

Alaska's Dog Teams

Iditarod Trail Annual 1977



Prior to the coming of the white man, traveling by dog team was not an important means of travel to the Eskimos, or to the Indians in Alaska. Their traveling was usually done in summer by means of seal skin kayaks or walrus-covered oomiaks on the sea; and birch bark canoes and dugouts on the rivers. During the winter months the Eskimos and Indians rarely felt a compelling urge to move swiftly from one place to another.

In the late 18th century, Russian explorers initiated the use of dog teams in their adventurous fur buying expeditions. Until major new sources of wealth were developed in the

late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the fur trade dominated the economy of Alaska for more than 150 years. Following Bering's Second Kamchatka Expedition of 1741-42, the Russians began to barter sea otter pelts from Alaskan waters. China ultimately became the key market, where the upper classes sought luxurious pelts for their clothing.

The trade initially was conducted by Russian frontier merchants known as *promyshlenniki*, who indentured native Aleut hunters to procure furs for them. In time, larger Russian joint-stock companies replaced the activity of individual trappers and traders.

Then the Eskimos and Indians began to use dog teams for travel, too.

Many people might be surprised to learn that the sled dogs were a transplanted product. The imported dogs have long since been crossbred and blended with native dogs to form the familiar "Husky" of today. It is claimed, though, that the predominant blood strain is still that of hound and setter.

During the Klondike Stampede to the Yukon Territory in 1897-98 thousands of "Outside" dogs were unloaded from steamers that brought prospectors north to seek their fortune. It became as necessary for a prospector to learn the art of dog mushing, as it did for him to learn to pan gold from pay dirt.

Every dog has its day and for 30 brief years the sled dogs reigned as King of Alaska's trails.

However, the exhilarating form of winter travel steadily lost ground after roads and the Alaska Railroad were built. Dog powered traffic suffered even more when travel by airplane came to Alaska.

The thrilling sport of dog sled racing had its beginning in Nome. The men and women who promoted the races hoped the sport would help with breeding good sled dogs; and maintaining dog mushing because it held a high place in the hearts of Alaskans.

Back in the early days, the hardiness and willingness of the sled dogs to struggle against all odds at the urging of their master brought thrilling tales of dog mushing out of the North. The Iditarod Race is called the "Greatest Sporting Event in the World" and is accomplishing exactly what the early backers of dog mushing had hoped that their races would accomplish ---- the breeding of good sled dogs and maintaining the sport of dog mushing in Alaska.



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