

"Reminiscences of the Iditarod Trail"

Our friend Mike Jones, who amongst his other qualities, is fanatically enthusiastic about unearthing information about the origins and early days of Siberian Huskies, recently gave us a mimeographed copy of "Reminiscences of the Iditarod Trail - Placer Mining Days in Alaska" by Charles Lee Cadwallader. These reminiscences allow us a fascinating insight into the hard life on the Alaskan frontier. Place names that are only familiar to us as checkpoints on the annual Iditarod race route, come to life as thriving villages populated by native Alaskans, trappers, and seekers after gold.

Cadwallader went to Alaska from Oregon in 1917 and **walked** the Iditarod trail from Knik to Iditarod. As he said later:

"that was many years ago when there were only two modes of travel, mush dogs or just mush!"

A dog team could be acquired in Anchorage for some \$300 dollars (plus 50c a day to feed your team), but Charlie had very little money and had no choice but to travel the trail on foot with his more experienced companion Dave Brown. Despite the undoubted hardship, Charlie fell in love with Alaska:

"The snow was nine feet deep and this trail winding its way over the frozen tundra held something for the musher that outweighed his thought of being tired and every muscle being crowned with a boil. I drank of this new country and its adventure and enjoyed all of it. This was the land of the midnight sun and it held romance, that kind of romance that does not require the presence of a woman, although a woman would have improved the situation!"

In his time in Alaska, Charlie worked as a shop assistant, bookkeeper and manager of a placer mining enterprise. In April 1918, he had his first experience of driving a dog team:

"I hitched up George's five dog team and took my first dog team ride... The dog team and I made it up to the wood camps and checked all the wood that was on the river bank; and on the way back I learned about overflows. I was driving a team of young dogs and it was no doubt their first experience in overflow, but they were equipped with their natural qualities for looking after themselves. I ran into the overflow, grabbed the leader and led the team to the dry bank and turned them loose and nearly missed grabbing the sled bow as it whizzed by me. They ran down the trail about 100 yards in one minute flat, all stopped at once, sat back on their rumps and began to move the ice from between their toes with their teeth. When they had finished they were ready to travel, but not before."

In December 1918, Charlie left the mining camp at Discovery in order to make the return journey to Anchorage. He had to wait three days in Iditarod however, as the temperature - at 56 below - was too low to travel. His intention was to walk the trail once more, but at Takotna, he hitched a lift with a US Mail dog driver - Charlie riding the sled as brakeman and the mailman on skis working the gee-pole. Charlie's ride lasted to the Rhone River Roadhouse where the mailman's run ended. From there he walked for three days to Happy River Roadhouse where he picked up another ride with the dog team of two Yukon Gold Company workers. He then borrowed a sled and three dogs at Skwentna which took him all the way to Anchorage.

His original journey from Anchorage to Iditarod - a distance of 418 miles - took 16 days. The return journey was made in 14 days.

It is amazing to realise that the leading competitors in the modern Iditarod race complete the 1200 mile course from Nome to Anchorage in a fraction over 9 days.

Charlie's "reminiscences" are a welcome reminder of the conditions in which sled dogs were bred to work, and of the days when they were definitely "**working**" rather than "**racing**" dogs.