on and the streetlights came on at noon. Everyone was wearing masks and clearing the grocery shelves of toilet paper and beer. The highways were closed due to blowing ash, and 1,500 travelers were stuck in Moses Lake. The airport was closed and the storm sewers were choked with ash as people hosed down their houses and yards. Car air filters clogged quickly, and one tire store sold over 2,000 filters in a few days.

I finally got the first flight out of Portland and got back to Spokane five days after what I thought was going to be a scenic flight over with a few photos and back home by lunch. Yeah. I had to muck out my car that was still parked at Felts and clean out the house from ash blowing in open windows.

Since that day I have gone back to St. Helens on all the usual anniversaries – 5, 10, 20, 25 and 30 years. I have hiked into the areas with U.S. Forest Service staff and geologists as they study the world's largest test lab. It was unreal to see boulders the size of basketballs that had been thrown miles from the crater. Several friends have hiked up to the rim; the Johnson Observation Center is quite informative.

You can stand there and look directly into the crater, which is big enough to hold the entire downtown Spokane core. You can see the mudflows and how the trees are growing again. You can see the elk and hear stories about fish coming back into Spirit Lake. You can do all these things, and still today it is hard to wrap your brain around the violent force of Mother Nature.