

The Legacy of WM. O. Field in Glacier Bay

C Suzanne Brown¹

Introduction

William O. Field (fig. 1) was a gentle giant in the history of science in Glacier Bay. He is recognized as the father of modern-day glaciology in North America; he was there at the beginning in the 1920s and he was glaciology's premier archivist into the 1990s. In his 68-year career he assembled a comprehensive collection of maps, books, films, photographs and field notes relating to the glaciers of Alaska. He also was a living link to the past, to the pioneer scientists and explorers and their early work in glaciology in the 1890s and early 1900s, people such as Harry Fielding Reid who first visited Glacier Bay in 1890 and Lawrence Martin, co-author of the well known *Alaskan Glacier Studies* (Tarr & Martin 1914). This tribute describes how he came to know these people, how he became interested in glaciers, and in particular his relationship to Glacier Bay, his ties to its past and his connection to its future.

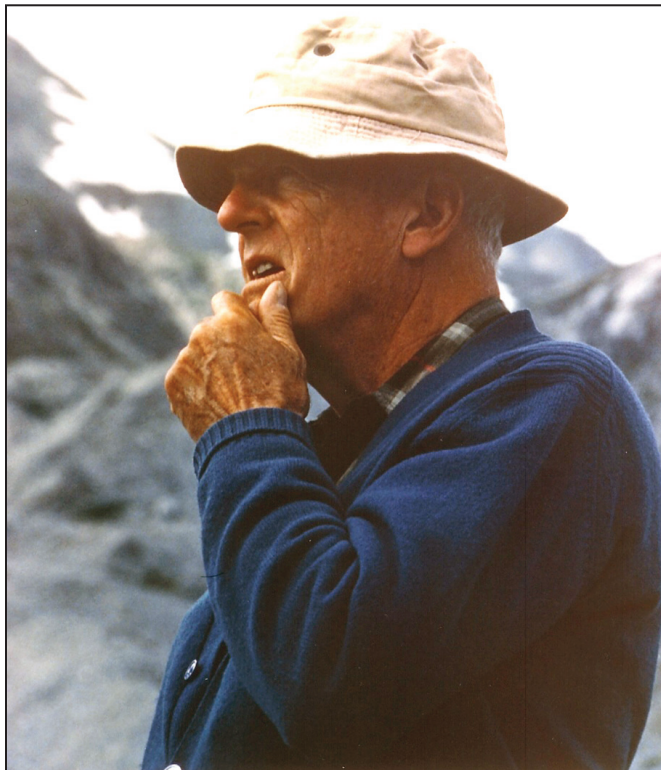


Figure 1. William O. Field, 1976. (WOF, personal collection, no number).

Setting the Stage

Bill was an accomplished mountaineer, filmmaker, and natural scientist; he loved to travel, and most of all he was keenly interested in *documenting change with a camera*. He first traveled to the Canadian Rockies in 1920, 21 & 22 when pack trains were the mode of transportation. During the '22 trip he visited the Columbia Icefield and photographed the terminus of the Saskatchewan and the Athabaska glaciers. These are the first ever pictures of glacier termini that Bill took, and those trips to the Canadian Rockies were the beginning of a conscious effort by Bill to photograph glaciers from a known position. He returned to the Canadian Rockies in 1924 and made the first ascent of South Twin, the highest unclimbed peak in the Canadian Rockies, and the third ascent of Mount Columbia.

Bill made his first trip to Alaska in 1925 while a geology major in college. He saw Childs and Miles glaciers near Cordova, Valdez Glacier, and a close-up view of Columbia Glacier in Prince William Sound, among others. He returned to college more interested in glaciers than ever. In the college library, he located Reid's report (Reid 1896) of his 1890 and '92 expeditions to Glacier Bay, Gilbert's *Glaciers and Glaciation*, (Gilbert 1904) and Tarr and Martin's classic *Alaskan Glacier Studies* and realized that he might be able to carry on their work. When he met these people later, they were so enthusiastic about somebody continuing their observations and "their encouragement greatly influenced me to keep going back for the next sixty years" (Field 2004).

First trip to Glacier Bay

Bill's first scientific trip to Glacier Bay was in 1926 at age 22. He visited 11 glaciers in Glacier Bay as well as those in Taku Inlet and Lituya Bay and took photos from stations he established at the glacier termini as well as from stations established by earlier people (figs. 2 and 3). One special objective of the trip was to visit Johns Hopkins Glacier; it last had been photographed in 1912. Since that time, no one had reported on the terminus position because extremely heavy floating ice filled the whole lower inlet. When he also found ice blocking the inlet, he climbed the ridge at the entrance of the fiord and saw the glacier 6-7 miles further up the inlet from where it was seen in 1912. The retreat was the most spectacular find that year.

¹3810-180th Street East, Tacoma, WA 98446.
SusieB5000@gmail.com, 253-847-2507.

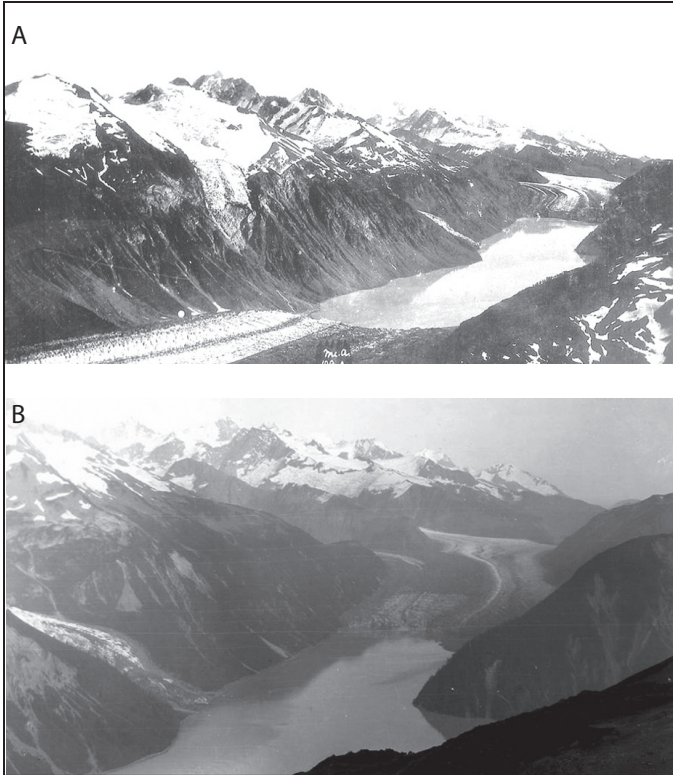


Figure 2. View to head of Lituya Bay from Sta. McArthur a. 1894 showing Lituya (L), Cascade (center), N. Crillon (R) glaciers (J.J. McArthur, 109A) and b. 1926, Cascade and N. Crillon glaciers (W.O.Field, F-26-325).



Figure 3. Rowing to the glaciers in Percy Pond’s canoe, 1926 in Taku Inlet. Ben Wood (bow), Bill (middle), Rocky Bonsal (stern). (Postcard from photo by P. Pond from the WOF Collection).

Another significant find was the position of the Muir Glacier terminus. After rowing the 10 miles from their base camp at Muir Point to the terminus, he and Ben Wood set up camp at Goose Cove. That night a wave turned over the boat and the next morning they found the boat but the oars were gone. They stayed to finish their work, occupying 5 stations and making a survey of the terminus, and then rowed the 10 miles back down the inlet using floor boards from their boat as paddles. While waiting at Muir Point for their vessel to pick them up, they found a sign "To and from the glacier". This was from the 1880s and 90s when steamships brought tourists to the Muir Glacier, who then were guided to the ice by a boardwalk. They left the sign and later, when Bill found out his mother and grandparents had been on that Muir Glacier boardwalk in 1897, he wished that they had given it to a museum.

Upon his return home, he reported the terminus positions to Lawrence Martin, chief of the Division of Maps at the Library of Congress. On the basis of Bill’s report Martin had changes made in the International Boundary Commission map—which was in the final stages of completion—to indicate the extension of the inlets at both Johns Hopkins and Muir. Martin then introduced Bill to H.F. Reid and both gentlemen remained Bill’s friend and mentors until their deaths.

The Beginning of Bill’s Legacy

The 1926 trip to Glacier Bay was followed by a trip to Prince William Sound in 1931, where he again established photo stations as well as reoccupied those stations established by earlier explorers. Bill’s extensive collection of Alaska glacier photographs taken by other people was begun after that trip. Upon his return to New York, he discovered there was no central collection of glacier photographs taken by people on earlier expeditions. He recognized the need to assemble in one place as many of these photographs as possible for his projects as well as “for the general interests of glaciologists in this country” (Field 2004). He began this project in 1932 and kept adding to it, including his own photographs, survey notes, research reports, and maps until his death in 1994. The collection is now housed in the archives in the Rasmussen Library, University of Alaska Fairbanks. In 1935 Bill returned to both Glacier Bay and Prince William Sound in order to repeat what he had done. This marked the beginning of careful, systematic monitoring of glaciers in coastal Alaska and the link between the scholarly past and future was established.

In 1941 he returned to map the lower end of Muir Inlet (fig. 4), something he had wanted to do since 1926. He visited many of the other glaciers, including Hugh Miller (fig. 5). Bill returned to Glacier Bay twelve more times, with his last trip in 1983. His son John and the author reoccupied photo station in Glacier Bay for him in 1989, 1993, a trip in his memory in 1997, and a special millennium trip in 2000, which included a trip to Field Glacier, recently named in his honor (fig. 6), located on the Juneau Icefield.

There are but few who can claim a personal relationship with the pioneers in their field. Bill knew these people, what they did and how they did it and this enabled him to learn from them and to continue in their footsteps for 68 years. The collection he has left as a resource for researchers is his connection with the future, providing them with a record of glacier fluctuations in Glacier Bay spanning over 100 years, on which to base their research in Glacier Bay today and tomorrow.

References Cited

Field, W.O. 2004. With a camera in my hands – a life history as told to C Suzanne Brown. University of Alaska Press, Fairbanks.

Gilbert, G.K. 1904. Glaciers and glaciation. Vol 3 of Harriman Alaska Expedition, C. Hart Merriam, ed. Doubleday, Page and Company, New York.

Reid, H.F. 1896. Glacier Bay and its glaciers. Pages 321-461 in: C.D. Walcott, ed. U.S. Geological Survey 16th Annual Report, 1894-95, part 1. Washington, D.C.

Tarr, R.S. and L. Martin. 1914. Alaskan Glacier Studies. National Geographic Society, Washington, D.C.

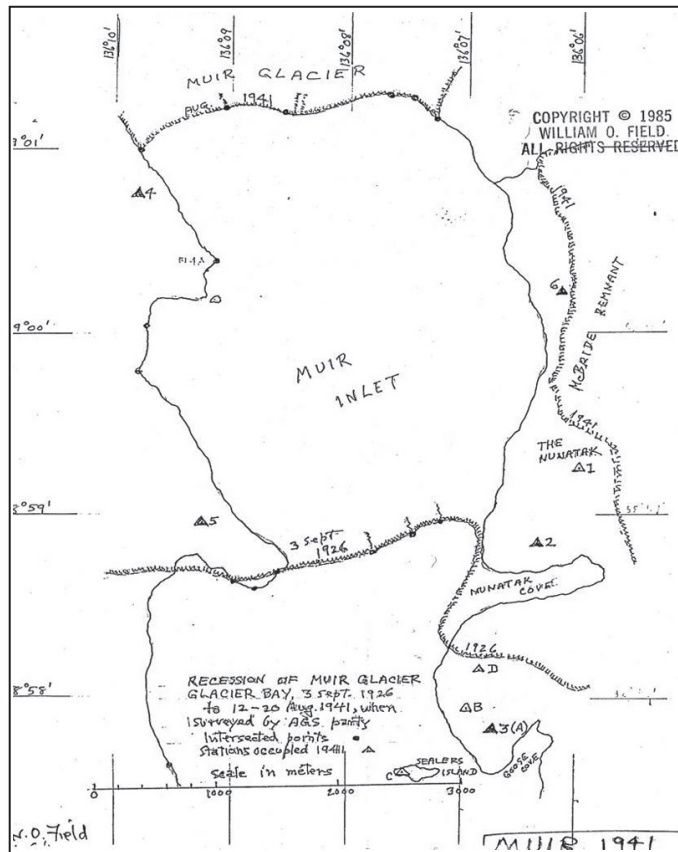


Figure 4. Bill's sketch map of the recession of Muir Glacier between his visit in 1926 and his return in 1941, and the location of the stations he occupied (from the WOF Collection).



Figure 5. Hugh Miller Glacier from Sta. A a. 1926 (W.O. Field, F-26-180,181) and b. 1941 (W.O. Field F-41-462,463).



Figure 6. Field Glacier on the western side of the Juneau Icefield, Coast Mountains, southeast Alaska (Austin Post, U.S. Geological Survey, September 12, 1986).

Suggested Citation

Brown, C.S., 2007, The Legacy of WM. O. Field in Glacier Bay, in Piatt, J.F., and Gende, S.M., eds., Proceedings of the Fourth Glacier Bay Science Symposium, October 26–28, 2004: U.S. Geological Survey Scientific Investigations Report 2007-5047, p. 241-244.