

ALASKA'S FAMOUS DOGS

Life and Deeds of Man's Wise, Intrepid Assistants in the Far North

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WHEN man's faithful friend the dog enters the trackless deserts of the Far North, ceasing to be merely a companion and pet, he rises to the dignity of a worker second in importance only to the fearless men who are slowly pushing back the fringe of the unknown Arctic. There for centuries the dog has toiled along the frozen trails, harnessed to the rough sleds of the natives dwelling in the frost-bound regions that even yet lie beyond the last outpost of civilization.

Where and when he was first broken to his life of toil are questions still unanswered. The first white men to set foot on the icy slopes of Greenland, the sterile wilderness of the Great Slave Lake and Mackenzie River countries, and the vast unknown tracts of Alaska, found him a beast of burden, with generations of intrepid sled-dogs lying behind him. Probably, like the horse his origin as a laborer is shrouded in the fogs of antiquity.

His use is general along the Arctic Circle; but in Alaska and the British Yukon he has attained his highest stage of development, this being due to his immediate adoption by the gold-seekers who invaded those countries in recent years. From the first they depended almost entirely upon the dog for transporting their provisions on their great stampedes, using him on a scale previously unknown and patiently laboring to improve him in his work. Without him, the men who trudged into the wilderness and by their daring laid the foundations for the interior's development would have faced a task well-nigh impossible. And realizing this, these daring forerunners of civilization came to consider the sled-dog not so much their servant as their partner, as is evidenced by the regard with which they treat him.

Harnessed to the sled, he hauls freight and outfits hundreds of miles along the great trails of the Northland during the long winter, and in summer works as a pack animal, his most important labor, however, being on the frozen trails. He is one of a team consisting usually of five or six dogs, harnessed to the sled generally in single file, though sometimes when the journey is one of exceptional length and the load unusually heavy as many as eight and nine dogs are in line. The harness is simple, in some cases being composed of collars and traces, but as a rule consisting of these and a back-and-belly-band.

The most important member of the team, the leader, to which falls the arduous task of guiding the other dogs in obedience to the profane commands of the "musher," must be endowed with an intelligence and knowledge that lift him above the common herd. Naturally his position is at the head of the line, where his sagacity, resourcefulness and knowledge of the snow-trails are kept in constant activity. His mental powers place him beyond the toil which falls to the others, except in emergencies when he also strains at the frozen traces. There is one breed of Northland dog, however, whose leaders work as hard as the rank and file—the fierce Mackenzie River huskies whose restless natures do not allow them to shirk toil even when they head the team as its leader.

The leader's brains do not place him above hardship, for if fresh snow has fallen or the highway has become drifted he must break trail for the less intelligent animals behind him. His lot is the easiest of all under favorable conditions, but under adverse conditions it is the worst, the rigors of a heavy trail telling more quickly on him than on the other members of the team. Because of this, the larger teams generally have a substitute leader working among the rank and file, one which possesses



enough knowledge and brains to enable him to step into the first place when the leader begins to show signs of exhaustion. Then the latter falls back and trots at the side of the sled until he is rested. The good leader balks at dropping back to a position among the workers, as a rule absolutely refusing to move a step when he is reduced from the leadership.

In that position he must not only be a master in finding the trail with unerring instinct, though even a "sourdough musher's" long experience proves unable to follow its crooked course, but he must also know every tone of his driver's voice as he shouts his cabalistic orders, the tone in which the command is given meaning almost as much as the spoken words. Thus "Come over haw!" uttered in a quiet tone means "Swing a little to the left!" while "Haw!" in a sharp, imperious shout means a sudden and complete turn to the left. Between these two tones lie many others, in which the veteran leader becomes so well versed that he obeys the order with a nicety that seems almost incredible. With such a dog the "musher" may take no liberties, for if he shouts "Haw!" and neglects to yell "Mush!" when the team has swung the desired length to the left the leader will guide the sled in a semicircle until he strikes the trail again, when he will start back over the route along which he has just passed.

"Gee!" signifying to turn to the right, "Mush!" to move ahead, "Whoa!" to halt, and "Haw!" with all their variations, form the language of the trail, which must be mastered by the dog before

he can trot at the head of the line as a full-fledged leader. Still he may be a master of the language and learned in the wisdom of the trail, yet be only a good leader. To become a great leader, he must have all this knowledge, and in addition possess resourcefulness, cunning, sagacity and a grit that will not falter even when the biting wind sweeping down from the Arctic hills drives the frozen snow into his faithful eyes. Such dogs were Ki-yi of the Atlin Trail, Laddie leader of the Royal Mail team, Italian Bob of the Northwest Mounted Police, and Bonnie of the Fortymile Trail—dumb beasts, but possessing a wisdom and courage truly heroic.

To the training of a leader the "musher" gives his best efforts, the undertaking being one requiring patience and tact, as well as a thorough knowledge of the ways of the trail. Sometimes the young dog and a veteran are harnessed together to a sled, and the older animal in obeying the shouted command teaches the novice the meaning of each order; or the dog is simply put at the head of a team and forced to learn by actual experience. Some gain the knowledge in a week's time or less, while others are not so apt; but in the case of the former it must be remembered that the Northern dog lives in an atmosphere of "mushing," in consequence often picking up considerable knowledge of trail language before the end of his puppyhood.

Behind the leader in the team come the laboring dogs, whose only requirements are brute strength and grit. They do not need special training, the novice being thrust into the harness and soon learning his simple duties. The worst punishment that can befall these workers, from their own viewpoint, is to be taken from the traces and not allowed to help in hauling the sled. To them it is worse than the severest whipping, and when one has been disgraced in that manner, whining piteously as

he runs alongside the team, he tries at every opportunity to push his head through the vacant collar. After awhile the "musher" lets him return to the harness, and for days he is one of the hardest workers in the team. The laziest cur that ever attempted to shirk his share of the trail's toil yields immediately to such treatment, when a brutal beating would make absolutely no impression on him, if indeed it did not make him worse.

Though only common workers, the dogs behind the leader take a certain pride in their positions, and one which has been broken to a certain place in the line sometimes will refuse to pull if he should happen to be transferred.

There are three broad divisions among the dogs of the North: the tricky medium-sized malamute, a wolf-dog, whose cunning face is distorted by a sarcastic grin; the fierce husky, also a wolf-dog, an animal of tremendous strength and vicious propensities; and the "outside" dog, the last division, embracing all the canines taken North from civilized countries.

The malamutes have gained the widest fame of the three, their name being so closely linked to the interior that one suggests the other. They are hereditary workers, their ancestors for hundreds of years back having toiled along the frozen trails of Alaska and the British Yukon in Indian and Eskimo teams. A cross between a wolf and a dog, they have all the vices of both, as well as most of their virtues. They are "wise" in the slang meaning of the word, it being a common saying along the great valley of the mighty Yukon



The Husky Is the Ishmaelite of the Snow-trail.