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RALPH WAHL: I’m down at the Washington Fly Fishing Club meeting here, today. This is two days after the big explosion when Mount St. Helens blew up. We’ve got Steve Raymond here who was caught over fishing – where?

STEVE RAYMOND: Dry Falls Lake.

WAHL: Well, tell us about it, Steve, about your experience.

RAYMOND: Well, we were sitting around the camp stove early in the morning brewing some coffee, and we heard the sound of what sounded like distant thunder. Then there was a whole series of rolling booms, followed finally by a very sharp clap that had an obvious shock wave with it. We could even see the sagebrush vibrate from the shock wave hitting it. We had no idea what it was. I thought perhaps it was an atmospheric quirk that brought the sound of firing from the Yakima Artillery Range. My children were with me, and they asked what it was. I jokingly said, “Maybe Mount St. Helens blew up.” They sort of laughed, the sound went away, and we forgot about it. I went fishing. It was shortly after 8:30 in the morning when we heard it, and I went fishing about 9, I guess, and fished till around 11:30 or maybe twenty minutes to 12.

The fishing was pretty good, and I’d been casting in the direction of the wind and had my back to the south. About a quarter to 12, I happened to glance over my shoulder, and here was this huge, dark cloud rolling in. I said, “Oops!” It looked just exactly like an ominous thunderstorm, and I’ve been caught in some bad ones over there, so I thought maybe I’d better quit fishing for a while and go in and have some lunch and wait for it to pass over and go out and fish again in the afternoon. I stayed out fishing for another ten or fifteen minutes, and the wind seemed to be picking up a little bit, so I headed in and just about everyone else on the lake was doing likewise. By the time I got back, there were several other boats pulling into the access, so I pulled mine out of the way and went and sat down and had a sandwich and watched this cloud rolling in. It occupied nearly half the sky. It was very, very dark, but strangely enough the wind had calmed down again and the lake seemed calm.

[I was] just waiting for the storm to break. Other people were loading up their boats and moving out. After a bit, I walked up the road, climbed up to the top of a hill where I could look down in

the coulee and see how far this cloud extended. It extended as far as I could see. It was very, very black. I began to think that the storm, when it came, would be a pretty big one and would last quite a long while and maybe there wasn't much sense in staying around after all. So I told the family to pack things up, and we put things in the back of the truck, and I got the boat on top.

By that time, there was only one other fisherman left in the access area besides ourselves, and it was getting very, very dark. I started the truck and turned on the headlights, and I was surprised at how much light the headlights gave. I hadn't realized it was quite that dark. We started up the road past the other fisherman who was loading things up, and he said, "Boy, I've never seen anything like this before," and I had to admit that I hadn't either. We were both feeling a little anxious, I think. We started up the hill from the lake, and it kept getting darker and darker. Finally I turned on the high beams from my truck, and even they were having a difficult time making much of a show in the blackness. We got maybe a mile from the lake, and I noticed something coming down on the windshield, which I thought was probably rain. I turned on the windshield wipers, and I could see it wasn't water. It was something solid and something dry.

It was the most peculiar feeling; it was one o'clock in the afternoon by then, and it was absolutely pitch dark. You could scarcely see even with the headlights on, and here was something dry falling out of the sky on us. The only thing I could think of that it might have been was that Mount St. Helens really had blown up, or maybe the Russians had finally come over and dropped the big one. My wife thought maybe something had happened at Hanford. Anyway, we turned on the radio. There was a lot of lightning in the air, and it was hard to get any reception down in the coulee. We finally got this station in Moses Lake where the disc jockey was almost in panic, saying, "Mount St. Helens has exploded! There is ash falling everywhere! All roads in the area are closed! If you're in a car, pull over and stop!" I thought that was probably the last thing I wanted to do. If Mount St. Helens had exploded, I just wanted to get out of there.

The ash was getting thick, and we could smell it. It was hard to breathe, and I didn't know how much harder it might get to breathe. So we just kept on going and drove out of Sun Lakes State Park up onto Highway 17. Far off toward the west, I could see a little glimmer of light under the blackness, just like light peeking under a curtain. I decided to try to head in that direction. So we drove up to Highway 2 where it intersects with 17 and turned west on Highway 2 toward Wenatchee and just kept going. After, oh, maybe twenty or twenty-five miles, it began to get a little bit light and it got steadily lighter. We could see the ash a lot more plainly, and it was gray in color and it was swirling around on the roadway like new-fallen powder snow, coating all of the plowed fields along the road and all of the houses. There aren't many houses over there, but those that were there were coated.

As we drove toward Wenatchee, it kept getting lighter and lighter, but when we got right down to the Columbia River and crossed into Wenatchee itself, it seemed to be especially heavy there. It was growing dark again, and the ash was very thick and dusty and swirling around. I was afraid the truck might balk on me because it was inhaling so much of that ash, but rather than stop, I just kept going. I drove straight over Stevens Pass without stopping and went directly to my office at the Seattle Times, and I've been there practically the whole time since, working on this story.

It was quite an experience, and I think anyone who wasn't actually there to see the size of that cloud or to see the eruption itself can't possibly imagine the magnitude of a thing like that. It's just so awesome that it makes you feel very, very small and humble and afraid to see a vast, unexplained blackness like that coming over the whole land. It's something I'm sure we'll always remember, something I hope I can tell my grandchildren about someday.

WAHL: Well, Steve, how much ash was actually at Dry Falls?

RAYMOND: Well, by the time we had left, it was just starting to fall, so there was no accumulation there at that time. By the time we got close to Wenatchee, I would say that, where we were, there may have been as much as half an inch on the ground. But it came down slowly; it was almost like a mist. It wasn't falling hard and fast; it was just sort of drifting down. I think it probably took an hour or more for any kind of an accumulation to build up.

WAHL: Would it be your guess that it's going to make it difficult to fish there in the future?

RAYMOND: Well, I really don't know, not knowing exactly how much ash they got over there, but I would say unless it's strongly acidic, it shouldn't affect the lake too much unless there was enough of it to cover the plants, in which case there could be a serious problem there. But I would think it'll probably be some time before we know that.

WAHL: What do you think about the proposed outing on Chopaka this weekend? Do you think that that's still in the path of the storm?

RAYMOND: I don't think it's a good idea. I wouldn't want to go over there now, I can tell you that.

WAHL: I have an idea that they may postpone it. That would be my guess. Thanks, Steve, for giving this first-hand interview. Do you know of anyone else who was over there so we can get more reports here?

RAYMOND: Lyn Gross was there from the Fly Club. I don't know whether he made it back. He left before I did, and I haven't seen or heard from him since. I hope he's all right. I might say this: I've had lots of fishing trips washed out by floods or violent storms or even snow or equipment failures or injury or sickness, but I never thought I'd have one cut short by a volcanic eruption.

WAHL: Well, that's a once-in-a-lifetime deal. At least let's hope so. Thanks, Steve.