

Myth Busting.. The Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race Started Because.... by Katie Mangelsdorf, Historian and Author of ***CHAMPION OF ALASKAN HUSKIES***

The most common "fact" I have heard since the publication of my book ***CHAMPION OF ALASKAN HUSKIES*** has been, "Oh, I know about the Iditarod. It started because of the Serum Run." This, however, is a misconception that has been perpetuated over the years and never corrected. **The fact is that Joe Redington Sr., the Father of the Iditarod, lived along the Iditarod Trail, not the Serum Run route, and he wanted to preserve the history of the Iditarod Trail, first and foremost.** This being said, the Serum Run would shortly play a second important part of Joe's mushing career and Alaska's history.

Joe and Vi Redington lived at Flat Horn Lake along the old Iditarod Trail. In the early 1950's the Redington's began rediscovering the route of this old mail and freight trail, which brought gold out of interior Alaska and the Iditarod District in the early 1900's. Lee Ellexon, the last mail carrier between Knik and Rainy Pass, showed Joe how to locate the remaining markings of the old Iditarod Trail. They talked for hours about the toughness of the dogs and mushers and gold-seeking adventurers along the Iditarod Trail. This all led to the importance of preserving the history of the Iditarod Trail. To them it was like preserving the Lewis and Clark Trail or the Oregon Trail. "We both wrote letters to get the Iditarod on the National Trail Registry," said Vi Redington, Joe's wife. "Joe would dictate and I would type out the letters." In an interview with Vi she stated, "During the '50's and '60's we were writing to everyone we could think of in the state and federal government... Governor Egan helped. All the governors helped...[U.S. Senator] Mike Gravel...Mike really pushed it for us...and finally Ted Stevens joined in."

In preparation for Alaska's 1967 Centennial Celebrations Dorothy Page, an avid historian and chairman of the Wasilla-Knik Centennial Committee, consulted with Joe Redington about the possibility of having a short sprint race along part of the Iditarod Trail. This idea fell perfectly in line with his dream to get the Iditarod Trail recognized as a national trail, so of course, it was possible. The one-time race took in nine miles of the Iditarod Trail. But nine miles was not big enough for Joe. No, Joe only dreamed BIG. So, from this seed-idea of Dorothy Page, now called the Mother of the Iditarod, Joe expanded his dream into a big long-distance race over the Alaska Range to Iditarod and back. More attention needed to be drawn to this historic trail. Plus the fact that sled dogs were being replaced by snowmachines, and for Joe, this just couldn't happen.

However, there was a big publicity stumbling block. "Where in the world was Iditarod? They needed to come up with some place that mushers could get excited about--a place that had a magical ring." (***CHAMPION OF ALASKAN HUSKIES***, p. 163-164)

On July 26, 1997, I interviewed Tom Johnson. He, along with another fellow teacher and dog musher, Gleo Huyck, were the two men who said, "Alright, we'll do it. We'll help you." Joe, these two courageous dreamers, and a few others who breathed in Joe's dream began a five month marathon to organize an almost inconceivable long distance sled dog race along the Iditarod Trail. Tom also stated, "The original idea was to go from Knik to Iditarod. Bill Weimer, the head of the Young Democrats ad hoc committee in Anchorage, said, 'Nope, that won't work. You've got [to get] a world-known place.' He suggested Anchorage to Nome." The new destination was just the zing needed to grab folk's interest!

"On December 9, 1972, Joe wrote a letter to his friend and fellow dog musher, Howard Farley. Howard ran a team of dogs for tourists during the summer and was the only man to have a dog team in Nome for some years. The letter started, 'I thought you might be interested in this race. I need some help on that end. Let me know if you are interested...' And Farley was. Farley sent the letter on to Leo Rasmussen. Then the Nome Kennel Club got involved. Their tireless teamwork and generosity proved to be invaluable to the Iditarod Race." (p.165) Thus, the Iditarod Race to Nome, the first long-distance sled dog race, was born.

The Serum Relay, getting the diphtheria anti-toxin to Nome, never entered the thoughts of Joe Redington Sr. or the folks who dove into Joe's incredible dream. Joe's Serum Run connection began in 1975 and again in 1995.* Find out more in the book, ***CHAMPION OF ALASKAN HUSKIES***.

FACT: The Iditarod Race was started because Joe Redington Sr. lived along the Iditarod Trail and wanted to preserve the history of the Iditarod Trail.

MYTH: The Iditarod Race started because of the Serum Race.

CONNECTION: The route of the Iditarod Trail Race and the Serum Race joined trail routes at Ruby along the Yukon River and continue down river to Kaltag, across the Kaltag Portage, and up the coastal trail to Nome. This traditional trail route has been used for millennia by the indigenous people of Alaska and in more recent years- explorers, traders, adventurers, and gold-seekers.