

DOG SLEDDING ANECDOTES

By Oliver Cameron
with Ole Wik¹

One day, in Kotzebue, a Pentacostal missionary came to me. He was wanting some meat, and asked if I would take him caribou hunting.

This guy wasn't making out so good. Compared with the Baptists and Quakers and Catholics, he didn't have a lot of parishioners, and he wasn't getting a lot of support from his mission society.

I had five dogs, and he was able to borrow six from one of his parishioners, so we had quite a string of dogs. My wheel dogs were bigger than his, so I hitched them right in front of the sled and put my other three up in front, with his rather small dogs in between.

Since his dogs were strangers and weren't used to me and the other dogs, we had a little "entertainment", some rather exasperating situations, but we finally got going. He was a heavy fellow, so we pretty much had a load even without meat, just our camp outfit and a grub box.

Anyway, we went up in the hills quite a ways up the Little Noatak. We made camp after we got up near the hunting area. The next day we hunted, got three or four caribou, and got the meat ready. By that time it was getting late and we were tired, so we stayed another night.

I figured that we had load enough and didn't want to make another trip, so we headed home the next day. By the time we got back down to the edge of the Kobuk Lake, the dogs were tired and so was I, so I cached most of the meat. His dogs were unused and soft and really tired, and he wasn't in shape for something like that either. He couldn't get off the sled and run much.

On those trails you can't run beside the sled in the deep snow, and he couldn't run behind and keep up when he got off the sled. He wanted me to go ahead, and let him come along at his own pace. I didn't want to leave him and hesitated to do that, but I'd go ahead a ways and wait until he caught up.

We did that for a while until we got close to the village. Then the dogs got more lively, and the trail was hard and fast and not too bad going. He got on the sled and road the last half mile.

The first thing the next morning I took my dogs, got the rest of the meat, and brought it in to him. That was the only time that I have ever used such a long string of dogs.

I swore up and down to myself, "Never again," but I'd felt sorry for the fellow. He was having a hard time there. Most of his parishioners were people that had moved down from Point Hope. They hadn't been there too long and some of them hardly spoke English, so he couldn't talk to them.

I think they were too smart. They knew better than to try to take him hunting, and they probably had all they could handle just keeping themselves fed and going. Anyway, it was an experience.

I don't think he stayed too long. I think he gave up and went out.

After several months or a year, another Pentacostal fellow came. He had more financial backing, and was an entirely different type of fellow. He got along well with the people, and there were a few more of them by that time, so I think he was doing alright. He started a little store there and was able to make quite a bit of money on the side from that.

He was there for a couple of years, anyway. I don't remember what eventually happened to him. I think he was still there when I left Kotzebue.

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I once had a camp at Iqaluligagaruk, about 30 miles from Kotzebue, and wanted to make a round trip to town. I left early in the morning, got to our place there, unharnessed the dogs, fed them, and let them rest for three hours or so while I was taking of business and mail.

Then I hooked up the four dogs and started out toward Lockhart Point. They were not eager to go. They were working OK after I got them into the notion that they had to, but about a mile from town, I saw two of them touch their noses together just briefly, and then, as one, they tried to wheel around and head back to town. Of course I took care of that real quick. I had to laugh at the time.

Bob Uhl also had a camp back up the creek at Iqaluligagaruk. I think he had an iglu there, and Charlie Jones had a big iglu quite a bit farther back than Bob's. I built an iglu closer to the lake. That was for wintertime.

It was a good place to hunt rabbits, and a good base for hunting caribou. In the springtime it was a good place for prospecting for sheefish out on the Kobuk Lake.

1) This essay stems from a series of telephone conversations that Ole Wik had with Oliver between December 2007 and February 2008.