

The Sinking of the U.S.S. Corntassel

by Will Noon

Ah, where to start. The tales are endless, the characters almost epic in their zest for life and never in all my years have I met two such people as these.

Bokie and Corntassel. The love for each other that these two displayed every day of their lives was a joy to watch if watching was what you could call it. It was more like being overrun by a quiet sort of avalanche rumbling down a mountain slope swallowing up everything in its path. The difference was that the avalanche covered everything over with genuine caring and warmth. Both Bokie and Corntassel had the ability to be entirely with whoever was there at the time. They weren't easily distracted with what had been or was to be. They lived in the now. What a refreshing thing it is to spend time with someone who is really there, completely there and paying attention.

To be with them was to laugh until your sides ached, and often to work until the sweat ran. When they worked they worked hard. When they played it was with the same intensity. Life was full of adventure wherever they were.

The adventures didn't really start or end. They just sort of moseyed along, never ending, always blossoming out in some unexpected place and in some way that had never been demonstrated before.

This particular balmy Alaskan summer day was a day just like so many others. Their eight or nine horses needed to be fed and watered. They needed handling on a regular basis if they were going to be fit partners for the olympian struggles to come in the Wrangell Mountains during the coming fall hunting season.

But King, the giant of the bunch, and several others who agreed in principle with him, all felt that the grass was most likely much greener on the other side of the Gulkana River. So they decided on a semi-regular basis that "over there" was the place to be.

The Gulkana is a beautiful river. It flows clear much of the time unless the up country to the north sends a shot of silty runoff water cascading down its channels from storms in the mountains. It is the home of arctic grayling and rainbow trout and some burbot pretty much all the time but during the summer months the realm is dominated by King Chinook. When the king salmon are in the river it belongs to them. Men drive hundreds of miles and spend countless hours paying tribute to them. And in the Gulkana that time can often be time profitably spent.

The salmon runs start into the Copper River mouth on the Gulf of Alaska hundreds of miles to the south in early May. Commercial fishermen start fishing for them at the mouth near Cordova probably about the first or second week in May. The salmon have to fight their way through a veritable gauntlet of nets, current, rapids, fishwheels and dipnets just to get to the mouth of the Gulkana. The Copper River is a big, cold, glacial river filled with silt all the

way up. But when the salmon turn into the Gulkana they encounter clear water flowing over a rock, gravel and sand bottom. The Gulkana holds the promise of spawning grounds ahead. The salmon are returning home to spawn and then die.

More than a few of the salmon arrive in the clear waters bearing scars from attacking seals, and other like predators. They often also carry the scars from other salmon fighting for their chance to keep their own bloodlines going.

The runs wax and wane until at least mid summer as do the fishermen that flock to the river in ever increasing hordes each year. In the 1960's it was mostly local fishermen with a few showing up from Fairbanks or from Los Anchorage as the locals referred to their oversized neighbor on down the Glenn Highway.

The country is fairly rough and hilly but it is truly the Copper River valley and the mountains that dominate the horizons are like distant giants on the near horizon, more like immediate neighbors. They are close enough to be awe inspiring but still far enough away to look as though some remote Shangri-La with its mysterious hidden treasures might lie just over the nearest peak.

This was the country Bokie and Corntassel had settled in. They came up the Alaska Highway in 1965 in their four wheel drive Ford stepside pickup pulling a small Airstream trailer. As I got to know them over the later years my guess is that putting even one additional item on that the truck and trailer would have required a shoehorn. The number of useful items that they unloaded from that pickup and trailer was substantial to say the least. It was a homestead minus the land.

They rarely met anyone in their travels who wasn't a friend already or in the process of becoming one. When they reached Gakona, Alaska, they met and befriended Cleo McMahan and his family. Cleo was a long time Alaskan pilot/guide and what he recognized immediately was people who would be good neighbors. So with the purchase of five acres from Cleo, the Sailors planted their roots at Gakona, Alaska.

Several years after settling at their homesite on the bluff, Bokie and Corntassel had the opportunity to get in on what proved to be the winding down of a tremendous homestead program that the State of Alaska offered in its better days. One offering in the State's program was called the T. and M. site. It stood for Trade and Manufacturing site. The program was inaugurated to promote small businesses. Bokie and Corntassel had run successful guide and outfitter businesses in Wyoming among many other enterprises, so this T. & M. site offer was a perfect way to acquire the land for a headquarters for their new Alaskan hunting and guiding operation to be.

By the summer of this tale, the eighty acres of their T. & M. had been partially cleared, planted in hay, and fenced in and a lodge, coral, and hay sheds had been erected. Some road building, garden planting and other like activities were also in the works. The property was promptly named the Seventy Six Ranch.

The land on the east side fronted on the Richardson Highway heading north towards Delta Junction and on to Fairbanks. The west side of the rectangular piece of land fronted the Gulkana River its entire length and because of a bend in the river one corner even extended

across the river a bit enclosing a triangular piece of an acre or two across the river.

This fenced T. & M. site was the prison from which King and his bunch fairly regularly staged escapes through the only unfenced border, the Gulkana river.

An early morning phone call from a neighbor who had spotted the mob across the river again started everything in motion. This wasn't the first escape. There wasn't too much trouble the horses could get into across the river. It was just miles and miles of unfenced wilderness. But there was a chance that they might recross the river somewhere else and end up out on the highway so they had to be recaptured as soon as possible for their safety as well as that of motorists.

Corntassel decided that in order to round up the escapees he and Bokie would hike down to the river, he would wade across and would drive the bunch back across to the proper side. Bokie would be in charge of keeping the crossing horses from escaping downriver on her side of the river.

The plan was a simple one. Kenny would wade across the river, track down the horses and drive them back across the river. It had been done before more than once.

Now the current was not raging but the water was a little higher than normal and roiled due to some rains upcountry a few days earlier. As a result it quickly became obvious to Corntassel that he wouldn't be wading, he would be swimming when he got into the main current. The prospect of swimming across the Gulkana wasn't an impossible thought to Corntassel. But knowing that he then would have to hike to find the horses, drive them back to the river, then take another swim in the cold, fast river just didn't hold much appeal.

So he decided that he and Bokie would pack his small two man rubber raft to the river, he would paddle it across, find the horses, and drive the bunch back across to the proper side. Bokie would stay on the east side of the river and watch to make sure the horses headed in the right direction once they came back across the river. So that was the plan.

But when Corntassel launched the raft he quickly found himself moving downstream much faster than he was moving across the stream. It was pretty obvious that by the time he got across he would have a considerable hike just to get himself and the raft back upstream to the point opposite where he had put in. Furthermore he would be dragging the ungainly raft through the willow brush all the way. So he quickly aborted the attempt and landed on the same bank from which he had launched only he was a ways downstream.

Hiking back with the raft he announced his new and better plan to Bokie.

"I will attach a line to the raft and tow it across, firmly anchoring it on some rocks or willow brush on the other bank while I track down and drive the horses back to the river. Once I get the horses started across the river I'll cast off and jump in the raft. You hold on to the line and as I drift out into the current you can be the anchor to swing my raft across to the same shore you are on. That way I won't end up way down river again."

Bokie thought that sounded like a fine plan that her ex-Marine partner had developed. Having been married many years the two had developed the finely tuned sense of

cooperation that only couples married for years can understand.

So the grand launching of the U.S.S. Corntassel commenced. Corntassel paddled furiously to get across the river dragging behind him the line that was firmly anchored to Bokie on the shore he had just left behind. As he paddled across he lost quite a bit of distance downstream because the river was up and faster than normal, but at least the hike was only a one way hike back up the river and he was still dry.

Bokie waited patiently on the bank watching for the first sign of the mob. Suddenly they burst out of the woods with Corntassel close behind driving them on. Without hesitation they entered the water and quickly crossed back to the home side. They didn't hesitate, but set out immediately up their usual trail, heading for the corral and the promise of some grain.

Corntassel quickly untied the raft from the anchoring willows and launched it into the river, jumping in quickly in order to stay dry. The current caught the tiny raft. Now you probably know that the name "two man" raft really means "just a little too small for one man". The line formed a large curving loop which was quickly tightening as the raft travelled downstream like a surfboard on the crest of a wave. When the raft and Corntassel hit the end of the loop, the line snapped out of the water with a crack, and the pull on Bokie was more than just considerable. But Bokie was up to the challenge.

When the line tightened completely the pull of the current against the rock solid anchor provided by Bokie caused the bow, if there is a bow on a two man raft, to dip under the water, quickly filling the raft with water. Corntassel shouted, "Let out some line!". What Bokie heard over the noise of the flow of the river and the scraping of her feet on the gravel bar as she dug in to hold on to the line, was "LINE" and her partner seemed to be taking on water somewhat. So Bokie began to haul line with all her might, one hand over the other.

Each pull turned the good ship U.S.S. Corntassel into the submarine U.S.S. Corntassel. Corntassel would sink completely out of sight on each pull and reappear between pulls sputtering, "Let out some line!" And of course the shore interpretation of the S.O.S. Message was "LINE". So Bokie pulled all the more furiously on the line, bending all her strength to the saving of the good ship U.S.S. Corntassel and its precious cargo.

Well, for the several minutes it took for the swift current to finally swing the raft through the fastest current and into the eddy on the near shore, the raft and it's captain were for the most part submerged. Once out of the fastest current the raft finally bobbed back to the surface to stay having been "saved from disaster" by the efforts of Corntassel's shore party.

Corntassel staggered out of the raft sputtering, cowboy hat soaked and drooping over his ears. With water running out of his boots, his Levis and western shirt drenched, he dragged the raft onto shore. He emptied it, let the air out of it and folded it up for the trip back up to the corral.

Nothing had to be said. Remember, as we said before, only those who had been married for as long as Corntassel and Bokie could have that "finely tuned sense of cooperation" that time alone can build. There was complete understanding of what had just occurred. Bokie had clearly saved Corntassel from an untimely demise in the swift currents of the Gulkana River.

So ended another typical day on the Seventy Six Ranch at Gakona, Alaska. The only thing new was that Corntassel started the day as a Marine and ended the day as a Submarine.

