

# Memorial to William Osgood Field 1904–1994

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*Gustavus, Alaska*

In 1926, the face of Muir Glacier was just north of what is today known as Goose Cove, and alders were beginning to creep around John Muir's cabin at Muir Point. It was in this year that a young adventurer named Bill Field made his first visit to Glacier Bay and fell in love with this raw, dynamic landscape. Later, reflecting on his visit, reading the works of Muir and other early visitors, and discussing the bay with William S. Cooper and Harry Fielding Reid, Bill soon realized the immensity of Glacier Bay's potential as an exemplar of glacial processes and therefore as a window into the Ice Age past of North America.

Bill Field's relationship to Glacier Bay became a testament to the value of clarity and consistency of purpose. His genius, and enduring gift to the future, was to become convinced that Glacier Bay's utility as a natural laboratory fundamentally depended on knowledge of the extent of glacial ice over time, and then to resolutely act upon this conviction throughout a long lifetime. For almost 70 years he was the prime repository of information on glacial extent along the bay, making many trips from his East Coast home at his own expense to gather the information firsthand. When advancing age prevented his return to the bay to personally reoccupy his photo stations, he relied on others to do so and turned his attention to archiving his voluminous photo collection, which he donated to the University of Alaska shortly before his death.

Bill was a fundamentally modest man. He actively avoided the limelight and seldom joined the company of leading scientists of the day. To give a lecture or deliver a paper was an ordeal that he was seldom willing to undergo. Such works as he committed to paper were carefully restricted to what he had seen and could vouch for; he left theory to those he considered better suited for its pursuit. It proved to be fortunate that Bill was not a highly trained scientist. Otherwise, he would have become too captivated by theoretical questions to devote the effort he did in pursuit of so simple a goal—recording the extent of glaciation through time.

As much as I am grateful to Bill for his professional contribution, my major joy in remembering him comes from reflections on Bill Field the man. To be near Bill was to feel the power and beauty of his sense of place, acted upon in the context of profound respect. He was not one to wear his personal feelings on his sleeve, or to bare his soul in an evening's conversation. You had to read the depth of his soul in his clear, gentle eyes, and in the courtesy and dignity with which he carried out each personal transaction. Seated with Bill in the *Nunatak's* galley, or looking out with him across the landscape from one of his beloved survey stations, you knew instinctively that you were in the presence of a great gentleman. His passing leaves a hole no one of us can fill. But as I think Bill would say with a small smile, "The glaciers are still there."

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