

*Determination of Eligibility for
The McGrath-Takotna Winter Trail (IDT-0068)*

June 17, 2002

Prepared by Michael R. Yarborough
for HDR Alaska, Inc.



Cultural Resource Consultants
Anchorage, Alaska

Introduction

Takotna is located in interior Alaska on the northern bank of the Takotna River, 27 kilometers west of McGrath (Figure 1). Also known in the past as Berry Landing, Portage City, Takotna City, and Takotna Station, Takotna was a riverboat landing and supply point for the Innoko River placer district. The discovery of gold in the Innoko River drainage precipitated a stampede into the area in 1907. In 1908, the Kuskokwim Commercial Company in Bethel hired Arthur Berry to take supplies up the Takotna River. The village was founded at the farthest point upstream on the river that Berry's small sternwheeler could reach. Takotna prospered during the gold rush and by 1912 had several stores that provided supplies and equipment to the large number of prospectors working and living in the area. By 1919, there were several roadhouses, a post office, and about 50 houses.

In 1908, the U.S. Army's Alaska Road Commission (ARC) surveyed a trail from Seward to Nome through Takotna and other major mining communities. The new trail, dubbed the Seward to Nome Mail Trail, eventually became the Iditarod National Historic Trail (see below). An airfield was constructed in Takotna in 1921. By 1923, the town had a radio station and its own newspaper. There was also a ARC "sub-office" in Takotna (Naske 1986:108). Since low water often precluded the arrival of steamboats, the Takotna-Sterling Landing road was constructed to the Kuskokwim River in 1930. During the 1930s, however, McGrath became a more important supply center and the Alaska Commercial Company store at Takotna closed. In 1949, construction began on nearby Tatalina Air Force Station, the site of a White Alice communications system. Operations at the station were phased out during the 1980s (Alaska Department of Transportation and Public Facilities 2001).

McGrath was originally a seasonal Upper Kuskokwim Athabascan village. In 1904, Abraham Appel opened a trading post at the old town site, now on a slough across the river from the modern village. The Alaska Commercial Company built a store in the old town in 1909. As both a stop along the Iditarod Trail and the northernmost point on the Kuskokwim River accessible by large riverboats, McGrath became a regional supply center. Hundreds of miners traveled through McGrath between 1911 to 1920, although the town's importance declined as mining activities fell off sharply after 1925.

McGrath-Takotna Winter Trail

Constructed in 1923 by the ARC, the McGrath-Takotna Winter Trail (IDT-0068) formed part of the mail route from Nenana to Flat. The 18-mile-long trail (Figures 2 and 3) begins on the western bank of the Kuskokwim River, near the junction of the Takotna and Kuskokwim Rivers at McGrath. It runs generally westward, crosses to the northern side of the Takotna River about one mile east of the village, and connects to the Takotna-Flat Primary Iditarod Trail (IDT-059), the "main" trail in this area (Sullivan 2000:1).

The McGrath-Takotna Trail is one of many historic rights-of-way granted to the State of Alaska under Revised Statute (RS) 2477 of the Mining Act of 1866. In the state's inventory, the trail is designated RST-138. It is shown in the Alaska Department of Transportation and Public

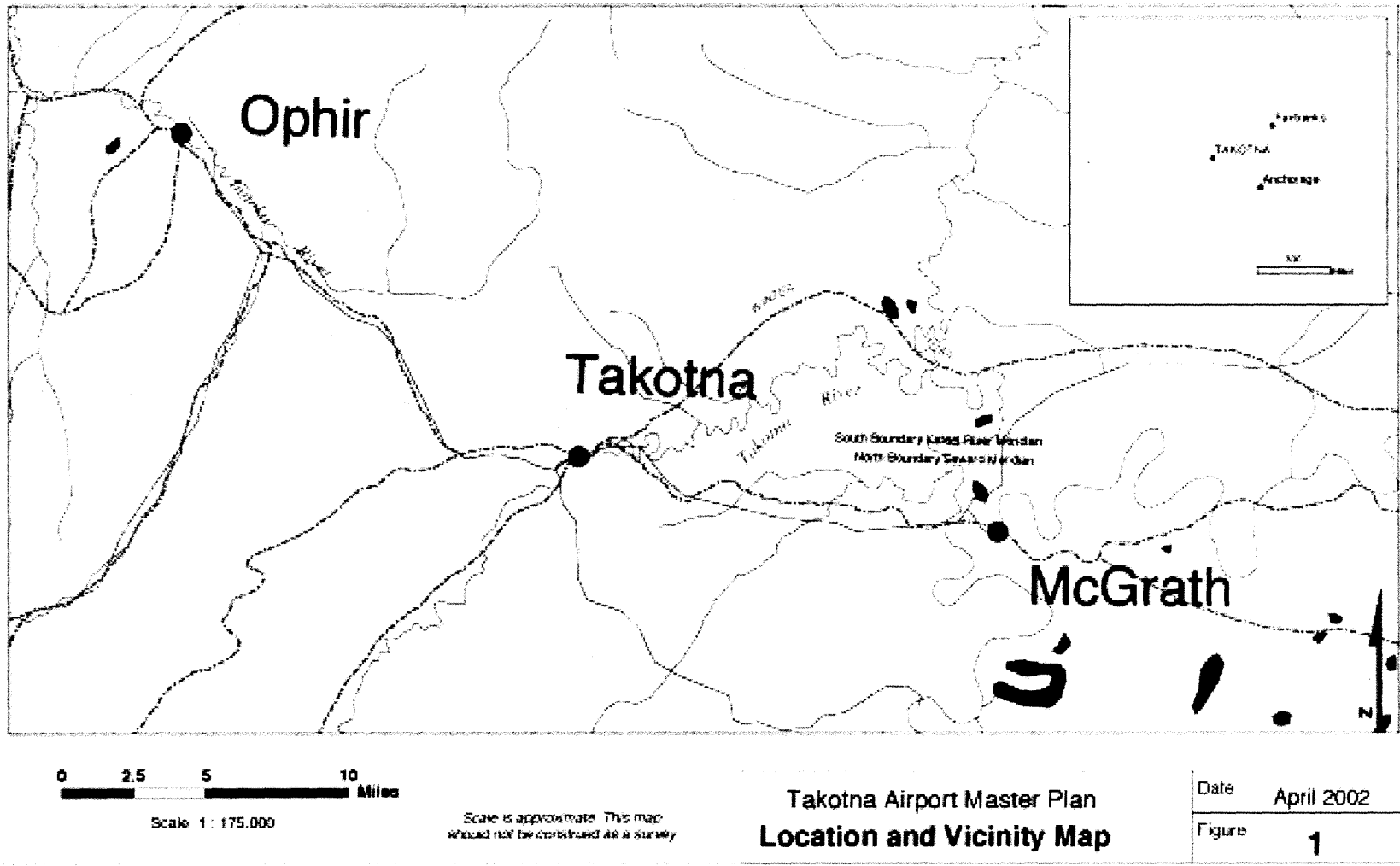


Figure 1. Takotna and McGrath area.



Figure 2. Takotna-McGrath Winter Trail. View east. This section is just southeast of the trail's intersection with the primary Iditarod Trail near Takotna.

Facilities' *Trails Inventory* as Trails 3 and 5 on Map 80 (McGrath quadrangle), and Trail 30 on Map 79 (Iditarod quadrangle). Historical documentation on the trail includes ARC annual reports and correspondence between 1922 and 1954. A 1922 ARC memo includes the trail in a list of needed projects. The ARC's 1923 annual report lists the trail as route "80AA" and notes that \$506.00 had been spent on log bridges across three creeks. By the 1925 annual report, \$1,013 had been spent on the trail. In 1928, the ARC constructed a 78-foot-long suspension bridge over the Tatalina River and relocated the trail "for 4 miles from the bridge," bringing the amount spent on the trail to \$2,665.18 (Sullivan 2000:1). Maintenance costs reported in the 1929 annual report totaled \$84.50. By 1954, the trail is on ARC's list of inactive, abandoned or transferred routes. In all, the ARC spent \$7,469.34 building and maintaining the McGrath-Takotna Winter Trail (Sullivan 2000:1).

Significance

The McGrath-Takotna Winter Trail is eligible for the National Register under Criterion A (events) as a component part of the Iditarod National Historic Trail system (Figure 4). The trail is significant within the historic context of transportation and communication associated with the Iditarod Trail. The Iditarod system was designated a National Historic Trail under the National Trails System Act, Public Law 90-543 of October 2, 1968.

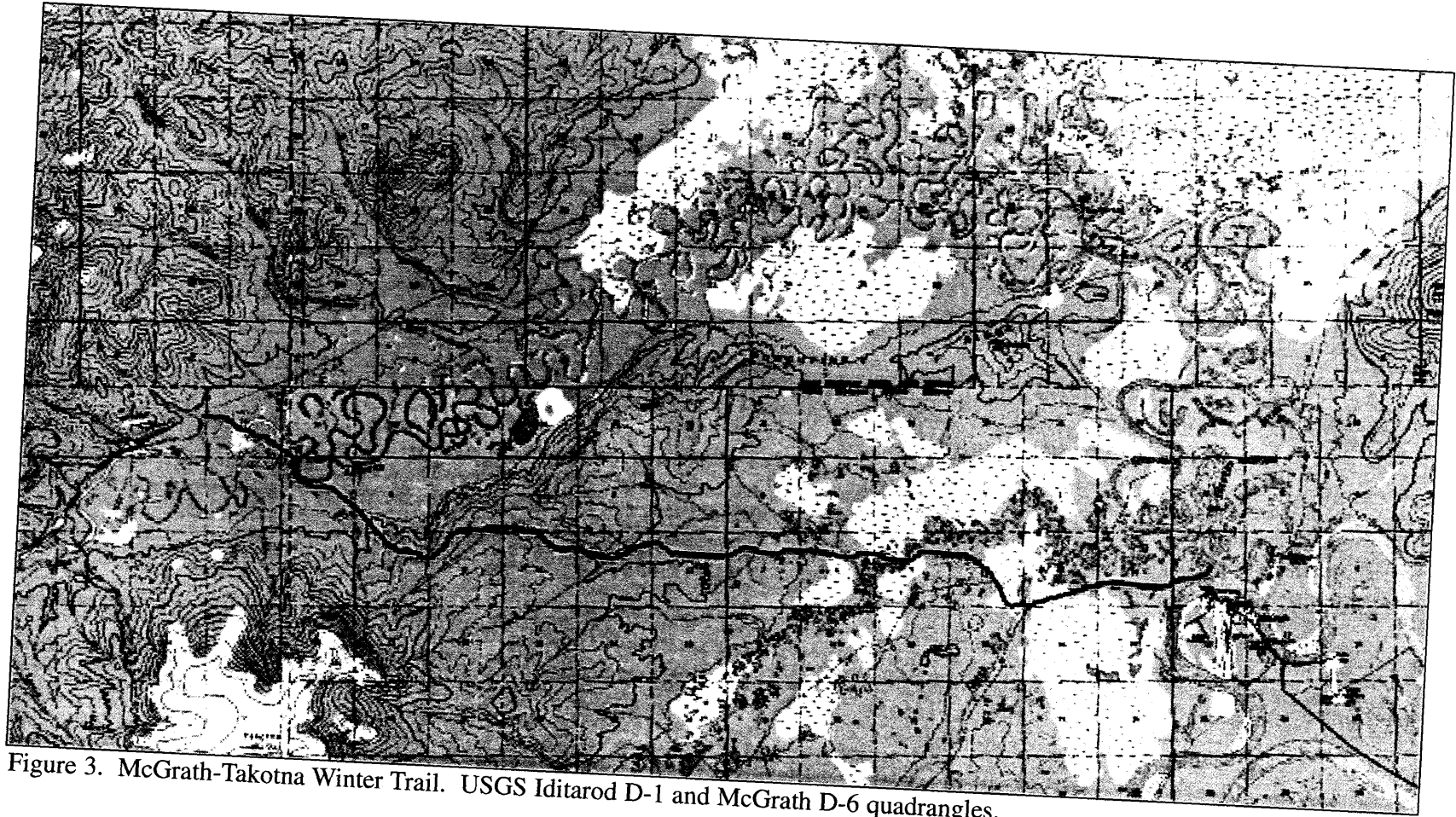


Figure 3. McGrath-Takotna Winter Trail. USGS Iditarod D-1 and McGrath D-6 quadrangles.

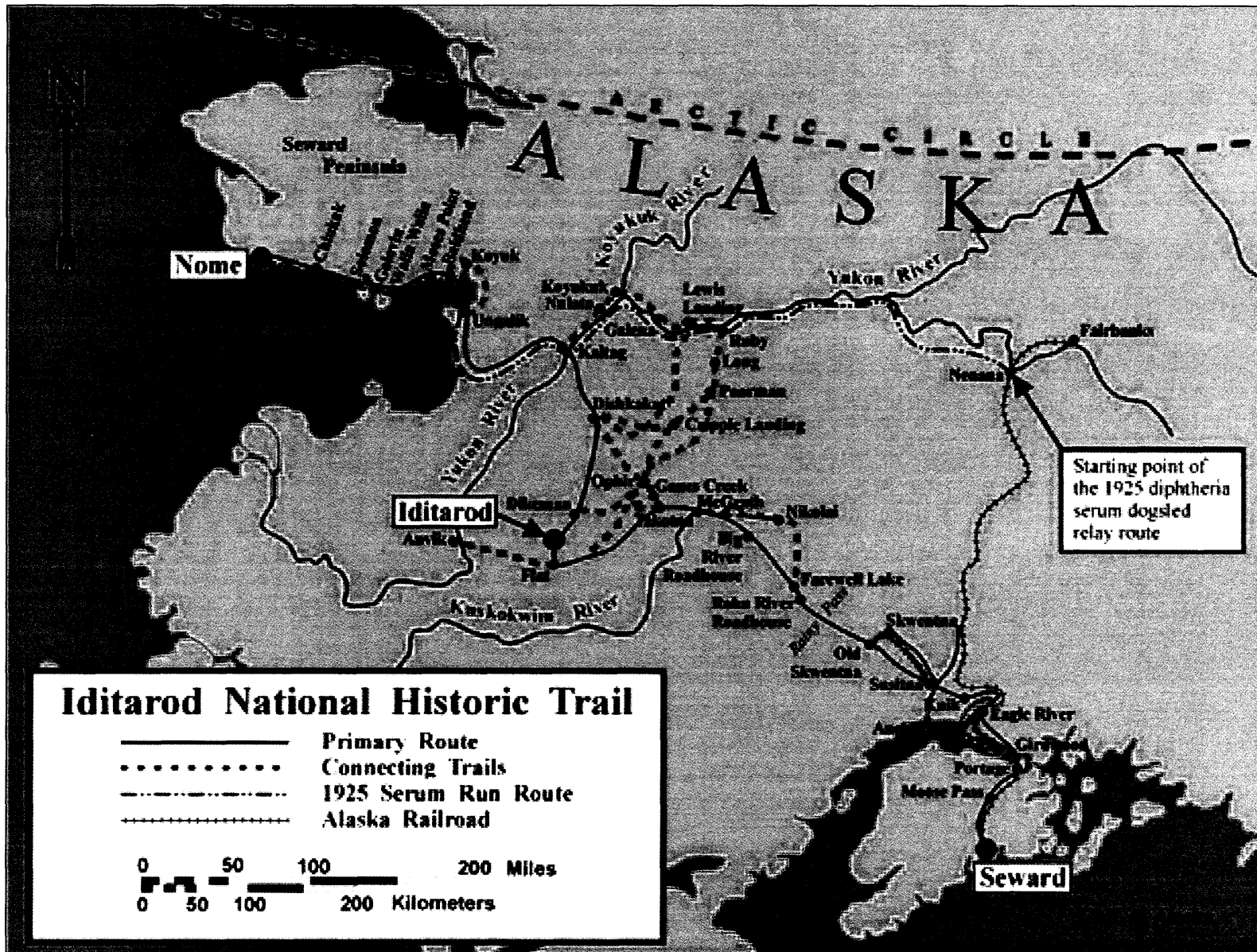


Figure 4. Iditarod National Historic Trail. From <http://www.ak.blm.gov/ado/inhtmaps.html>.

The Iditarod was actually a trail system made up of a primary route between Seward and Nome and over 1,300 miles of connecting trails. Used earlier by Ingalik and Dena'ina Indians and Russian fur traders, the Iditarod Trail was a main artery of winter travel, commerce, and communications between mining camps, trading posts, and other settlements founded during Alaska's gold rush era (Schweigert 1999).

In 1905, the ARC began to improve transportation and communications among the gold mining areas of Alaska by upgrading existing routes and constructing new ones:

Alaskans have never been shy about making demands on the federal government...Residents complained when the government did not provide the services available to other Americans. Complaints were very vociferous during the gold rush era when the federal government might perhaps have been excused for a tardy response to such a swift swelling of the population. Alaskans expected full mail service despite the awesome distances and scattered population. They expected trails, roads, railroads, telegraphs and police protection as well (Naske 1986:91).



Figure 5. Mail carrier with his dog team on the Yukon River. University of Alaska, Fairbanks.

In 1910-1911, the ARC built a winter trail from Seward to Nome along a route that, because of its association with the booming Iditarod Mining District, became popularly known as the Iditarod Trail. Starting at the ice free port of Seward, or the town of Knik on Cook Inlet, early twentieth century gold seekers traveled the Iditarod across the Alaska Range en route to the

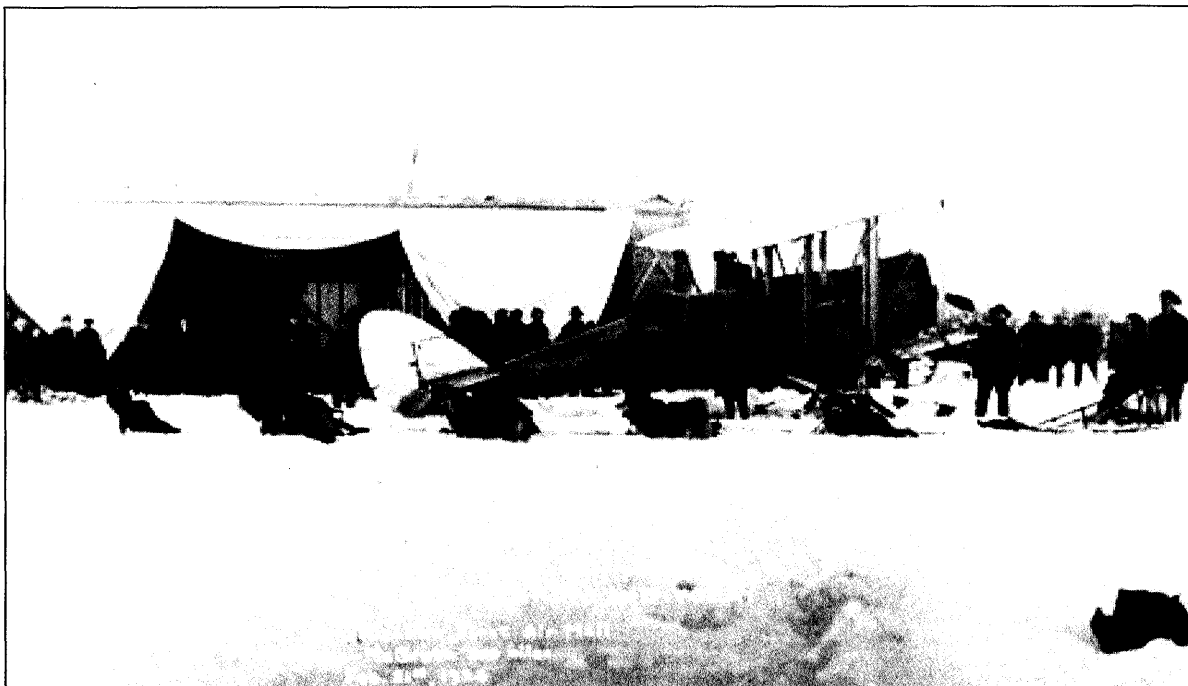


Figure 6. Alaska's first airmail flight from Fairbanks to McGrath, February 1924. Anchorage Museum of History and Art, B72.88.45.

various mining districts. Parts of the trail were also already in use for travel between Nome and inland gold camps. Developing from both ends, the trail eventually met at the Iditarod Mining District. The primary route was intended to be principally a winter trail on which dog sleds would carry mail and freight (Figure 5).

Construction of the McGrath-Takotna Trail was part of an ARC work program begun in 1920 that included rehabilitating or reconstructing roads and trails, and building new roads, trails, bridges, and aircraft landing fields (Naske 1986:109). Connecting routes like the McGrath-Takotna Trail provided access to and between communities not located directly on the primary Iditarod route. By 1926, the commission had constructed 1,433.5 miles of wagon road, 100 miles of tram road, 1,086 miles of sled road, 6,671.5 miles of permanent trail, and 712 miles of flagged trail (Naske 1986:108-109).

Dog sleds remained the primary mode of winter transportation until the airplane came into common use about 1924 (Schweigert 1999; Figure 6). Besides the modern-day sled dog race, the Iditarod is perhaps best known for the 1925 relay of dog teams that carried diphtheria serum from Nenana to Nome.

The McGrath-Takotna Trail still evokes the historic feeling of a 1920s trail. The trail is a relatively unchanged Iditarod connecting route and still has integrity of location, setting, and association. For this reason, the trail is judged to be eligible for inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places.

References Cited

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Nomination, Historic Properties Associated with the Iditarod National Historic Trail.

Prepared for USDA Forest Service, Chugach National Forest, Anchorage. Cultural Research & Management, Inc., Englewood, CO.

Sullivan, Joseph

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Ms. Judith Bittner
State Historic Preservation Officer
Office of History and Archaeology
550 West 7th Avenue, Suite 1310
Anchorage, AK 99501-3565

Re: Takotna Airport Master Plan

Dear Ms. Bittner:

Through the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) Airport Improvement Program, the Alaska Department of Transportation and Public Facilities (DOT&PF) has undertaken an airport master planning project at Takotna, Alaska, to study ways to improve aircraft service to the community and bring the airport into compliance with current FAA and DOT&PF standards. The Takotna Airport Master Plan identifies "Alternative C," an area approximately 0.9 km east of the village, as the preferred location for a new airport. An access road would be constructed from an existing road at the eastern edge of the village to the new apron.

An archeological and historical literature review identified several historic sites in the general project area. The town of Takotna is listed in the Alaska Heritage Resources Survey (AHRS) as IDT-0045. Other sites include the Takotna Roadhouse (IDT-0008), one of several roadhouses that operated during the 1920s, the McGrath-Takotna Connecting Trail (IDT-0068), and the Iditarod-Takotna Summer Trail (IDT-0248). Both of the latter are components of the Iditarod National Historic Trail system. The "main" trail in the Takotna area is the Takotna-Flat Primary Iditarod Trail (IDT-059). In addition to the properties listed in the AHRS, there is at least one small cemetery east of the village.

Brandy Prosser of HDR Alaska, Rae Deley of DOT&PF, Michael Yarborough of Cultural Resource Consultants, and Stefanie Ludwig of your office met on April 17, 2002 to discuss the Takotna project. Ms. Deley and Ms. Prosser gave an introduction to the project, and they discussed Alternative C (the preferred alternative) and needs for additional work. Mr. Yarborough pointed out known grave locations east of the village and explained what Andra Love (HDR) had learned about them during March 2002 visit to Takotna. Ms. Ludwig agreed that the runway did not need an archeological survey, but indicated that there should be a field survey of the access road from the village. They also discussed the routes of the Iditarod and McGrath-Takotna trails east of Takotna. The access road and runway of Alternative C are aligned to avoid the Iditarod, although the runway will cover a portion of the McGrath-Takotna trail.

Michael Yarborough conducted an archeological survey of the access road between June 24 and 26, 2002. He found no cultural material along this route. He also photographed the section of the McGrath-Takotna trail that would be covered by the runway and confirmed the location of the graves east of the village. A full report on this survey will be available soon.

A determination of National Register eligibility for the McGrath-Takotna trail is included with this letter. The Department has determined that the trail is eligible for the Register of Historic

Places and asks your concurrence with this determination. I have also included for your review a draft Memorandum of Agreement that contains stipulations to mitigate impacts on the trail and satisfy FAA's Section 106 responsibilities.

If you have any questions or need additional information please do not hesitate to call Laurie Mulcahy at 269-0536 or via email at laurie_mulcahy@dot.state.ak.us. Michael Yarborough can be reached at 349-3445 or via email at archeology@acsalaska.net. Thank you for your assistance.

Sincerely,

Jerry O. Ruehle
Environmental Coordinator

Attachments:

Determination of Eligibility for the McGrath-Takotna Winter Trail (IDT-0068) by Michael R. Yarborough

Draft Memorandum of Agreement

cc: Mark Mayo, ADOT&PF Project Manager
Laurie Mulcahy, Environmental Team Leader, PD&E
Sally Morsell, HDR Alaska, Inc.
Michael Yarborough, Archaeologist, Cultural Resource Consultants
Mike Zaidlicz, BLM Iditarod Trail Administrator