

Land, Sea, Air / Dog Mushing

The Iditarod Trail

By Tricia Brown

In 1908, hopeful miners throughout Alaska and the Yukon flooded the Iditarod region following the discovery of gold on Otter Creek. Within a year the main camp in the gold fields developed at Flat. A second discovery attracted a new wave of arrivals and resulted in the birth of boomtown Iditarod, complete with hotels and restaurants, newspapers, a bank, and brothels. In the town's prime, automobiles motored along the streets and a well-appointed courthouse handled legal matters of the district.

In summer months, many people and supplies came in on steamers and barges via the Yukon, Innoko, and Iditarod Rivers. Overland, a network of trails crisscrossed the backcountry, linking Flat, Discovery, Otter, Dikeman, and Willow Creek with outlying villages. On the main Iditarod Trail and other connecting trails, one could travel all the way to Nome or southeast to the port of Seward. The nine hundred miles between Seward and Nome were mapped as early as 1908. Freight, mail—and gold—moved through the country via dogsled team.

Traveling the Iditarod was no easy ride, but it was a worthwhile journey, said C. K. Snow, a member of the territory's House of Representatives from 1915-1918. Hailing from Ruby, Snow represented the voters of the 4th District. On February 15, 1919, standing at one end of the trail in Seward, Snow offered this perspective: "If you love the grandeur of nature—its canyons, its mountains and its mightiness, and love to feel the thrill of their presence—then take the trip by all means; you will not be disappointed. But if you wish to travel on 'flowery beds of ease' and wish to snooze and dream that you are a special product of higher civilization too finely adjusted for this more strenuous life, then don't. But may God pity you, for you will lose one this worth living for if you have the opportunity to make this trip and fail to do so."

Around Iditarod, the easiest gold was gone by 1930, and with the decline, miners, bankers, and businesspeople moved on to other locales. Some buildings were moved to

Flat; others decayed with time. Iditarod was a ghost town when Anchorage was still young. Airplanes had replaced dog teams for carrying mail and freight. In many villages, snowmobiles began taking the place of dog teams for hauling people, water, and wood. The Iditarod Trail saw less use.

In 1967, as Alaska was celebrating the 100th anniversary of the U.S. purchase from Russia, the old Iditarod Trail came to light again. A Wasilla woman named Dorothy Page promoted the idea of cleaning up a portion of the disused trail and staging a two-day race of twenty-five miles a day. Knik homesteader Joe Redington, Sr., and other local mushers and pioneers helped with fundraising and brushing out the trail. Six years later, Page threw her support behind Redington when he had a notion to revive the race idea, but extend it all the way to Nome. Page, who died in 1989, is remembered as the “Mother of the Iditarod” for her work on that precursor to the famous long-distance race of today.

Redington had mushed dogs for the U.S. Army in search, rescue, and recovery operations and was saddened at the changes he’d witnessed in Bush Alaska, seeing more snowmachines and fewer dog teams. A portion of the Iditarod Trail passed near his homestead, and he had personally kept it brushed out to run his dogs. He’d also seen the enthusiastic response to the Centennial Race in 1967. So in 1972 and early 1973, Redington stumped for the idea of a longer sled dog race to demonstrate the superiority of Alaska sled dogs.

Although Redington had first proposed a five-hundred-mile race to the ghost town of Iditarod, musher Dick Mackey upped the ante and suggested they go all the way to Nome, more than a thousand miles. Decades later, Mackey remembered the scene at the first starting line in 1973:

“Half the family was there,” he said, “but the mothers and daughters and so forth were all crying. It was tough on them because they thought they’re never going to see you again . . . you’re going off in the middle of nowhere. And I suspect a great many of us wondered if, in fact, we would make it.”

They did make it, even though the last musher crossed the finish line thirty-two days after leaving Anchorage. The Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race has been staged every year since then, attracting teams from all over the world, and Redington is remembered as the “Father of the Iditarod.”

In 1977, recognizing the historical importance of the route in the territory’s development, Alaska’s U.S. Senator Mike Gravel proposed naming the Iditarod as the nation’s first “Historic Trail.” A year later, President James Carter signed the National Historic Trail Bill. The Iditarod’s designation was followed by other trails with great historic significance: Oregon, Mormon, Pioneer, Lewis & Clark, Over Mountain, Victory, Nez Perce, Santa Fe, Trail of Tears, Juan Bautista, and the Pony Express.

Upkeep of the Iditarod National Historic Trail is complicated because, from Seward to Nome, it crosses lands that are private and Native-owned, or public lands that are managed by various agencies. The Bureau of Land Management now administers the 2,200 miles of winter trails affiliated with the National Historic Trail. Through the nonprofit organization, Iditarod National Historic Trail, Inc., various “Trail Blazer” clubs in trail communities count on volunteer laborers and federal grant funding to help keep their portion of trail open and well-marked.

In the modern Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race, the ghost town of Iditarod is a halfway checkpoint stop for mushers following the southern route, which is run during odd-numbered years. Little evidence of a bustling gold-rush town remains. There are no buildings to house volunteers or welcome the mushers, so they operate out of tents erected solely for the race.

The name Iditarod, a long-dead town on a remote Alaskan river, has achieved international fame thanks to mushers who, like territorial Rep. C. K. Snow, do not wish to travel on “flowery beds of ease.”

LINKS:

Iditarod National Historic Trail, Bureau of Land Management:

<http://www.blm.gov/ak/iditarod>

Official Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race website:

<http://www.iditarod.com/>

Celebrate Alaska's Gold Rushes, BLM:

<http://www.blm.gov/ak/ak930/akgold.html>

Iditarod National Historic Trail, Inc.:

<http://www.iditarodnationalhistorictrail.org/>

VISIT THE LIBRARY FOR MORE INFORMATION:

Alaska's libraries hold audio, visual, and written material about the Iditarod National Historic Trail, the gold rush town of Iditarod, and the Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race. Visit your local library or go online to see what's available in holdings all over the state. Take these simple steps:

1. Access **SLED** (State Library Electronic Doorway) at <http://sled.alaska.edu/library.html>.
2. Click on the listing for **ALNCat** (the Alaska Library Network Catalog) to view the Basic Search window. Go to the Keyword field, and type in **IDITAROD TRAIL, IDITAROD GOLD, or ALASKA DOG MUSHING.**

MORE READING:

Brown, Tricia, ed. *The Iditarod Fact Book*, 2nd edition. Kenmore, WA: Epicenter Press, 2006.

Brown, Tricia and Jeff Schultz. *Iditarod Country: Exploring the Route of the Last Great Race*. Kenmore, WA: Epicenter Press, 1998.

Cadwallader, Charles Lee. *Reminiscences of the Iditarod Trail: Placer Mining Days in Alaska. 1900-1984?*

Carter, Marilyn and Joe Redington. *Iditarod Trail: The Old & the New*. Palmer, Alaska: Aladdin Publishing, 1990.

Curtis, Allan. "Iditarod's Newspapers: Optimist, Nugget, Pioneer." *The Alaska Journal*, Vol. 6, No.2, Spring 1976, pp. 78-83.

Freedman, Lew. *Father of the Iditarod: The Joe Redington Story*. Kenmore, WA: Epicenter Press, 1999.

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Iditarod National Historic Trail. Anchorage, Alaska: U.S. Department of the Interior, Bureau of the Land Management, 2000.

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Jones, Tim. *The Last Great Race*. Seattle: Madrona, 1982.

Littlepage, Dean. *Gold Fever in the North: The Alaska-Yukon Gold Rush Era* (Gold Rush Centennial Exhibition catalog). Anchorage, Alaska: Anchorage Museum of History and Art, Municipality of Anchorage, 1997.

Eakin, Henry M. *The Iditarod-Ruby Region, Alaska*. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1914.

Mackey, Billy E. *Iditarod: Portrait of an Alaska Gold Rush Community*. Ph.D. dissertation, Northern Arizona University, 1988.

Paulsen, Gary. *Winterdance: The Fine Madness of Running the Iditarod*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1994, 1995.

Schultz, Jeff and Brian O'Donoghue. *Iditarod Glory*. Portland, Ore.: Graphic Arts Books, 2006.

Thompson, John M. *America's Historic Trails*. Washington, D.C.: National Geographic Society, 2001.

VIDEO:

Iditarod: Trail to Gold. Delores Cannizzaro and John Tracy. VHS (75 min). Anchorage, Alaska: Alaska Video Publications, Inc. 1988. The Iditarod history takes you back to the origins of the Iditarod Trail. Rare interviews with surviving mushers of that first of Iditarod runs and highlights of the race as it has matured through the years show why "The Last Great Race" is steeped in tradition. This selection also contains exclusive coverage of the 1988 Iditarod race.

Redington: The Man behind the Last Great Race. Andy Lockett. VHS (60 min). Anchorage, Alaska: 4th Avenue Theatre, 2000.

Iditarod XXXIV: Mother Nature's Turn to Dance DVD video (93 min). Wasilla, Alaska: Iditarod Trail Committee, 2006. Follows the 2006 Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race from Anchorage to Nome, Alaska.

The History of the Iditarod Trail. VHS (48 min). Fairbanks, Alaska: Education Media Services, 1980s.

ARCHIVAL MATERIALS:

Iditarod Trail Project Oral History Program: A guide to twenty-two audiotape interviews in the Alaska State Library, collected by the U.S. Bureau of Land Management, Iditarod National Historic Trail Project Office in 1980-1981. Juneau, Alaska: Alaska Department of Education, Division of State Libraries and Museums, 1981.

Glassburn photograph collection, 1913-1921. Alice Glassburn and Basil Clemons. Alaska State Library. The collection contains images of miners and placer mining, residents and community celebrations in Ruby, Iditarod, Long, and Fairbanks, from about 1913 to 1921. Many of the photographs were taken by photographer Basil Clemons.

Basil Clemons photograph collection, 1911-1912. Alaska State Library. Includes scenes and residents of Flat, Ruby, and Iditarod, Alaska.

Harold and Leila Waffle photograph collection, 1912-1918. Harold Waffle and Basil Clemons. Alaska State Library. Views of Ruby, Pedro Creek, Dikeman, Fairbanks, Chena, Dome Creek, Flat, Iditarod, Kaltag, Long City, Fort Discovery City, and St. Michael. Subjects also include dog sled racing, riverboats and gold mining operations in Alaska. Basil Clemons is the predominant photographer; other photographers are unidentified.

William “Buzz” Mitchell photograph collection, 1912-1918. Buzz Mitchell and Basil Clemons. Alaska State Library. The collection contains photographs of Anchorage, Fort Liscum, Fairbanks, Iditarod, Ruby, mining activities and the Copper River Northwestern Railway, primarily by photographer Basil Clemons.

Roscoe “Dan” and Margaret P. Averill photograph collection, 1900-1961. Alaska State Library. Many of the images were photographed in Ruby, Alaska, 1910-1911, including views of mining activities, community events, people, river boats and travel by dog team. Miscellaneous postcards of other Alaskan towns (Fairbanks, Skagway, Wiseman, Coldfoot, Koyukuk River, Russian Mission, Flat, Iditarod, Loudon, Tanana); steamboats on Yukon River; 1930s -1960s group photographs of Alaska-Yukon Club (California) activities are also included.

Papers of Lynn Smith, 1926-1933. University of Alaska Anchorage. The collection consists of reminiscences of Lynn Smith from his days as a prospector, his letters to family and friends relating to activities as a marshal and his travels, and obituaries and testimonials. ***Bio/History:*** Lynn Smith was born in Indiana. He moved to Dawson, Yukon Territory, by way of White Pass in 1898 and prospected for gold in Alaska at Rampart, Fairbanks, Hot Springs, Tanana, Ruby, and Iditarod. He operated a jewelry business in each camp to finance his efforts. Smith was an agent for the North American Transportation and Trading Company in Ruby, a deputy marshal in Flat, Iditarod, and Ruby, and a U.S. Marshal for the Fourth Judicial District (1926-1933). He died in Seattle in 1933.