

Excerpt from *The Opening of New Landscape, Chapter 3*

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[W.Tad Pfeffer's book about the retreat of Columbia Glacier, AK]

Austin Post

Born in 1922 in Chelan, Washington, on the eastern slope of the Cascade Mountains, Austin Post's early life followed an unusual course for a scientist. His formal education was brief, but that limitation was more than compensated for by intuition and keen observational powers. In 2004, when Post was awarded an Honorary Ph.D. by the University of Alaska, he was described as the 'preeminent self-made scholar' investigating Alaskan glaciers – a fitting description considering his highly intuitive and integrative approach to glaciology, and especially given his role in the investigation of the Alaskan tidewater glaciers. Post's first introduction to glaciers was in 1953, when he spent the summer surveying at the Juneau Icefields Research Project (JIRP), founded several years previously by Bill Field and the geographer and mountaineer Maynard Miller. Among the people Post met at JIRP that summer was Dick Hubley, the program's glaciologist and an emerging American leader in micrometeorology and glacier energy balance. Post's surveying that summer was cut short by a bout of pneumonia, but remained in close contact with Hubley. A few years later, Hubley was involved in planning glaciological activities for the 1957–58 International Geophysical Year (activities made possible by the advocacy of Bill Field), and knowing of Post's interests and abilities, Hubley put him to work mapping a small set of nine "index" glaciers chosen as regional representatives in a mass balance study that extended from California to Alaska's Brook's Range.

One of Post's ambitions, inspired by the work of mountaineer, mapmaker, and photographer Bradford Washburn, was to take aerial photographs of glaciers. Post had picked up the necessary camera equipment (much of it available in the 1950s at very low cost from military surplus sources), but the actual operation of the cameras as well as flight time for aerial photography was too expensive to pursue independently. Photographs Post made at the Muldrow Glacier following a surge in 1957 helped to establish his early reputation as an aerial photographer, and led to his first major project in 1960, operated through the University of Washington, in Seattle. Professor Phillip Church, the founder of the University's Department of Meteorology and Climatology and a leading authority on arctic meteorology, had received National Science Foundation funding to study a large number of glaciers in the western US and Alaska for comparison with the nine IGY "index" glaciers. The large region of coverage was well-suited to aerial photography, and Post was occupied with that project up through 1963, shortly before his next big opportunity, investigating the consequences of the Alaskan Good Friday Earthquake of March 27, 1964.

Meier's USGS Program Office in Glaciology had been operating for seven years at the time of the Good Friday Earthquake, conducting research aimed at understanding causes of glacier variations, both external (i.e. mass balance variations) and internal (i.e. ice dynamics). The earthquake provided a perfect test of the old Tarr and Martin "Earthquake Advance Theory," an idea which no longer had much credibility but which had yet to be definitively refuted. Meier seized the opportunity to make this test using quick and comprehensive observations, and together with Post planned a flight to photograph those glaciers in the regions most affected by the earthquake. While the resulting photographs showed that tremendous landslide deposits covered many of the glaciers, no evidence of changes in glacier flow caused by the earthquake could be seen, and the Earthquake Advance Theory was finally retired. The program of aerial photography was a great success and earned Post a permanent position in the Project Office in Glaciology.