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Blazing trails on snowy dog day

Paul Marvella

Dog sledding is one way to experience snow country in places such as Mammoth Mountain, where riders and drivers get a chance to blaze a few trails like they did in the old days in Alaska.

By Hillary Hauser

"Dec. 1, 1904
Kougarok River

Otto thought Thanksgiving Day was a perfect time for me to learn how to drive a dog team. He brought around the freight sled and put Wolf and Spot in harness. The two dogs were so eager to get going they almost jumped into the harnesses by themselves. Usually Otto uses all nine dogs in the team, but Otto said four dogs were plenty for me to handle and I couldn't have agreed with him more.

Well! We started off, with me standing on the runners. For a while, Otto kept up on snowshoes behind, giving me the necessary signals: "Gee" turned us right, and "Haw" turned us left. "Whoa" was, of course, stop, and "Mush" made us go like lightning.

I kept my eye on Wolf, the leader, for signals of what was to come ahead. I got the feeling this dog knew it was me, a cheechako, in command and that he therefore did his best to make up for what I couldn't sense"

I had just written the above scene, trying with all my might to recreate with passion and accuracy how my grandmother, Mattie Steiner, must have felt learning from her brother, Otto, how to drive an Alaskan dog sled. For some reason, this reliving of my grandmother's life during the Nome gold rush of 1900 had me whirling constantly into a snowdrift of wonder. What did she really feel like?

The Alaska of 1904 was certainly not the Alaska of today, and a woman mushing dogs then was a rare sight. There were no high-tech dog diets, designated trails or assigned places to stay along the way. Su-

san Butcher did not exist.

When my grandmother mushed dogs, she wore skirts!

Later, when she met and married my grandfather, Bobby Brown, the two would become deeply involved in the first All-Alaska Sweepstakes races. This was 70 years before the Iditarod. In these early races, Bobby Brown would race Leonhard Seppala, the famous dog musher who played a critical role in the 1925 diphtheria serum run from Nenana to Nome.

My grandparents' story ended in 1917, however, when Seppala carried Bobby Brown on his sled 90 miles through an Alaskan blizzard trying to save his life.

One morning, my husband rescued me from all this drama.

"We're going skiing," he said. "Pack your things. I'm going downtown to get chains for the car."

I absolutely love skiing. The next day I loved it especially as I zoomed to the bottom of one of the many chairlifts at Mammoth Mountain off Highway 395 on the eastern side of the Sierra Nevada. It was mid-week, there were no lines and the snow was glorious. As I waited at the bottom for the others, the snow was falling gently.

I heard some barks.

More barks.

A dog team!

From around the corner along a level, packed snow trail they came — a handsome team of malamutes, huskies and other dog types — nine of

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them in all, towing a dog sled. A single driver stood at the back, pawing one leg along the side of one runner like a child on a scooter.

In the sled were two passengers, a woman and a child, bundled under a thick blanket. The hood of the driver's green parka covered his head so thoroughly I couldn't see his face.

This was a scene from the past I had been trying so hard to recreate at my word processor.

That did it!

I threw my skis into a snowbank and walked in my heavy ski boots over to the sled. The driver, Paul Marvelly, and his assistant, Mick Humphrey, were now busy with the dogs — mainly patting them on their heads and telling them they had done their job well. The happy dogs were all sitting in the snow, enjoying their praises with their tongues wagging.

For the next half hour the two men, both New Zealanders, and I talked about Jack London, Robert Service, Leonhard Seppala and my grandfather. The next thing I knew, I was in the sled, underneath the blanket, and the dogs were taking me for a happy four-and-a-half-mile romp through the woods.

Dog sledding is a quiet affair. Marvelly's sled, a bonafide Alaskan freight model, which he built from red oak (similar to hickory), flexed and moved with each twist and turn in the trail. The layer of soft snow on top of the packed trail was a quiet cushion for the runners of the sled.

Suddenly there was a roar of a snowmobile, which came from behind us on the trail and then passed us. It was Mick, who came to take pictures, even though the snow was now falling in earnest. The noise of the thing ripped asunder the wonderful silence of the woods, while the dogs pawed onward, respectfully quiet.

I laughed at the paradox: a modern snowmobile alongside a dog

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PAUL MARVELLY

team. The machine looked plastic, tinny and tacky next to these handsome, classic dogs.

Marvelly threw in his own laugh. "That snowmobile is designed to work in soft snow," he said. "We bought it to pack the trail for the dogs on days when the snow is particularly deep. This morning, the snowmobile got stuck in powder, but we mushed the dogs right on by.

"In fact," he added, "we have pulled a stuck snowmobile out with the dog team."

At Minaret Vista, a spot at Mammoth Mountain that offers a glorious, all-around view, Marvelly apologized for the snowstorm that had obliterated a view of anything.

I couldn't have cared less, and I told him so. Many of my grandparents' most interesting, harrowing experiences in Alaska took place in horrible, life-threatening blizzards. I wanted to pretend I was in such a blizzard in the soft-falling snow that was now coming down around us.

I was more interested in the sled ride and in the dogs themselves.

In a team, each dog is carefully placed in the harness two by two in front of the sled. At the front of the team are the leaders: one or two dogs that exhibit high intelligence and exceptional abilities of concentration, who can follow orders and sense the trail.

Leaders are also not prone to chase wild animals they may meet — like deer, rabbits, bears or moose, for example. Many a sled mishap has occurred because an overenthusiastic leader may react to his wild animal instincts in giving chase to another animal.

Behind the leader(s) is a pair of "point" dogs, hard workers that can stand the strain of running in front of other dogs ("a lot of dogs turn around," Mick said). Point dogs have a good ability to concentrate, and are often young leaders.

After the point dogs are two pairs of "team" dogs (which can handle another mental strain — that of running behind other dogs).

Just in front of the sled are the "wheels," which are usually pups and old dogs. ("You start with the brains and end with the brawn," Mick said.)

In addition to its special job as a team member, every dog punctuates its duty with a special personality. For my ride, Marvelly's team was comprised mainly of females.

Most dogs don't run so well if paired with other dogs they don't get along with. It's up to the driver to see the kinks in the various canine personalities and avoid the problems.

A driver also has to watch his dogs carefully. We stopped a few times for nature's calling, and got under way again when the dogs had taken care of these duties. Dogs can also pick up what is ahead in the trail and Marvelly said if a dog has to turn around to look at the driver, the driver has already missed a signal.

Dogs can often let a driver know what is coming, whether it's a wild beast, a wrong turn in the trail or some horrible hazard. In Alaska, sled dogs are famous for letting their drivers know if they are treading on thin ice.

At the lead of the team for my ride was Rocci (pronounced "Rocky"). This is Marvelly's No. 1 lead dog, a loyal Alaskan village husky that has carved a soft spot in his master's heart. Rocci had begun running races when he was 2 years old — open class races, long-distance races, big races that promised long miles, hard work and big purses at the end.

Rocci once ran the Iditarod as a member of an 18-dog team.

Now 13 years old, he is slightly arthritic, but runs with a willing heart. Marvelly said he had tried to retire Rocci during the summer just past, but that "he got really depressed."

"He wants to be on the team, so I let him," Marvelly said. "You know, the scroungiest dogs have the biggest and strongest hearts."

Dog genetics play a big part in their persistence and bravery. The Siberians are small and fast, the malamutes can be stubborn, and then there are the special characteristics of Greenland Eskimo huskies and Labradors. There are also things to consider, such as large legs, splayed feet, stamina and energy.

Sled dogs don't eat salmon, like

they did in the Alaska gold rush days. Instead it's some modern, high-vitamin, slum-gullion with a sort of chicken pulp thrown in.

Marvelly offers a number of different dog sled trips to the public — a 25-minute, two-mile "loop ride" around Sierra Meadows (\$25 adults, \$15 children), or a one-hour, 4 1/2-mile Minaret Vista Lookout Ride, from the Mammoth Inn to the lookout (\$55 adults, \$25 children). For a real adventure, you can take a "wintermoon" dog sled dinner ride — with champagne in the sled by moonlight and dinner following the sled trip (\$65.50 per person).

Marvelly has 30 dogs in his kennel, each one a pal of his. He'll take "retired" dogs any time, letting them live out their sunset days in dog-sled happiness.

"We're a leisure home for dogs," he said.

Marvelly's ultimate goal is to have a showcase kennel where people can come and see how sled dogs operate, and see, also, the role of sled dogs in Mammoth Mountain history. In the 1920s, dog teams pulled men and supplies to and from the countryside mines.

As Marvelly and I made our way home from Minaret Vista, I was as happy as I've ever been. The snow was falling more heavily, but it made no difference to me or to Marvelly and least of all, the dogs. At the lead, Rocci was mushing along dutifully, full of heart.

Biscuit, running a little bit sideways, like a crab, was having fun showing how she did things a little bit differently from the others. The only sounds in the snowy silence were the good-natured encouragements of Marvelly, who talked to his dogs all along the trail — "Good Rocci," "Keep it up, Biscuit," "Way to go, Jenny" — and there were the normal commands of "Gee" (right), "Haw" (left), or "Whoa" (whoa).

I never did hear Marvelly say "Mush" when he wanted to get the team going. Rather, it was "Hike!" — and the dogs bounded off with a new burst of energy each time. Each initial lurch took us up steep hills with no problem at all.

I have to admit that as a passenger, I felt a little guilty about those dogs working so hard to haul me around. I think I would have been just as happy running alongside the team, cheering them on for all their enthusiasm and true obedience.

Imagine how you feel about your most faithful, loyal dog, and then multiply that a hundredfold for sled dogs. Like your pet, these dogs are eager to do what's right, but they are also extremely sensitive to all sorts of needs and commands, and they're pleased as anything to perform hours and hours of hauling and other hard work.

In fact, when a sled is rigged they will almost jump into their harnesses by themselves, and they'll howl in consternation if they're left behind.

Sled dogs are also known to be so loyal to their drivers that they will go beyond apparent dog reason to save their owners' lives when disaster hits. Like Buck the dog in "Call of the Wild," many sled dogs go to great lengths to serve the master they respect and love.

Baldy of Nome, the lead dog in Scotty Allan's 1911 Solomon Derby racing team, resuscitated his unconscious master after Allan hit his head on an iron trail stake. Slim Williams, the famous Alaskan trailblazer was also saved by his lead dog, who pawed him fiercely in the face as he drifted off to sleep in the snow. Slim bled severely, but at least he didn't freeze to death.

In my own annals of dog sled history there is Togo, the lead dog in Leonhard Seppala's team that carried my grandfather 90 miles through a raging Alaskan blizzard. In the dark, Togo dutifully kept to the trail that Seppala could no longer see — and although my grandfather died three days after he reached the hospital in Candle, Togo had done his job faithfully, successfully and well.

For more information, call or write Dog Sled Adventures, P.O. Box 7791, Mammoth Lakes, Calif. 93546, (619) 934-6161.

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