The Iditarod National Historic Trail: A brief history

On Christmas Day in 1908, gold was discovered on Otter Creek, a tributary of the Iditarod River. Alaska’s last great gold rush would begin here, far into Alaska’s interior. Nome had already been established because of a previous gold rush, but winter ice prevented maritime traffic for the majority of the year. The only ice free port established at this time was in Seward, a far cry from both Iditarod and Nome. Miners and entrepreneurs were already demanding that the government establish a trail for mail and safe passage, and Colonel Walter L. Goodwin and the Alaska Road Commission began work on the trail in 1908, and concluded in 1911. Because expansive river systems allowed access to the Iditarod region in summer months, the trail system was primarily used in winter. The majority of travelers did not complete the entire Seward to Nome route, but rather made their destination the gold rich fields of the Iditarod district, thus the Seward-Nome route became known as the Iditarod Trail.

Dog mushing on the Iditarod Trail was nearing its end by the time Nome had its diphtheria outbreak. Aviation was in its infancy and was quickly becoming the primary means of bush travel. Because of weather conditions, the mushers that remained from the gold era were summoned to complete the relay that would be known as the 1925 Serum run. This was the last great moment for dog mushing, and would be the inspiration for the Iditarod Sled Dog Race begun in 1973. While the original serum run was run from Nenana to Nome, the current race format follows the historical trail as mapped by Colonel Goodwin, thus combining the excitement of sled dog racing with the historical past.

The Iditarod National Historic Trail is Established

In 1978 the United States Congress, at the behest of the public, amended the National Trails System Act to include a new category: National Historic Trails. Among its first inductees was the Iditarod National Historic Trail (INHT). The 938 mile Seward-Nome mail route surveyed and constructed by the Alaska Road Commission under Goodwin was established as the primary route. However, the entirety of the trail network, including branches that connect former mining towns, was included under the National Trails System Act, effectively adding hundreds of miles to the INHT.

This sprawling network of trails passes through land owned by various federal and state agencies, as well as Native Corporations, local governments and individuals. Through the amended Act, the Bureau of Land Management was designated as the manager of the INHT, to work in cooperation with all these agencies and individuals who had ownership of the trail. Their collaborative effort to establish a management philosophy culminated in the publication of the INHT Comprehensive Management Plan (CMP) with the accompanying INHT Resource Inventory.
The INHT CMP and its accompanying volume INHT Resource Inventory have two purposes. The first is to document as many historical sites on the trail system as possible. BLM, in conjunction with its agency partners, sent several expeditions out to the trail between 1978 and 1981. Sites that were identified in historical literature and oral histories were first located by air, and in many cases, further studied on the ground. The location and remaining structures at these sites were documented and photographed. In some cases, these were the last photographs captured at particular sites, as fire damage and river erosion destroyed what was left of its remains.

The second purpose of the INHT CMP was to develop management proposals for each individual site. Each recommendation was based on the condition of the site, as well as potential visitor use and accessibility. Based on these recommendations, the BLM and its partners maintain and protect various site locations. One such location is the Rohn River Shelter Cabin, originally built in 1939, which is still used today as a checkpoint in the annual Iditarod dog sled race.

The INHT collection at ARLIS

The digital INHT collection at ARLIS includes most of the material collected for the creation of the INHT CMP. While only a small percentage of data and photographs appear in the INHT CMP and INHT Resource Inventory, this collection makes public the rest of the work, which includes all photographs, resource inventories, field notes, and more. Also included are the oral interviews, which feature the voices and stories of men and women who experienced the end of Alaska’s gold era, including participants in the 1925 serum run. Previously unpublished reports included in the collection also add to the mass body of information collected about the Iditarod National Historic Trail.

The information here is useful for research of both history and policy. Much of the data included offers an alternative view into Alaska’s gold rush heyday, examining and substantiating the literature written during and about this period in Alaska’s history. Secondarily, the examination and documentation of these historical resources as they were being studied in the early 1980s offers a window into past preservation tactics, and guidance for the future preservation of Alaska’s history.

Navigating the INHT Digital Collection at ARLIS

The digital collection is organized into these major sections:

- INHT Comprehensive Management Plan
- INHT 1982 Resource Inventory
- Geographically based by 1:250K quadrangle
1908 Goodwin Alaska Road Commission Report

Oral Histories

Lynch Report

Peterson 1981 Maps

Bureau of Recreation Gold Rush Trails Study

Each site as identified by BLM and its partners was given an Alaska Heritage Resource Survey number, as well as mapped geographically. In this collection, you will be able to search the records by site name. You may also search based on geographic location, with each site located within a 1:63K quadrangle. For those unfamiliar with these terms, a browse by map will be available. We’ll use the town of Iditarod as an example.

Iditarod has the AHRS number IDT-001. IDT (Iditarod) is the 250K quadrangle. IDT C5 is the 1:63K quadrangle.

We’re pleased to make this collection available to the public for the first time, particularly now when Alaska celebrates the 100th anniversary of the Iditarod National Historic Trail from its survey in 1908 to its final construction in 1912. ‘Immerse yourself in the rich history of Alaska’s gold era, and know that the Bureau of Land Management, along with its partners, both public and private, are working not only to remember our past, but to preserve it.

Jarod Hoogland

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