

Managing a Melting Easement: The Iditarod National Historic Trail

by Rick Elliott and Paul C. Costello, SR/WA

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Musher enters Rainy Pass on the way into Interior Alaska.



photo by Rick Elliott

GOLD RUSH TRAILS

The Iditarod National Historic Trail is one of many historic and scenic trails designated by the National Trails System Act, which became federal law on Oct. 2, 1968. The Act established trails to promote "public access to, travel within, and enjoyment and appreciation of the open-air, outdoor areas of the Nation." Several national scenic trails, including the Appalachian Trail and Pacific Crest Trail (the initial components of the System) were authorized and designated by this Act. The Act also provided for additional studies for the purpose of designating other trails as national scenic trails. The "Gold Rush Trails in Alaska" were specifically identified for additional study.

The National Parks and Recreation Act of 1978 amended the National Trails System Act to add historic trails to the system. Four national historic trails were added to the National Trails System by this Act. Included was the "Iditarod National Historic Trail, a route of approximately 2,000 miles extending from Seward to Nome, Alaska."

Today, the National Trails System consists of eight congressionally designated national scenic trails, which are continuous, protected, scenic corridors for outdoor recreation, and nine national historic trails, which recognize prominent past routes of exploration, migration and military action. The historic trails generally consist of remnant site and trail segments, and thus, are not necessarily continuous. Of the 17 national scenic and national historic trails so far established, 12 are administered by the National Park Service, four by the Forest Service and one by the Bureau of Land Management. The one trail administered by the BLM is the Iditarod National Historic Trail.

GLORIOUS DAYS

The trail—now called the Iditarod Trail—was first used by ancient Na-

tive hunters. Following them came the early 20th-century gold seekers. Now, the trail, as part of the National Trails System, is also used for recreational purposes, most notably for the running of the well-publicized Iditarod Sled Dog Race.

The Iditarod is a network of more than 2,400 miles of trails. The Trail takes its name from the 19th-century Athabaskan Indian Village on the Iditarod River near the site of 1908 gold discovery. By 1910, the gold rush town called Iditarod flourished and was the center of the Iditarod Mining District. Trails historically used for trade and commerce by Ingalik and Tanaina Indians were improved by and for the miners.

Seward was the southern terminus of the Trail. White settlers entering the Territory trekked through heavily forested lands, now part of the Chugach National Forest. The route eventually was surveyed by the railroad to connect Anchorage with Seward.

Gold seekers often bought provisions in Anchorage or the town of Knik as a prelude to sledding, hiking or snow-shoeing across Rainy Pass en route to the various mining districts following news of each new strike.

Other adventurers started their travels in Nome, the northern terminus of the trail. They may have worked the beaches panning for gold for a time before moving south. As the two-end portions of the trail developed, they met in the interior at the Iditarod Mining District.

The Iditarod Trail was officially surveyed by the U.S. Army's Alaska Road Commission (ARC) in 1910. It was used as a major mail route until 1924 when the airplane came into use. But, in 1925, dogs teams and drivers captured national attention with the relay of desperately needed diphtheria serum to Nome. Plans to send the serum by plane were thwarted by weather. So a relay of dogs teams was dispatched from Nenana down the Tanana and Yukon

River to the Iditarod Trail. Twenty mushers carried the serum the 674 miles in 127 hours. The mushers became heroes. President Coolidge sent each of the mushers medals, and Balto, the lead dog of the finishing team, was immortalized in statues across the country. The era of the sled dog as transportation came to an end in a blaze of glory.

The Iditarod Trail was basically forgotten for more than 40 years until the 1960s when interest in sled dog racing was kindled. In 1967, a race was staged between Knik and Big Lake on nine miles of the old Iditarod Trail. Another race was held in 1969. Then in 1973, the race was run between Anchorage and Nome. The Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race, now known as the "Last Great Race," is staged each March and includes competitors from around the world. Other sporting events that use the Trail include the Iditasport race for skiers, mountain bikers, and snowshoers and the Gold Rush Classic (formerly the Iron Dog) for snowmobilers.

MARKING ONE'S TRAIL

Before the invention of the airplane an extensive trail system had been developed between the communities in Alaska. The first trails were no doubt developed by Alaskan natives as they carried on trade and commerce between villages such as Kaltag on the Yukon River and Unalakleet on Norton Sound. Over time, prospectors and miners took advantage of these trails while establishing new trails in other areas. Some of these trails developed into wagon roads. Many of these wagon roads became today's all-weather roads. The U.S. Army, the Bureau of Public Roads and the Alaska Road Commission, among other entities, had the responsibility for surveying and marking most of the winter trails and wagon roads at one time or another. Often, the ARC contracted their winter trail maintenance to individuals.