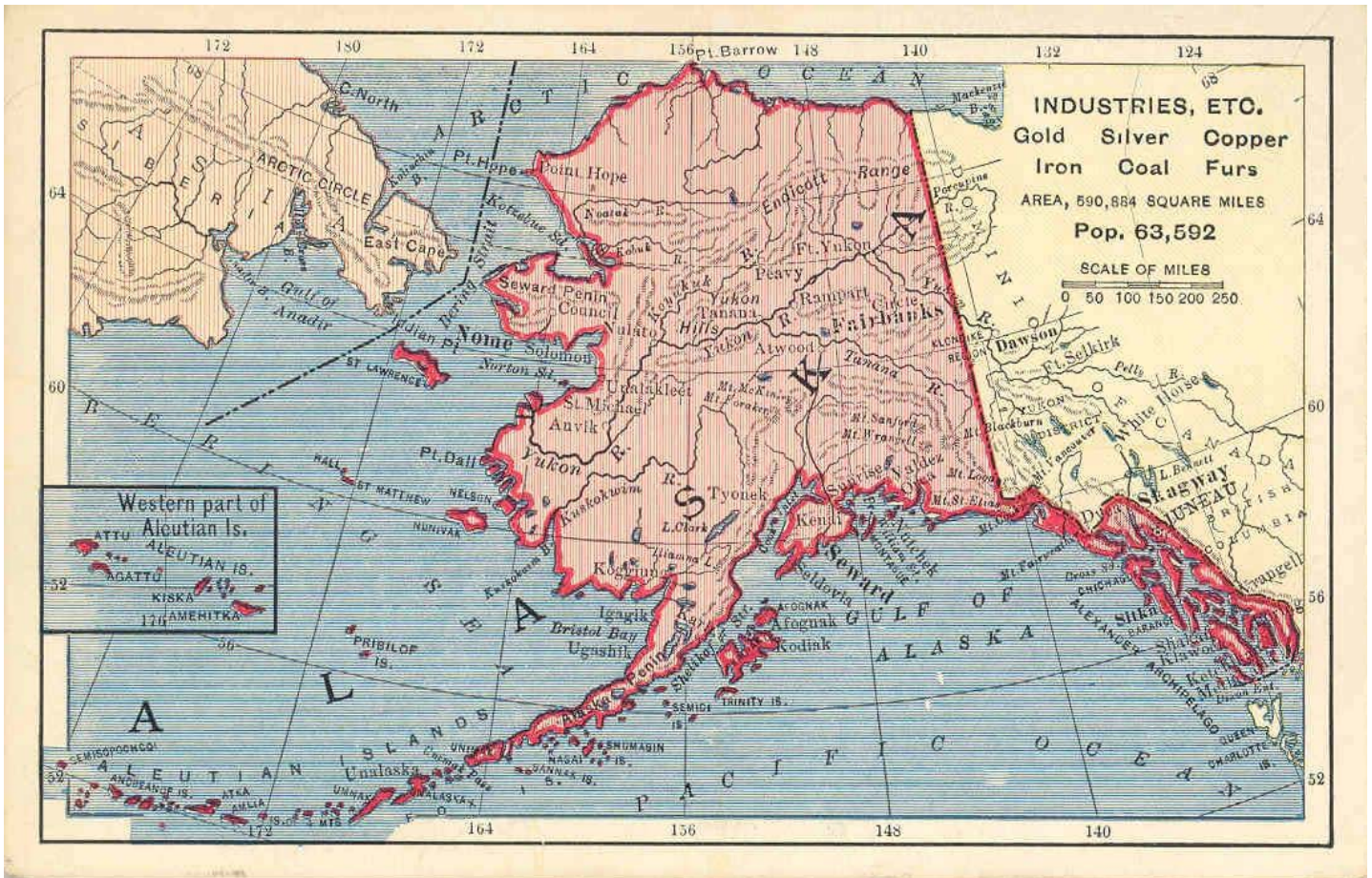




U.S. Department of the Interior
Bureau of Land Management

Iditarod National Historic Trail

Historic Overview – Robert King¹



Introduction:

Today's Iditarod Trail, a symbol of frontier travel and once an important artery of Alaska's winter commerce, served a string of mining camps, trading posts, and other settlements founded between 1880 and 1920, during Alaska's Gold Rush Era. Alaska's gold rushes were an extension of the American mining frontier that dates from colonial America and moved west to California with the gold discovery there in 1848. In each new territory, gold strikes had caused a surge in population, the establishment of a territorial government, and the development of a transportation system linking the goldfields with the rest of the nation. Alaska, too, followed through these same general stages. With the increase in gold production particularly in the later 1890s and early 1900s, the non-Native population boomed from 430 people in 1880 to some 36,400 in 1910. In 1912, President Taft signed the act creating the Territory of Alaska. At that time, the region's

transportation systems included a mixture of steamship and steamboat lines, railroads, wagon roads, and various cross-country trail including ones designed principally for winter time dogsled travel. Of the latter, the longest ran from Seward to Nome, and came to be called the Iditarod Trail.

The Iditarod Trail today:



The Iditarod trail, first commonly referred to as the Seward to Nome trail, was developed starting in 1908 in response to gold rush era needs. While marked off by an official government survey, in many places it followed preexisting Native trails of the Tanaina and Ingalik Indians in the Interior of Alaska. In parts of western Alaska east of Unalakleet and along the coast, it followed ancient routes traveled by the Inupiaq and Yupik Eskimos. Thus, Alaska Natives long used portions of what came to be today's Iditarod Trail, and before the first non-natives came to Alaska had developed special winter modes of travel over it—the dogsled and snowshoe.

Russian Connections:

Our stereotyped image of the parka-clad musher behind a string of dogs reflects a mixture of Native technology and European adaptation. The native sled was built to carry all the owner's possessions from camp to camp or from camp to village. The owner ran in front, guiding his dog team along unimproved trail. The Russian, Lt. Zagoskin, wrote in the 1840s that the Russians introduced the method of harnessing the dogs single file or in pairs in front of the sled. The Russians also introduced the lead dog or "leader"—the best trained dog that kept the others in line and recognized voice commands for direction. During the Russian era, guide-poles and later handlebars were attached to the rear of the sled to direct, push, and balance weight.

The Russians also developed parts of what became today's Iditarod Trail as a route of supply and provision for fur trading posts. The Russian American Company sent fur trading expeditions across the Kaltag Portage to Nulato on the Yukon River, along a section of trail later incorporated as part of the Iditarod Trail. Archaeological work along this segment of the Iditarod Trail east of Unalakleet has demonstrated its use and importance as a trade route connecting coastal and Interior peoples for thousands of years.

When the American fur trading companies took over the Russian posts after the 1867 purchase of Alaska by the United States, they continued using the Kaltag Portage and extended it as part of the greater Yukon River trail, linking fur trading posts into Canada. From there came French-Canadian traders and trappers. Their voice commands in French to direct their dog teams changed to what we know today: "gee," for "ye," meaning go right; "haw," for "cha," meaning go left; and "mush" for "marche," meaning go forward.

Thus, the mode of travel and an emerging pattern of transportation were developed by the mid-19th century, aiding the movement north by the time of the first gold strikes that would soon follow.

Alaska's Early Gold Discoveries:

Most of Alaska's gold rushes occurred after the frontier mining era in other Western states had passed. Yet the dream of finding riches in the earth remained, and new adventurers ventured north to prospect, while others came to trap or trade. These freebooters came from a variety of places including the industrializing mines in Montana, Idaho and Washington, the Black Hills of the Dakotas, from the deserts of Arizona and California, and the mountains of Colorado. Each was in search of an Eldorado or enough of a grubstake to continue the itinerant lifestyle. There were miners, after the California fashion, which had moved up the Pacific coast following a series of strikes. The trail north led the Stikine River finds in Canada near Wrangell, Alaska in the later 1860s, into the Cassiar Country of British Columbia in the 1870s, then to Juneau, Alaska starting in 1880. That same decade some crossed into the Yukon region with gold struck in 1886 in the Fortymile County of eastern central Alaska. There, the particular conditions of geography and the sub-Arctic climate changed the familiar patterns of the mining west. Dogs and sleds replaced the burro, sourdough replaced Johnny cakes, and cigars (with their mosquito deterrence) replaced the plug and chew.

First Mining along what became the Iditarod Trail:

The first mining area to develop along the future route of today's Iditarod Trail was the Cook Inlet country. The glacial Kenai and Chugach ranges cut along the Inlet's eastern shores creating numerous bays and arms. In a few of the streams pouring into the ocean, gold had been deposited into rich pockets. Russians and early traders and prospectors found traces of gold, but the first major find did not occur until the 1890s.

In 1891, Al King, a veteran prospector from the interior, working with a gold pan and rocker, located gold on Resurrection Creek, a steep-graded stream flowing north into Turnagain Arm. A secretive sort, King kept his find quiet until 1893. That year the prospectors and traders followed the usual practice of establishing a mining district, creating rules for claim ownership, and electing a recorder.

The Turnagain Arm Mining District boomed in 1895-1896. News of the rich finds on the tributaries of the Six-Mile, Resurrection, and Glacier Creeks drew a reported 3,000 people into Turnagain Arm. Most arrived by steamship or sailing vessel, precariously navigating the treacherous tides of the Arm in order to dock at the log cabin communities of Hope and Sunrise. Several hundred other miners took the Portage Glacier route. Steamers from Juneau and Sitka unloaded their passengers in winter at Portage Bay, where the miners had a 15-mile trek across a glacier, the frozen Place River, and the frozen Arm to Sunrise. Here miners were introduced to the hardships of Alaska winter travel. Some froze on the glacier, others starved while lost in "white-outs," and a few drowned in the Arm.

During the 1890s, Sunrise, Hope, and scattered trading posts at Resurrection Bay, Knik Arm, and the Susitna River were connected by roughly blazed trails. Miners and merchants combined to build a wagon road from Sunrise up Six-Mile Creek along the mining claims.

Like their counterparts of the Yukon, miners in Southcentral Alaska were adapting to the northern climate. Prospecting followed the cycle of seasons. In the fall, after freeze-up, they hooked up their dogs and

pulled their Yukon sleds loaded with a year or two of supplies up the Kenai, Susitna, Knik, or other rivers, then established camp at a promising location and spent the winter thawing ground and digging gravel. At the spring break-up, with plenty of water, they sluiced the hoped-for gold from pay dirt. At season's end they built rafts and poling boats and floated back downstream to the trading posts or towns. In this way, the land was prospected. As goldfields were found to the north in the Talkeetna Mountains and the Yentna River drainage, the network of trails was extended.

Klondike & Nome gold rushes bring thousands

The greatest impetus to Alaska mining occurred, not in Alaska, but in the Klondike goldfields of northwestern Canada. After gold was discovered there in 1896, the stampede in 1897-1898 brought an estimated 50,000 people to the north. Many never reached the Klondike, but flowed over into the Cook Inlet country, the American part of the Yukon River system, and elsewhere.



During the summer of 1898, on the shores of the Bering Sea, a handful of inexperienced prospectors, in part brought to the region by an earlier silver strike, happened upon the gold of Anvil Creek. On September 20, 1898, Jafet Lindeberg, Eric Lindblom, and John Byrneson, the three “Lucky Swedes,” staked the richest creekbeds of the Cape Nome goldfields.

Nome became an instant city. Word of even more gold discoveries in the beach sands caused one of the West's and Alaska's largest stampedes. By the summer of 1900, an estimated 20,000 to 30,000 people arrived by steamer to dig the “golden sands” of Nome. Miners' tents spread for miles along the Bering Sea coast, and inland hydraulic plants were introduced to wash away gravel. Nome also gained national notoriety for its violence and its corrupt Federal officials, who were later exposed and imprisoned. These events were immortalized by the novels of Rex Beach.

From October to June, the Bering Sea froze, isolating the people of Nome who had missed the last boat “Outside.” In order to break down this isolation, the people focused their concern on wintertime ties to the rest of the nation. A telegraph system was constructed from Valdez across Alaska to Nome via the Yukon River.

Routes to Nome

Between 1898 and 1908, four routes were used connecting ice-free ports with Nome. The first ran from Skagway to Dawson, Yukon Territory, then down the Yukon River to the Bering Sea coast and Nome. This 2,000-mile route, though used by express companies and the mail, was considered unsatisfactory because of its great distance and because it crossed Canadian territory. The search for an “All-American route” and the demand for a shorter haul to Nome brought into existence two aborted routes—the Valdez to Eagle Trail and the Iliamna Route. Each proved uneconomical. After the gold rush to Fairbanks in 1903, the Valdez route

became feasible via Fairbanks and the Yukon river Trail. By 1904-1905, all winter mail bound for Nome went by way of Valdez and Fairbanks.

Wintertime travelers to Nome, however, still believed the shortest route to Nome would be via the Cook Inlet country. Railroad promoters had already begun construction of the ill-fated Alaska Central Railway north of Seward. In 1907, because of the development of Seward on Resurrection Bay and recent gold discoveries in the Innoko District, the Army's Alaska Road Commission took action.

Walter L. Goodwin's survey to Nome

Major Wilds P. Richardson, head of the Alaska Road Commission, ordered Walter Goodwin and a crew of three to blaze a route from Seward through the Cook Inlet country and beyond to Nome. From January to April 1908, Goodwin and his crew blazed the first routing for what we call today the Iditarod Trail. In a report to Richardson, Goodwin concluded that the 800-mile proposed trunkline would be feasible only if mineral discoveries of value were developed, attracting additional traffic. Recent discoveries in the Ophir area were already encouraging, yet unknown to Goodwin, an even richer area was about to be found. Two prospectors, John Beaton and William Dikeman, had penetrated the virgin territory and uncovered paydirt in the area that soon would become the Iditarod Mining District.

1908 Iditarod gold discovery

The Iditarod is called Alaska's last major gold rush, though gold continued to be found in many areas afterwards. Iditarod, however, was the most productive strike in a vast area, loosely termed the Inland Empire, spreading from Ruby on the Yukon River, south along the Kuskokwim Mountains into the drainages of the Innoko and Upper Kuskokwim rivers. Prospectors had visited the area since the 1880s, and minor stampedes had occurred up to 1907 with strikes on Ganes Creek and near Ophir. The rush to Iditarod and Ruby, between 1910 and 1912, set 10,000 stampedeers in motion, while each community reached peak populations of 3,000. Within two decades, \$30 million worth of gold was dug from these goldfields.

Whereas Nome and the Cook Inlet country were easily accessible by ocean steamers, interior camps in the Inland Empire (the Iditarod, Innoko, and Ruby districts) were isolated. Stampedeers bound for the mines took steamships to tidewater, then steamboats for as far as 1,000 miles up the meandering rivers—the Yukon, Innoko, or Kuskokwim. The majority of passenger and freight traffic used the river system from May to October. Freeze-up shifted traffic to the trails.

Gold Rush trails to Interior Alaska

Trails developed in the Inland Empire in direct response to gold discoveries. Prospectors took the natural land routes or Native routes to the Innoko mines in 1906 and 1907 and were followed the next year by Goodwin. With additional work into 1911, Goodwin's blazed and cleared Seward-to-Nome winter trail became a winter access route to the Iditarod district. A loop trail left the main trail at Takotna and followed the creeks to the town of Iditarod, and from there north through Dikeman to rejoin the trunkline trail at Dishkaket. A trail from Ruby on the Yukon River ran south in response to strikes made on the tributaries of the Nowitna and

Upper Innoko rivers. By 1913, an alternate trail to Nome left the trunkline at Ophir and headed north to Ruby via the gold camps of Cripple, Poorman, and Long. From Ruby the musher followed the Yukon River Trail east to Fairbanks or west to Nome.

Alaska Road Commission

These crude trails built by the mining camp residents were upgraded by the Alaska Road Commission. Congress established the Alaska Road Commission in 1905 as part of the Army's road and trail building efforts connecting the military posts and the new mining camps with tidewater ports and navigable streams. Major Wilds P. Richardson headed the Commission and with the help of engineers set the standards for construction. The lowest level of transportation was the trail, a cleared and smoothed surface approximately eight feet wide and with no grades steeper than four percent. Along barren stretches or areas above timberline the trails were flagged.

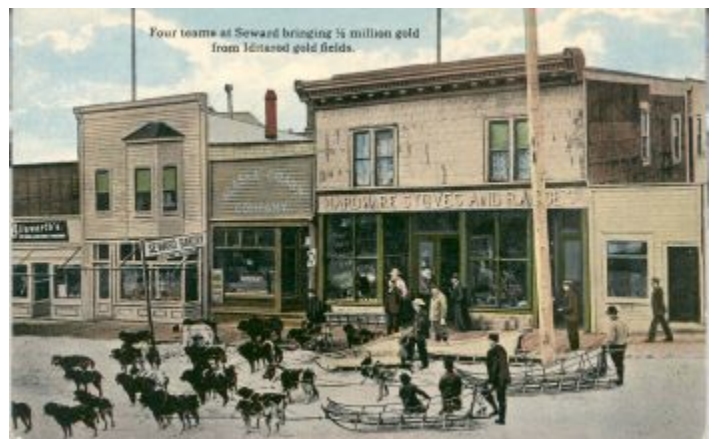
The Commission's bobsled roads were similar to trails except they were wider and more attention was given to grade. The few early wagon roads built by the Alaska road Commission along the Iditarod Trail ran from communities to mining areas: from Nome to Solomon and Council, from Ruby to Long, Iditarod to Flat, Knik to Willow mines, and from Sunrise to Canyon and Six-Mile creeks. These roads were graded and drained, and corduroyed with logs or macadamed. In some areas further improvements enabled them to be used in the summer.

Use of the Iditarod Trail

Most travelers on the Iditarod Trail did not go from trailhead to trailhead—Seward to Nome—as they did on the other trails of settlement in the American West. Instead, they mushed from the ice-free harbor of Seward to the various mining districts midway to Nome, or used the Trail segments while traveling between mining camps and trade centers. Thus, little traffic actually went the full distance of the Iditarod Trail, and even the winter mail route connecting Nome and Seward only used the Iditarod Trail for a few years in the 1910s before being routed through

Fairbanks. In 1918, the last year mail followed the trail to Seward, carriers complained of the difficulties of travel. So little traffic was following the Trail from Iditarod to Seward by that time that they were constantly plagued with the hard and time-consuming task of breaking trail for the dogs.

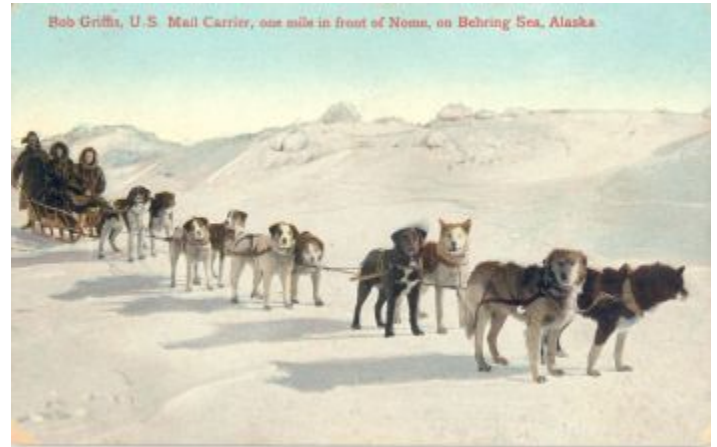
Over the few years of its use, an assortment of travelers used the Trail. The majority were prospectors, trappers, or Natives, who traveled—often without dogs or with one or two to help pull a sledload of supplies—to isolated cabins. A surprising number walked along the Trail. The hero of the Trail, however, was the dogsled and driver.



These noteworthies earned nicknames befitting the men who raced along the Trail carrying fresh eggs or oranges, mail or express, or shipments of gold. Among them were Frank Tondreau, known from Belfast to Point Barrow as the Malemute Kid; John “Iron Man” Johnson, the famous racer and his indefatigable Siberians; Captain Ulysses Grant Norton, the tireless Trojan of the trails; the Eskimo “Split-the-Wind”; and the wandering Japanese Jujira Wada, associated with the Fairbanks strike. All were welcomed in the camps and became often interviewed celebrities.

Bob Griffis of Iditarod legend

One such person and event glorified in the press was Bob Griffis and his annual Iditarod gold train. Griffis, who had once driven stages during the Black Hills rush in the Dakotas, ran the mail from Unalakleet to Nome for a decade before the Miners and Merchants Bank of Iditarod acquired his services. In November 1910, he started from Iditarod for Seward with a quarter million dollars worth of gold lashed to his dogsled. While the scene was set for a spectacular robbery, the 63-year-old Griffis knew that the Alaska winter was deterrent enough to



robbers. Consequently, 37 days later his three teams and their guards arrived unscathed in Seward. Until World War I, Griffis protected the Iditarod gold trains carrying up to one million dollars worth of gold on their annual trek to Seward. Popular postcard pictures were made for sale of such sled dog-hauled gold shipments arriving in Seward. It was to Griffis’s credit that the gold was never stolen. (Only later, in 1922, did such a theft occur. A shipment of \$30,000 worth of gold was stolen by a roadhouse operator and his confederate, an Iditarod “lady of the evening.”)

Roadhouses on the Iditarod Trail

The relative ease of travel along the trails during this period was made possible by the maintenance provided by the Alaska Road Commission and by the many roadhouses, which for a few years lined the Trail and its branches. During stampedes to a new gold strike, numerous impromptu roadhouses vied for traveler patronage, but after business settled to a routine, roadhouses were naturally thinned to locations roughly a day’s journey apart—approximately 20 miles. Roadhouse operators might begin a business in a tent, then during the first winter build a log cabin, adding another story or an addition as business increased. Accommodations varied. Hudson Stuck reported stopping at a filthy roadhouse at Shaktoolik, where the proprietor continued his card games rather than serve patrons. In contrast, near Iditarod, Stuck and other travelers praised the Bonanza Creek Roadhouse as the best on the Trail. The fresh meat and roomy bunks were termed luxuries.

Henry Cox's Roadhouse at Poorman

An advertisement in the Ruby Record Citizen gives an image of Cox's Roadhouse at Poorman, a better than average stop. Besides the 22-by-30 foot main roadhouse, Henry Cox had a lean-to kitchen with running water and a dining room plus an "outside white porcelain bathtub." A cache and ice house were nearby. To entertain patrons, the roadhouse had a pool table, card tables, and a phonograph "with 40 records." The nice single beds had springs and mattresses. Henry Cox's Poorman Roadhouse was a place of relative comfort and leisure. Yet Cox and other roadhouse proprietors faced economic problems once the stampede days passed and travel on the trails declined. In part, it was related to the U.S. mail.

Mail on the Iditarod Trail

A major mainstay for a roadhouse on the Iditarod Trail was becoming a stop on the mail contractor's run. The first mail contract to Iditarod ran from Nulato, a branch run of the Valdez-Fairbanks-Nome route. In 1914, "Colonel" Harry Revell received the first contract to carry the winter mail from Seward to Iditarod.



Revell had been one of the stampeders to the Cook Inlet country in 1896. With his brother-in-law, Alfred Lowell, he operated a winter mail service connecting Seward, Sunrise, Girdwood, Eklutna, Knik, and Susitna Station. With the development of the Seward-to-Nome route, he joined other Seward businessmen to boost the establishment of a mail route between the two places. Although travel between the two points was common, the mail route extended only to Iditarod. Connections with Nome were made via a short spur route from Takotna to Ruby, where the main mail run was joined. After 1918, Revell gave up the mail contract.

The Iditarod Trail in the 1910s and beyond

With the end of winter mail runs between Iditarod and Cook Inlet, the few remaining roadhouse also began closing. Consequently, the lack of roadhouses caused residents to demand protection for winter travel. Even before this, in the early 1910s, representatives of the voters along the Iditarod presented a strong voice in the Territorial legislature and secured legislation to aid travelers. All roadhouses were required to keep a list of travelers in order to help find the last known location of lost mushers. A territorial road commission was established to assist the federal Alaska Road Commission. Funds were set aside by the territory for staking trails and building shelter cabins in order to save the lives of travelers stranded by blizzards. The legislators also dealt with restrictive mining laws, moralistic change, prohibition, and other issues of the mining camps and trade centers.

By World War I, the days of isolation were coming to an end. The activities "Outside" began to bear more and more on local events, especially the Great War. Young miners and workers enlisted and left the country, most

never to return. Money expected to be funneled into trails and mines went east. The slow construction of the federal government's Alaska Railroad (not completed until 1923) and its anticipated aid to growth did little to stabilize the Inland Empire's economy. Instead, many of its settlers moved to the railroad town of Anchorage or elsewhere.

Further decline in use of the Iditarod Trail

During the 1920s, the need for dogsled transportation was challenged by the airplane. On February 21, 1924, the first Alaskan airmail flew into McGrath and soon more airplanes followed. By the end of the decade airmail replaced the mail run to Nome. However, in early 1925, the dog team and driver captured the attention of the nation for a final episode involving a portion of the Iditarod Trail—a heroic attempt to bring much-needed medical supplies to Nome.

1925 serum run to Nome

In early 1925, a feared epidemic of diphtheria caught the town of Nome without enough serum to inoculate the community. A wire went out for help, but plans to send an airplane from Fairbanks were thwarted by weather. Instead, serum was rushed to Nenana by train, and then carried by a relay of dog teams down the Yukon River Trail to the Iditarod Trail, and into Nome. Twenty mushers carried the serum the 674 miles in just over 127 hours starting on January 27, 1925. The mushers along with some of their dogs became heroes. President Coolidge sent medals, and Balto, the dog leading the last team to Nome, was used as a model for statues of dogs in places as distant as New York City's Central Park. In the minds of some, this episode brought a colorful end to era of use of the Iditarod Trail and dogsledding. Yet some parts of the Trail would continue to be used even to the present.

Post-1920s Iditarod Trail use and evolution

Despite the closure of most roadhouses along the Iditarod Trail starting a few years after the major rushes to the Iditarod Mining District dwindled, certain Trail portions remained in use and were even improved in some areas. Communities along the Trail and connecting trails that survived into the 1930s and beyond never stopped using trails in their vicinity. While virtually abandoned in some areas, near Seward and Nome, the Iditarod Trail was upgraded and in places hard surfaced illustrating the continuing evolution of some segments of the broad network of trails that collectively make up the Iditarod National Historic Trail System.

The Iditarod Sled Dog Race spotlights the early winter trails

Since the beginning in 1973 of the now internationally-known winter sporting event, the Iditarod Sled Dog Race, new life and fame has come to the old Iditarod Trail. This annual event, in part inspired to commemorate the use of this still most remarkable Alaskan trail, has perhaps misshaped the understanding of people today about how the Iditarod Trail was truly used during its heyday in the 1910s. Some may mistakenly think that it was a year-round trail, more like the Valdez Trail to Fairbanks.ⁱⁱ It wasn't. It was foremost a trail designed for winter use.

In the broader picture, the Iditarod Trail and its network of connecting trails are examples of the more typical Alaska trails: ones of more limited use, with their decline and selective abandonment linked to the fate of the local and regional economy. Today, the once thriving city of Iditarod that gave a major impetus for the Trail to exist is a ghost town. And the terminus, Nome, is now solidly linked with the rest of Alaska and the world by airplanes and boats. Thus, the need for the Iditarod Trail passed into history, and it is for us today to celebrate its memory and the important place it holds in Alaska's history.

ⁱ While much of this history is a lightly edited version of what appears in "The Iditarod National Historic Trail: Seward to Nome Route – A Comprehensive Management Plan," published in 1986 by the Bureau of Land Management, it has also been expanded in places with new information and interpretations added by Robert E. King, Ph.D., State Archaeologist for the Bureau of Land Management.

ⁱⁱ The Valdez Trail was used both in summer and winter, was never abandoned, and evolved into today's Richardson Highway. The reason in large part was due to the continual growth and importance of Fairbanks as the largest city in Interior Alaska.