BLM - ALASKA

FRONTIERS

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JOHN & CLYDE'S FRONTIER ADVENTURE

For many years, Alaska was considered too remote and unpopulated to warrant building an overland highway, but the bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, changed everything.

On February 6, 1942, President Roosevelt authorized construction of the pioneer road. Work began in April. Crews working east to west met at Contact Creek on September 25, with the road opening to limited military traffic in October. A ribbon-cutting ceremony on November 20, 1942 at Soldier's Summit near Kluane Lake marked the completion of the first phase of construction of today's Alaska Highway. The enormous building project is still heralded as one of the greatest engineering feats of the twentieth century.

In late 1932, former Alaska Road Commissioner Donald MacDonald II heard of a boast made by a Copper Center area trapper, Clyde "Slim" Williams (left). Slim bragged that his dog team was capable of "taking the trail and heading out for Chicago." MacDonald persuaded Williams that such a trip could promote a highway from Alaska to the Lower 48. Five months later Williams reached the existing North American Highway System, in British Columbia. Later, in 1939, Williams teamed up with John Logan (right) and their dog, Blizzard, to be the first expedition to use motorized vehicles on the Alaska Highway.

1939 road trip paves way for Alaska Highway

BLM's Don Hinrichsen (l) and KJ Mushovic (r) present John Logan (center) a copy of the interpretive panel located at the Sourdough Creek Campground near Glennallen. The panel commemorates Logan's 1939 road trip with Slim Williams.

"People told us it was the rainiest summer in 20 years," recalled a smiling white-haired gentleman. And so begins 86-year-old John Logan's tale of how, in 1939, he and a partner, "Slim" Williams, drove motorcycles from Alaska to the Lower 48, an event which helped inspire the construction of today's Alaska Highway.

Recently, Logan visited the Alaska Bureau of Land Management, where he was presented with a replica of an interpretive panel being installed at BLM's Sourdough Creek Campground. In part, the panel commemorates Logan's 1939 trip.

In 1937, John Logan took a 2-week vacation to Alaska, and was smitten with the Great Land. Later, he was intrigued by an article by Donald MacDonald proposing a road to Asia via Alaska. Logan, with help from a cousin, contacted former territorial governor Tom Riggs, who had led the US survey team that established the Alaska-Canada boundary. Riggs recommended that Logan meet a man called "Slim" Williams who was planning to journey by motorcycle from Alaska to the Lower 48. "I said, 'He's going to do WHAT?'" recalled Logan.

Logan arranged to meet with then 57-year-old Williams, and after explaining his interest in promoting a road-link with Alaska, Slim asked Logan to be his partner on the proposed motorcycle trip. At first Logan hedged. "I'd never ridden a motorcycle, but I realized that I'd never be able to live with myself if I passed up the opportunity." It turned out Williams hadn't, either. "We'll figure it out," Williams assured him.

"No thanks, I'll pass"

There were some lean times during the trip when Logan and Williams foraged for anything edible, and Logan had a very close call. "I ate some lily bulbs that were poisonous — they had a strychnine effect. I was unconscious for 12 hours, during which Slim told me later, I was so stiff, he could tip me up like a board."

After somewhat recovering, Logan still was in no shape to manage the rugged ridges and muskeg that lay ahead. They considered building a raft, but although there were trees and they had their axe, they had no rope to hold a raft together.

Just when things looked hopeless. Williams kicked a mound of moss and discovered the remains of a rotting sled.

"He found this sled just when we needed it, a one in a million chance." In one of dozens of examples of sourdough ingenuity, Williams was able to free the nuts, frozen in place by rust, by heating them in a fire until they glowed red, then tossing them into the cold steam nearby.

"Slim was able to just unscrew them with his fingers," said Logan, "leaving us with 14 — and I remember the number exactly — bolts that we were able to use to fashion one of the sturdiest rafts of the several we made during the trip. The bolts proved literally to be a Godsend — we saw some whitewater that dumped us a few times."

Within BLM's Sourdough Creek Campground is a site identified by area residents as the location of a cabin used by Slim Williams during his trapping days in the early 1900s. The deterioratinbg log structure was torn down in the late 1980s as a safety precaution before its potential historical significance was realized. Now the cabin is memorialized on an interpretive panel developed for BLM's Sourdough Creek Campground. One of the photographs used to illustrate the interpretive panel features Logan, Williams and Blizzard on their motorcycles, near the end of their 1939 trip.

On his first trip from Alaska to the Lower 48 in 1932, it took Slim Williams (right) five months to reach the northernmost point of the existing North American Highway system in British Columbia. In the state of Washington, he replaced the sled's runners with wheels and continued to the 1933 Chicago World's Fair. There, he and his dog team made a wildly popular exhibit, reportedly the favorite of First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt (left). After the fair closed, Williams went to Washington D.C., where he met President Roosevelt. Roosevelt set up a commission with Canada to explore building a highway to Alaska, but although the commission found the project feasible, there were still doubts about the value of such expenditure for so small a population.

Once agreed, both Williams and Logan began preparing for the unparalleled trip. Logan put money he had saved into the purchase of two carefully researched and modified British-made motorcycles. "We chose small, single engine machines because we knew we would be pushing, pulling and rafting with them. We had plates welded on the bottom and hand brakes added so we would be able to have some control when walking the machines with the engines running. Of course, there were even fewer gas stations then, so we had racks with two gas cans each in the back." They began their trip on May 14, 1939.

In Fairbanks, the pair had "help from all sides," including Donald MacDonald's son, Donald III, who helped by assembling maps and attaching them to canvas for durability. The pair was presented with a young Siberian Husky named Blizzard.

Logan and Williams didn't pack any special clothing or gear for themselves, using just the typical outdoor wear of the times. "We did make sure we had mosquito head nets," Logan recalled. "The mosquitoes were fierce. One day, I made a bet with Slim, who had big hands, over who could kill the most mosquitoes with one swat. I believe I won by getting 24 mosquitoes."

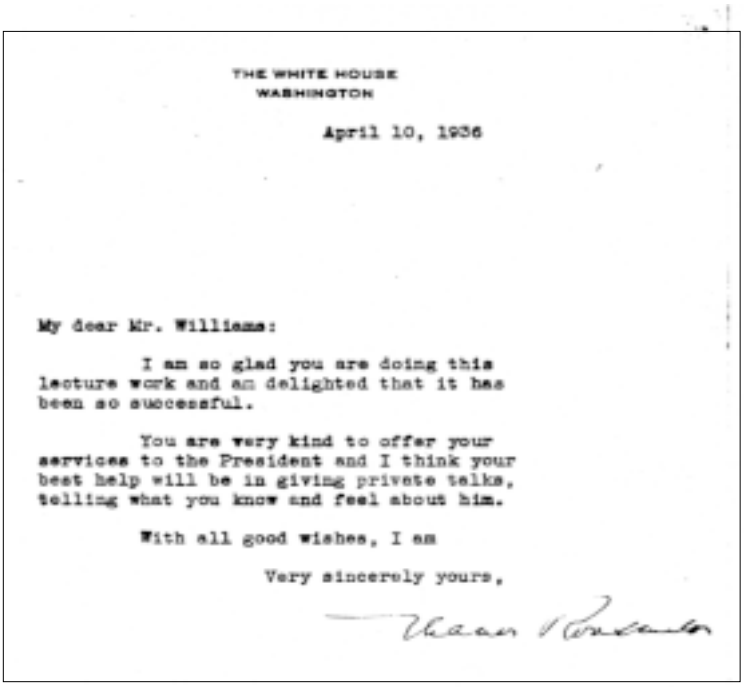
After leaving Big Delta, Blizzard ran off, evidently spooked by the noise and smell of the motorcycles.

About halfway between Healy Village and Chicken, the one motorcycle the pair took on this rugged part of the trip, failed. Narrowing the problem down to either the generator or battery, the two removed the battery and set off for Chicken by foot, carrying nothing but their .22 rifle, an axe, a small amount of food and the battery. Williams, who wandered throughout Alaska alone for decades without getting lost, indeed got lost! And with game then in short supply, the men also ran out of food. They lost track of the days because of so much daylight and overcast weather. "When we got to Chicken, we reckoned it was June 22nd, but it was already the 24th," recalled Logan.

Their second motorcycle, left off earlier in Big Delta, was flown to an airstrip near Chicken. Happily, Blizzard, who had been captured bumming a meal where they had stayed at Big Delta, was also reunited with the pair on that same flight. "Blizzard was a great dog," recalled Logan fondly, "and a good companion, even if it did take him two encounters with porcupines to figure out to leave them alone. He was just barely full grown, and a blue-eyed beauty."

The going was a bit easier into Dawson and Whitehorse, although food was still scarce. "One fellow gave us all the moose we could carry from one he had just shot, and we shot two caribou ourselves and even ate a couple of porcupines." Even so, Logan lost up to 17 pounds and Williams about 22. Logan recalled, "As Slim used to say in his lectures, we never missed a meal, but we got pretty far behind sometimes!"

Despite their limited cargo space and primitive living conditions, Logan and Williams managed to take black-and-white photos and even color movies during their trip. Significantly, they



THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON

April 10, 1936

My dear Mr. Williams:

I am so glad you are doing this lecture work and am delighted that it has been so successful.

You are very kind to offer your services to the President and I think your best help will be in giving private talks, telling what you know and feel about him.

With all good wishes, I am

Very sincerely yours,

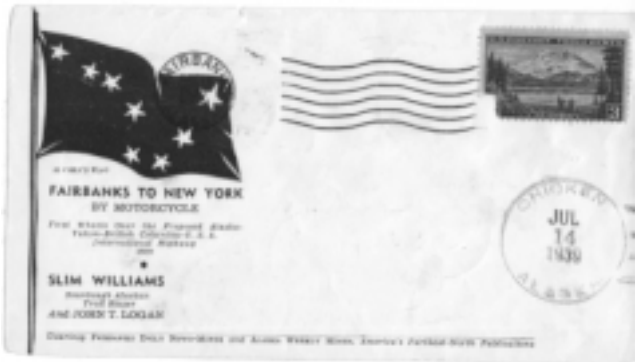
obtained some of the first color film footage shot of parts of Alaska and Canada. Their pictures and movies would later enhance Williams' lectures and public speaking engagements.

With other setbacks, including many difficult rivers to cross and the onset of colder weather, it was early December 1939, before Logan and Williams finally made it to Seattle. But when they did, they were hailed as heroes, and later summoned to Washington, D.C. to testify about the success of their trip and their vision for a highway.

Ironically, at first no one could believe that the pair undertook the trip without monetary compensation or sponsorship. "They couldn't believe that we had just come up with the money ourselves. The driving force was that we simply wanted to demonstrate the feasibility of a highway." Logan paused, and then said firmly, "I think we did. And I kind of hated to see it end."

It was BLM-Alaska's state archaeologist, Robert King who first uncovered the link between Slim Williams and BLM's Sourdough Creek Campground, and then Logan's connection to Williams and the remarkable 1939 trip. King has been particularly interested in the Alaska Highway story since his own father helped build it during World War II.

Logan, now retired in Connecticut after a long airline career and later a fund-raiser for charities, hasn't been to Alaska much since the famous trip. In 1978, he and his wife, now deceased, traveled from Fairbanks through Chicken and on to Dawson, Yukon Territory. "Chicken hadn't changed much," he chuckled. Both west and east of Boundary, the Logans could make out wide trail markings of the rudimentary road Slim and John had traversed back in 1939.

— KJ Mushovic / Dr. Robert King

Williams and Logan also carried custom-made commemorative stamped envelopes which they cajoled postal workers all along the way to postmark. These are now viewed as the first mail to travel the "highway" by motorized vehicles.