

Amos Burg

The first time I saw Amos I was in a hurry. I was young and fairly intoxicated with my new job at the Alaska Department of Fish and Game. I was rushing somewhere with a paper I had written and brushed by an old man in the communications office. He wore a Greek fisherman's cap above a broad, strongly chiseled face and a brown wool jacket. He was tall, but slightly stooped, and he walked with deliberate steps. As I approached, he looked at me and nodded, and I thought at the time he was too shy to speak, but would have liked to. I nodded quickly with a smile and hurried on.

And so would I have missed acquaintance with one of the most remarkable men I've known had I not, in a year or so, been named editor of this magazine, which was then called *Alaska Fish Tales & Game Trails*.

I remember during my first week as editor sitting in my office thinking of ways to improve the magazine when Amos walked in and quit. He wasn't working for the magazine per se, but he was a columnist and had been since the second or third issue of the magazine some 12 years before. I was distressed, because I had determined that his column, "Campfire Reflections," was one of the few elements of the magazine that was good consistently. It is worth mentioning that Amos was 80 years old at the time.

In a half hour, luckily, I had talked him into continuing the column. I felt we were off to a fine working relationship, and I believe he did, also, but that was before I edited his copy.

In our discussion that afternoon, Amos had let me know that he was a photographer and film maker first, and a writer second. He didn't invest a lot of pride in his writing ability, he said, even though he had written a dozen pieces for *National Geographic*.

He wouldn't mind, he implied, having his words edited, as long as it was accomplished with intelligence and sensitivity, two items I revealed almost immediately were absent from my kit.

"I planned my life backwards from most people. At 15, I retired. At 55, I took a regular job."

—Amos Burg



He had written a piece about the coming of spring, a joyous celebration of an article across which my editorial pen skipped lightly. The only part I rewrote was the ending: "The birds are always punctual to their time of season," which I thought awkward and changed by lopping off the last five words.

Amos, I have found since, really doesn't mind having his words edited. My blunder, my sin, was that those last words of the column were not his; they were Ralph Waldo Emerson's, Amos's favorite writer. He apparently figured I would recognize the line and connect

some of his musings about the seasons with Emerson's meditations.

He came to the office and spoke to me about it, not letting on that the words were actually Emerson's. He was either having fun with me or trying to save me from embarrassment.

I defended my editing on grounds of terseness and style and thought the issue ended until I received a letter two days later telling me whom I had edited and explaining that the ending is a very special part of a story, where the author ties things together, gives them meaning, and departs with grace and style. An editor, he offered, should seldom be so brutal as to change an ending.

I had to agree. Not only had I edited one of America's great authors, but I had offended the star of the magazine, for Amos's articles always drew more praise from readers than the rest of the magazine in total. By the time Amos arrived at the office to quit again, I could show him a galley proof shining with Emerson's exact words. He was mollified and decided to give me one more chance.

I must have done okay (what I did, in fact, was nothing to his endings) because a few months later I was invited to his house for Norwegian pancakes, the Saturday morning "Endeavour Breakfast Club," so named after Amos's sailboat, the *Endeavour*, which can still be seen in Juneau's Harris Harbor, though under new ownership. It was at these meetings I learned more about Amos and his adventures.

Amos Burg spent his boyhood in Oregon, where he wandered along the sloughs and lakes of the Columbia River, fishing and dreaming. Two days after graduating from grammar school, he left on his first sea voyage aboard the coastal steamer *Rose City* plying between Portland, San Francisco, and Los Angeles. But the West Coast was too small a world for this young wanderer, and he soon left to sail to Hawaii, then to Australia, where his plan was to raise ostriches. Homesickness overtook him, however, and he returned home. A month later he announced his intention

to sail around the world.

This voyage began aboard the old coal-burning S.S. *Katia*. Violent storms washed away her deck coal bunkers and damaged the steering gear, and the *Katia* limped into Dutch Harbor for repairs, Amos's first visit to Alaska. Later, off the Japanese coast, the young seaman steered the ship for eight hours in a typhoon. He completed the circumnavigation and another voyage, during which he was nearly washed overboard and survived a collision at sea.

In 1920, between ocean voyages, he began his canoe expeditions on the Snake and Columbia Rivers. In the years since, Amos voyaged on nearly every major western river. (An account of his river running adventures appeared in the January 1984 issue of this magazine.)

But by 1922 Amos began to get restless with his seaman's life. He wrote: "On these long sea voyages...shipboard is somewhat monotonous. No wonder the sailors threw away their hard-earned pay on booze and women when they reached a port. For me, port was a time to see the zoos and museums. Life at sea would have been a problem had I not discovered the encyclopedia. I had two trunks; one carried my clothes and personal items, the other 24 volumes of the *Britannica*."

Reading widened his horizons and expectations, and he grew dissatisfied with shipboard life. In 1923, he returned to school and in two years entered the University of Oregon, studying journalism and science. Here, Amos began to learn film making.

In 1928, Amos and former shipmate Fred Hill took a canoe down the Yukon River, filming the mighty crossing of a half million caribou and eventually turning the experience into an article for *National Geographic*, a film called *Alaska Wilds*, and later an illustrated lecture.

In 1930, he was accepted into the famous Explorer's Club, which allowed him to socialize with men like Stefansson, Byrd, and Beebe. "Most all the explorers had a powerful propulsion—glory," Burg noted.

The next year he found himself the photographer for an expedition led by Dr. William Beebe, the first man to descend 2,500 feet into the ocean in a bathysphere.

In 1932, Amos was back in Alaska filming—*Giants of the North*, a motion picture about brown bears on Admiralty Island with Al Hasselborg.

In 1934, the National Geographic Society sponsored Amos on an expedition around Cape Horn to photograph the world's most southerly peoples and to explore one of the stormiest regions of earth. He accomplished the adventure aboard his own 26-foot wooden sailing vessel.

The list goes on:

1936—Explores the coast of British Columbia and Alaska in his Cape Horn boat, *Dorjun*.

1937—Sails to England to cover the coronation of King George VI for *National Geographic*.

1938—Takes the first inflatable down the Colorado River while filming *Conquering the Colorado*.

1939—Descends the middle fork of the Salmon River. Shoots two films. Purchases the *Endeavour*.

1940—Visits Japan, Hong Kong, and Chungking, where he weathered 21 bombings by Japanese planes. On his return through Kobe, Japan, he is arrested as a spy, but released.

1941—Makes films in Alaska.

1942—Films in Western states.

1943—Works as secret agent of the U.S. in Argentina and Chile during World War II.

1944—Cameraman for *Encyclopaedia Britannica* films.

1946—Sails the *Endeavour* to Alaska.

1947-50—Makes a series of 30 films for *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.

1952—Serves as patrol officer aboard *Endeavour* supplying stream guards in Southeast Alaska.

1955—Sets up the Information and Education Section of the Alaska Department of Fisheries (later the Department of Fish and Game) in Juneau and works

there until he retires in 1974. During his tenure, he made 15 films on fish and game.

Now, across Gastineau Channel from downtown Juneau, this man of many adventures waits for the last and commonest adventure. The pale blue eyes that once beheld the splendid ancient ruins of Angkor Wat now squint across at a booming capital city. The arms that once guided canoes and rafts through the awe-inspiring rapids of many a river and steered the *Katia* through a typhoon in the North Pacific, now hold the crutches that guide him from bed to chair and back again. The legs that once carried him and his motion picture equipment to the far ends of the world are weaker and painful now, gripped by cancer.

Mementos, awards, and old photographs cover his walls like ivy. On every shelf, and under nearly every table, sits a tilting pile of books, letters, notes, and photographs. Amos rummages through them while telling a tale, and usually pulls out just the photo or paper he was looking for.

Amos remains as active as his body allows. He has been interviewed for a local TV production, is working with another author on an autobiographical book, and has been cataloging his films and photos and donating them to the Oregon Historical Society, which also supplies Alaska. But sadly, for the readers of this magazine, Amos has decided to discontinue his "Campfire Reflections." The magazine may seem empty now without his warm and wise words.

"*Though much is taken, much abides*"; says Tennyson's Ulysses, "*and though We are not now that strength which in old days Moved earth and heaven, that which we are, we are: One equal temper of heroic hearts Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.*"

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