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Shane McConkey on
McConkey's (formerly
Eagle's Nest), Squaw
Valley, California.
PHOTO: HECKI FLAGG

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Shane McConkey

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of the new school?



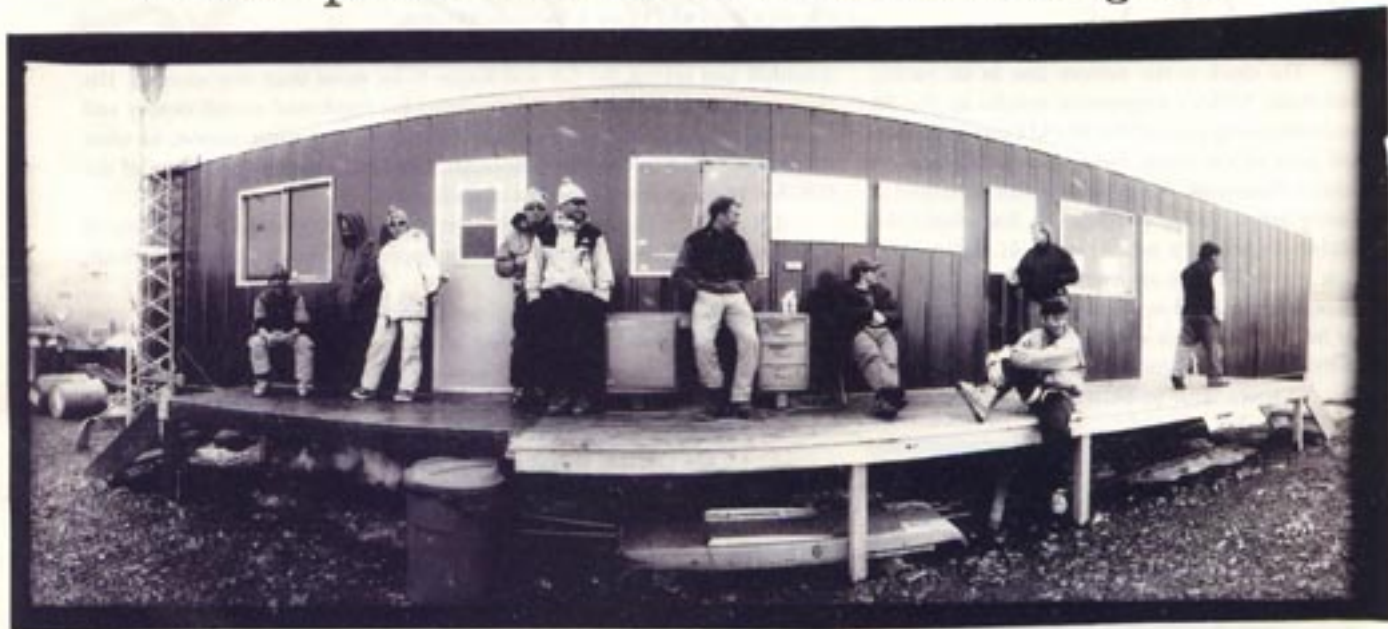


Down and Out in

Valdez, ALASKA

by Steve and Todd Jones
photos by Keoki Flagg

The weather days provide
the steepest mental terrain in the Chugach



Skiing in Valdez, Alaska, is completely and totally weather-dependent. There are no trees to provide definition, and the helicopters can't fly without clear weather. Anyone who's been there knows that timing and patience are the name of the game. Week-long dream trips to the Chugach have sent people home without having made a single turn. Like surfing Hawaii's North Shore, people who venture up to the big state wait out long stints of weather, hoping for the perfect day in some of the wildest ski terrain in the world.

The down time will eat you alive. Day after day, you deal with the 6 a.m. wake-up calls, and then you go through the motions, pack your gear, load the rig, grab coffee, and drive. From the town of Valdez to the top of Thompson Pass, where the helicopters are waiting, is a 30- to 40-minute drive. Leaving town in the morning, the cloud level hovers around a hundred feet. The word from up the road is that it could be breaking. Of course, you've heard the report a thousand times before, only to drive up the road and stare at white nothingness in all directions. Yet the anticipation and

drink more whiskey; it has a warming effect and calms you for the time being. Another shot, another day, one more chance to be a hero.

After a while, Valdez just keeps getting grayer and grayer, all color being sucked into the lingering clouds that hang above. Boredom and homesickness set in. You drink more whiskey; it has a warming effect and calms you for the time being. Another shot, another day, one more chance to be a hero.

It's strange, but killing time or doing nothing actually becomes a dutiful endeavor in and of itself. On the surface, you relax on weather days, but this is a high-stakes poker game and nature is the dealer. The truly afflicted have resilience and will wait endlessly for more flyable days without once flinching. But for most, the temptation to pull the cord is



strong. Everyone's still alive, and it's sunny and warm back home. With one short drive to the airport, the season can be over. People crack on a daily basis, peddling their heli chips for half price and fleeing to Anchorage for a flight back to civilization.

But when the weather starts to blow out on Thompson Pass, the energy shifts. It's the same nervous anticipation of a swollen concert mob as the band takes the stage and strikes a few preemptory notes before laying into a mad set of music. The clouds break; the gray disappears. You're suddenly back in the kingdom of the ski gods. No matter how long you've been down, you convince yourself you're ready. "We'll just go up and take a look around, surf the holes in the clouds, window-shop." You develop a





unwillingness to miss the smallest opportunity keeps you alert and ready to go at all times.

"If I get a day in tomorrow, I can handle another seven down," said Kent Kreitler to no one in particular. Such rationalization is a method of reassurance used by many of the long-time heli junkies who squat in Valdez every spring. It often comes out in the deeper end of a string of down days. Even though you're on the verge of ripcording, if you can just get one fly day in, you'll be re-hooked, re-amped, and recharged to sit out another seven if need be. The number of endurable days you get out of one fly day depends on how much down time you've had that season. Seven down days for



every ski day may turn into three later in the year or 10 if you're fresh. Amazingly, the quality of that one ski day is usually not an issue, as skiing in the Chugach is typically sick.

Occasionally, down time can be welcomed. After a five- or six-day stint of blue skies and endless hours of skiing, it can keep you in the game and give you a much-needed rest. You walk the docks and streets, surf the bars, and think. You anticipate the clearing—where to go, who with, and what insanity will ensue. You drink whiskey.

After a while, Valdez just keeps getting grayer and grayer, all color being sucked into the lingering clouds that hang above. Boredom and homesickness set in. You



plan: Go out and step it up slowly, warm up, and progress into the terrain. Something tells you that these thoughts are comforting nonsense, because shit could hit the fan on the first run. You must be at peak awareness, using all your judgment and intuition to evaluate terrain and keep you out of trouble. You look around, survey your team, run through people's strengths and weaknesses in your head. These people are your life support. Going out after a long storm is like being on patrol at a resort and preparing to bomb. The difference is that your resort is a hundred times bigger, and you don't have any bombs.

But when the weather starts to blow out on Thompson Pass, the energy shifts. It's the same nervous anticipation of a swollen concert mob as the band takes the stage and strikes a few preemptory notes before laying into a mad set of music.



You load the helicopter and lift off. Every second in the air is valuable. You must look for signs of wind, avalanche activity, and any indicators of the events that took place in the world of gray that lingered above you for so long. The kingdom presents itself. Temptation lurks around every peak. You look for a good place to start—somewhere safe. Islands of safety and runouts dominate your thoughts. You choose a small peak, somewhere with a view so you can search deeper. You send the heli in and point out the landing zone. The ship pulls in and drops you off. The noise gets louder and louder as the heli powers up and pulls out. Silence takes over. You breathe a deep sigh of relief and soak in the world around you. You rejoice with your friends. You have fought the battle and won. You have endured another stint of down time. ©