

**IDITAROD TRAIL INTERVIEW - EDGAR NOLLNER**

September 12, 1980  
Galena, Alaska

BLM Interviewer:

Tom Beck

SEPTEMBER 12, 1980 - EDGAR NOLLNER

INTRODUCTION

INTERVIEWER: .....Trail interview with Edgar Nollner of Galena, Alaska. The interview was conducted at Edgar's home in Galena on September 12th, 1980. The interview was conducted for the Bureau of Land Management by Tom Beck.

Edgar was born near Loudon, Alaska, in a small village called Old Village in 1904. Edgar's father, who came over the Chilkoot Pass in 1898, had a small store at Loudon. His father also cut wood for steamboats and carried mail from Old Village to Kaltag, both during the summer and during the winters.

Edgar also cut wood for the steamboats, and in 1921, he hauled out over 250 cords of wood by dog sled. Edgar worked summers for the CAA as a riverboat pilot for many years. As a dog musher, Edgar participated in both serum runs from Nenana to Nome in 1925. Edgar ran from Whiskey Creek to Galena in the first diphtheria run, and in the second run, Edgar ran from Galena to Bishop Mountain.

(Off record at Log No. 0126)

(On record at Log No. 0172)

INTERVIEW

Q We're up from the Iditarod Trail Project, and we're trying to get some information about some of the trails and some of the history of some of the dog carriers (sic) and mushers and things like that. And one of the things we're dealing with, too, is the serum run. I know there's.....

A Yeah.

Q You've talked to a lot of people about that before.

A Mm hmm (affirmative). Yeah, and I've been over that trail. I never been no place else.

Q Mm hmm (affirmative).

A Uh-huh (affirmative). One year (indiscernible) go airplane from here to Anchorage. That's all.

Q Yeah. Okay. Let me get -- if you don't mind, let me sit a little closer to you. There we go. This doesn't pick up unless you're real close, so I hope you don't mind this.

A Okay. Yeah. Mm hmm (affirmative).

Q Where were you born?

A I was born up here about 14 miles up here, in Loudon Slough.

Q Oh, Loudon Slough?

A Mm hmm (affirmative).

Q Is that what they call Old Village?

A Old Village there, yeah, uh-huh (affirmative). 1904.

Q How did you -- were your parents.....

A Yeah. My old man had the store there.

Q Did he?

A Yeah, he came over the Chilkoot Pass in '98, and then he -- one winter he stayed up at 40-mile for one winter, and then he came down here, and then he started the trading post there.

Q At.....

A At Louden.

Q .....Louden?

A Louden, yeah. Mm hmm (affirmative). I was born in Louden Slough in 1904, and 1906 they moved up to Louden. This is what -- this one was the road there, yes. And then somewhere in 1920 we moved down here.

Q Was the store -- did that sort of -- was there a village there before the store?

A Yeah. There was a village there, but some of them people moved to Koyukuk, some up to Kokrines and some up to Yuki, and then we moved to Louden at that time, 1906, and in 1920, we moved down here.

Q How about your mother? Where was she from?

A She was born around here someplace, up around Louden I think. Mm hmm (affirmative).

Q Did your father ever find any gold or was he.....

A No, he never -- no, he never looked for gold, no. He'd just do chopping and -- he used to cut steamboat wood. The first winter when he was up at Louden on the island, he cut 120 cords with just pole axes, so he didn't have no saw. That's lots of chopping.

Q What'd they get for a cord of wood, do you know?

A I don't know. I wouldn't know, but it wasn't very much.

Q The steamboats used a lot of wood?

A Yeah, there was lots of steamboats coming and going steady in them days, no airplanes. Yeah.

Q So he eventually sold the store there in Louden?

A No. My mom died and it's no more.

Q He moved down here too?

A Yeah, he moved down. He died in 19- -- we moved down here in 1920, then he died in 1928 or '29.

Q Do you remember Louden very well -- or you were pretty small then?

A No, I was -- I used to work eight hours a day when we came down here about 19- -- yeah. Mm hmm (affirmative). I was about 15 years old and still worked eight hours a day -- we were putting up some buildings.

Q Did your father have a dog team?

A Yeah, he used to (indiscernible) from Louden from Old Village all the way to Tanana and down to Kaltag once a month with those. In the summertime we used to go boat, too. It didn't have no kicker or nothing, just a pulling boat.

Q He carried it all the way from.....

A From Louden to Tanana, he'd land the boats, row, put up sail, although he'd float back down -- float to Kaltag, and you got to row and pull it all the way back up to Louden, you know, once a month.

Q Who was he -- did he have a contract with somebody?

A Yeah, uh-huh (affirmative), carrying mail, just letters, that's all. Yeah. Wintertime, same way.

Q Did you help him do that at all?

A No, I was too small. Yeah. Mm hmm (affirmative). And the serum run was 1925.

Q There were two runs, weren't there?

A Yeah, there was one in January, one in March. I was on the second one too, from here to Bishop Mountain. The first one, that was from Whiskey Creek down here, and my brother took from here down (indiscernible). It was cold that time.

Q How cold was it?

A It was about 50, I guess, or more. You couldn't even see them dogs, just like smoke. And when I left Whiskey Creek in January it was dark. It took me three hours to come down. And you say nothing to these dogs, they just followed the trail at nighttime. And the second round, Scotty Clark (ph), a boy from Whiskey Creek down here, it snowed too much so he told me to take it to Bishop Mountain.

Q Could you see the trail that first run at all? It was pretty dark?

A The first run, we couldn't even see -- too dark, but them dogs followed the trail good.

Q Whose team was it?

A That was ours. We had seven dogs. We had five gray ones and two black ones. The first dog race I win in Ruby was 1919. I beat -- six-mile race, I beat the second team a little over six minutes.

Q Really?

A I had good dogs, yeah.

Q Where'd you race?

A Up in Ruby, they had -- on the river, a six-mile race. There was lots of miners up there at that time, in 1919.

Q Were there a lot of dog races in those days?

A Yeah, they have once in a while like Christmas and 17th of March, they used to have dog races.

Q And out at Ruby? Was Ruby a pretty big town then?

A Yeah, uh-huh (affirmative), pretty big -- all the way from (indiscernible) Creek, Poorman, there was lots of miners out that way. Everybody would come out for the dance. They had good dances, too. (Laughs)

Q That was the draw?

A Yeah.

Q That first serum run then was 50 or 60 below. Do you usually go out when it was that cold, I mean, do you.....

A I think it was around 50 below that time when I was on the first run. The second run, it was warmer in March, longer days too.

Q Mm hmm (affirmative). What was the -- how big a package was the serum in?

A It was about just so big, that's all, not too big.

Q (Indiscernible - multiple speech.)

A Put in there, yeah, put it in the sled, wrap it up good. It was frozen together down there, but it worked, I think. The second run, it was all right too.

Q The same kind of packaging as the first one was?

A Yeah, uh-huh (affirmative), same kind of package, yeah.

Q What kind of dogs did you have? Were they mixed?

A We had -- oh, gray dogs and two black ones, just like wolves. I hauled out over 250 cords of wood -- steamboat wood right here with them dogs in 1921. Half a cord of

(indiscernible). And them seven dogs, they just -- talk about strong dogs. And good feet, too, they had good feet. I used to travel all spring long, and of course, I needed a dog moccasin on them. Them other guys, they used to put dog moccasin on their feet and.....

Q You didn't use them?

A No, because they got good feet.

Q A lot of people, didn't they used to use bird dogs, too?

A Some of.....

A We used to -- after that we used to have bird dogs. I had good dogs too, one time, bird dogs. There was no race around here, too. My brother, George and Walter, they used to go up to Fairbanks to race around 1926, '27, '28, along in there. But I never went up there.

Q Hmm. Did you breed dogs, too?

A Yeah. Uh-huh (affirmative).

Q What was your lead dog at that time? Do you remember the dog?

A Our lead dog?

Q Mm hmm (affirmative).

A We called Dixie. They were smart dogs, too. When I hitched them up, my brother George and Walter and my sister Lizzy, you can't move them dogs. They just sit there. And nobody can move them dogs when I hitch them up, but when they hitch them up they haul water -- they drive them if they hitch them up. But if I hitch them up, them dogs going to sit, when I hitch them up. They holler at them and everything. No, he just stood there. Mm hmm (affirmative).

Q Hmm.

A Yeah, them are smart dogs.

Q Did you make your own sleds?

A Yeah, we used to make our own sleds all the time.

Q What'd you make them out of?

A Birch. Mm hmm (affirmative). And hickory runners.

Q What'd you lash them up together with?

A Yeah. It was (indiscernible), yeah, that my mother used to get sent from Nome. We used to order lots of water boots and things like this (indiscernible) boots and things from Nome.

Q Hmm. How long would a sled last?

A Well, if you take care of it, they last quite a while. If you don't take care of it, one winter. Some guys, they make a new sleigh and then they haul wood and pretty soon there's nothing left, (indiscernible).

Q Did you ever use metal runners at all?

A Yeah, sometimes when the -- we used to have steel runners on the bottom of the sleigh.

Q How did they ask you to participate in the serum run?

A Oh, there was -- they had -- there was telephone at that time, all the way from Tanana down to Unalakleet, all the way. And they call, they said the serum run -- they want to know who would take (indiscernible), and I said I'd go. And there was one guy -- I told them, it'd just be my brother and, you know, my sister died a few years ago. He was down in Koyukuk. And there was one guy, Monroe (ph), he

had good dogs, so (indiscernible). He had the store down there, and he asked them, 'If you want to go up this mountain, bring that medicine down to Nulato.' 'How much they going to pay? How much they going to pay?' And old man Evans told him, he said, 'Everybody dying off down in Nome. They need that medicine.' No, he wanted to know how much they going to pay, that's all.

So Charlie -- my brother, you know, Charlie Evans said, 'I'll go up there and bring it to Nulato.' He went up and he took it down to Nulato. Oh, he got paid a little bit (indiscernible). The next trip he was (indiscernible) Monroe (ph). (Laughs)

Q How much did you get, do you remember?

A We didn't -- we got about \$25, but we didn't really want nothing.

Q Mm hmm (affirmative).

A Everybody sick down there, dying off.

Q That's right.

A They had a big flu down there. Yeah. But this guy wanted to get paid first. He wanted to know how much he was going to paid. (Laughs) Yeah.

Q Did you know any of the other runners, like had you heard of Leonhard Seppala and some of those?

A Oh, yeah, I seen him. He used to go through here going -- takes the banker from Nome to Nenana with dogs.

Q Banker?

A Yeah, a big banker from Nome. He was going Outside. He had to catch a boat a certain day in Seward, so he stayed overnight. My father-in-law had a roadhouse there, and he stayed overnight. He had about under 20 dogs, I guess, and it snowed. It started to snow and he got one guy to break trail from there to Whiskey Creek so they can make it to Ruby one day. They got up in the morning, early in the morning, about 4:00 o'clock, he said, 'Come over at 4:00 o'clock in the morning. You'll have breakfast and you'll start ahead of us.' He said, 'Okay.' 'If you get up there at 12:00 o'clock you get \$20; 1:00 o'clock, \$18; and 2:00 o'clock would be \$16. It'd be \$16.' And he left ahead -- and he was -- I was on the back when they went over the bank and they were going across -- he had a lantern in his hand and he was running ahead of the dogs, you know, this guy, he's a good runner.

Q Mm hmm (affirmative).

A He had six dogs behind him. (Indiscernible) he left and he run with them, and it's blowing snow. When he got to Whiskey Creek, he got there about 1:00 o'clock. And the guys behind him, they couldn't see him. (Indiscernible) until -- been there -- oh, he stayed a time. He was carrying mail that time. He was home. And he told -- he said coming up -- he said, 'If I get here -- he told me if I get here at 12:00 o'clock, I get \$20 -- or 11:00 o'clock, \$20, and then (indiscernible) at 1:00 o'clock.' And he got up there around 12:00 o'clock, I think. That would be about \$18, something like that. He told him, 'That's all right.' He said, 'I'll tell him.' So he said, 'Come in.' He said

he was sitting in the back room, he said, 'What time did that guy come in?' He said, 'Quarter to eleven.' Just gave him \$20. (Laughs) (Indiscernible.) They got in around 3:00 o'clock. They had to -- they couldn't make it to Ruby that day.

(Indiscernible) coming up -- I had dogs with a pair of skis -- no trail. This guy run away from them, too. (Laughs) Yeah. Everyone down there is ready to have (indiscernible). (Laughs)

Q Quite a trip.

A Yeah. Yeah.

Q You said your father-in-law had a roadhouse here in.....

A Huh?

Q Your father-in-law had a roadhouse here?

A Yeah, he -- John Antosky has a roadhouse out here.

Q What was his name?

A Johnny Antosky. He used to have a roadhouse out here. He used to have a roadhouse down at the point long ago before he moved up here around 1918 or 1919 or something. He moved up here and he had the roadhouse out here.

Q Where was it here? Where was it, right here in town or.....

A It was right there on the bank. That place is right out here. (Indiscernible) see the place, we tore it all down. That's about it.

Q Mm hmm (affirmative).

A (Indiscernible), that was out here. They tore them all down because the bank was way out. It's all cut up, cut away. Yeah.

Q Where was his other roadhouse?

A Huh?

Q Where was the other roadhouse he had? You said he had another.....

A No, there was only one roadhouse here at that time, around 1923. Mm hmm (affirmative).

(Crying sound in the background)

(Off record)

(On record)

Q Let me ask you a little bit about some of the roadhouses along -- like from Ruby to Nulato and the trail. Did the trail pretty much follow the river?

A Yeah, it used to be on the river all the way, yeah. I wouldn't know a lot of roadhouses. I never went no place.

Q Did you ever run the mail along there?

A No. Huh-uh (negative). No.

Q You don't remember the roadhouses along the river?

A No. Huh-uh (negative). No. Bill Dalquist had a roadhouse down in Nulato. I don't know about -- they used to stop at -- old-man John Evans -- at Koyukuk too, I think. I'm pretty sure. But up above, I wouldn't know.

Q Hmm. I think they had one at Bishop Mountain maybe.

A No, there was no -- there was none there. They had a main cabin there with -- guys that carried mail used to stay

overnight there. And them guys that go through there, they stopped there overnight, too -- nobody there to.....

Q Hmm. What'd you feed your dogs?

A The salmon, that's all -- silver salmon, dog salmon, silver salmon. We cooked dog feed sometimes. We used to silver salmon, that's all, all winter long. But these races from -- I did dog races. They got to have meat and beaver meat and -- and all the mail team, they used to feed them dry fish, that's all, silver salmon all winter long. They feed them some (indiscernible) sometimes.

Q How often did they come through, the mail run?

A It was twice a week -- well, this way then. From Whiskey Creek to up here, that's three or four miles (indiscernible) 16 miles down (indiscernible). They'd go there, stay overnight, then the other team from down below come there and go back down. They meet twice a week.

Q Do you remember who some of the mail runners were?

A Oh, there's been just quite a few. Some were from Nulato. Mm hmm (affirmative).

Q Then the airplanes took over?

A Then the airplanes took over, right. Mm hmm (affirmative).

Q So you worked for your dad for a while?

A Yeah, down here we used to go out chopping and we used to go (indiscernible) you can't take that.

Q Your Dad came up over the trail (indiscernible)?

A Ninety-eight (indiscernible.) I know how long it took him from Missouri. My brother -- I got only one brother left -- he said, 'You got lots of cousins out in Missouri,' but I don't know none of them.

Q It must have been quite a trip, in '98.

A Mm hmm (affirmative). Yeah, '98 (indiscernible). That's a -- I see a picture of them going up the hill, I said, 'My Daddy's in that one' some could say, and then they come down Dawson. He said that town was all street. There was about 10,000 or more people there, so he went down -- stayed up Fortymile River. And he said just the day before it snowed, he said he was working down the creek, he said it's a narrow little creek but wide. And he said coming around the bend -- he had an ax, that's all. On one side of the creek there was two big brown bear and two cubs, big ones too, coming up around the other side, just coming around. He said he was walking on this side going down. He said he just keep walking. Them bears go right by, he said, on that side. (Indiscernible) get up and look, and then they got around.

That night it snowed about four or five inches. There was one guy coming over the hill, he said he stepped on a brown bear and that brown bear growled, and he said he seen them tracks going down the hill he said 12, 15 feet across (indiscernible). That guy must have been flying, he said. He went up there and he shot it. It was a big brown bear. Talk about fat. (Laughs)

Q Hmm.

A He thought he stepped on a lump but it was the brown bear.

Q So is that -- mainly you spent your time trapping?



A Yeah, mm hmm (affirmative). After the Air Force and the Army came here, we used to work back -- we used to work every summer for CAA. And then after that it was FAA. They changed their name, that's all. Then the last time I worked over three year -- three and a half years for the Air Force in the mess hall back there, the last time I worked. I always worked a little longer. I was 65 then. (Indiscernible) and I didn't act the way he told me. (Indiscernible) all them guys (indiscernible). They're gone. They never show up. They got to get one G.I. to help me. And pretty soon he came out -- the new guy came and he (indiscernible) me. I was mopping the mess hall out there. 'From now on,' he said, 'you guys better do what I tell you to.' I said, 'Tomorrow will be my last day.' He didn't say a word, he walked away. And Lieutenant Colonel Trezall (ph), he said, 'Why don't you lay off about a month and come back?' I said, 'I don't like the way that mess sergeant -- only me back there. All them guys never show up.' I said, 'It's hard for one guy, you know, a big place.' I bet that mess sergeant catch hell from the commander that time. He asked me a couple of times, the commander.

And there was just beer, whiskey and wine, and a cigarette in my life. And then I went back there all the time, but them guys they just waste -- all of them out there, I asked them, them guys from the mess hall, 'How many K.P. today?' Not one. (Laughs) He asked me, 'Do you want to work overtime?' I said, 'No.'

Q What'd you do for CAA?

A Oh, we used to work on the runway and lots of work -- paint buildings and work. And every summer I used to work at CAA, since when they first moved in. Yeah.

Q Did you ever work on the railroad at all?

A I worked on the CAA boats four summers, for CAA too. I was a pilot from Nenana down here to down this way past Kaltag (indiscernible). I made seven trips to Bettles. I made three trips to Lake Minchumina, too. I was a pilot on CAA boats, but it was all right.

Q What were you carrying, fuel or something?

A Yeah, lots of freight, all kinds of freight. After that, them planes took over everything -- them big planes, you know, fuel and, you know, all, everything.

(Tape Change - Tape No. 1, Side B)

A .....sick down there. They wanted medicine. We just -- everybody wanted to go, I mean, we had good dogs. Mm hmm (affirmative). And this one guy wanted to know how much they going to pay. There's lot of guys like that. (Indiscernible) -- they want to know how much they going to get paid. We didn't care to get paid that time.

Q You went about what, 25 miles, was it?

A From Whiskey Creek, yeah, 24 miles from Whiskey Creek down here, and it's 16 miles from here. I was going to go all the way, but my brother, George, wanted to take it down by Smalltown. He got down there 1930 -- down here hunting

geese one spring. He went through the ice -- never found him.

Q Did he have dogs with him then?

A Yeah, he had four dogs. The ice was -- and there was no ice. When he started across, they went through.

Q That winter it was that cold, 50, 60 below. Did that bother the dogs quite a bit?

A I guess if you don't force them it's all right. Mm hmm (affirmative). You can't drive them hard though. They freeze their lungs when you drive them hard. Yeah. I see lots of good runners -- cold weather, they run, they don't last very long. They freeze inside. And there are lots of good runners that used to run lots of cold weather. They don't last.

Q What do you think about the race now?

A Huh?

Q That's quite a race they have now.

A Yeah, mm hmm (affirmative). I told them guys, 'Gee, if I had them dogs like a long time ago, the same dogs,' I said, 'I would just (indiscernible) one of them guys, just like nothing.' Yeah. All day long I used to drive, and I never got tired, too.

Q Cutting -- hauling wood and stuff?

A Mm hmm (affirmative). Everybody was cutting wood at that time for steamboats, but I haul wood.

Q Did you haul it down to that river here and then.....

A We put them on the bank out here. We had near 400 cords out here on the bank, and all that summer the steamboats cleaned it all.

Q Do you remember which boats they were?

A Oh, there was Seattle Tree and -- well, there was lots of them. I don't know their name, what the names are.

Q How'd you learn how to mush dogs, just doing it when you were a little kid?

A Yeah, everybody had dogs. That's all we used to have anyway in those olden days. Now we got a bunch of dogs down here, them boys don't want to drive. They got too many snowmachines, you know. Mm hmm (affirmative).

Q Did you hook up a little team when you were little or did.....

A Yeah, uh-huh (affirmative). You start out about three, and then pretty soon a little more and a little more, yeah.

Q Did your dad make you a little sled or something, or did you make it?

A No. Yeah, we used to make our own. We learned how and we watched some other guys make a sleigh and then -- my first one, my old man bought (indiscernible) Louden, but they lost them dogs. It was too fast and I hit a corner -- making a corner over in the woods, and I hit a big patch of willows and it came -- the whole bow came in just like a fork.

Q What happened?

A I couldn't make that turn, going too fast, and I wasn't holding the brake. I thought that was pretty good then at the time. (Indiscernible) I just jumped and threw myself and I just rolled, and then that sleigh, just the whole

thing, the whole -- folded up and the bot- -- yeah.

Q Did you get hurt?

A No, I didn't get hurt because there was lots of snow. There was Bill Honey (ph), he was hauling wood. He was right ahead of me, but making the turn he stopped them dogs. And I run up there and I got them dogs and then I tied it on the sleigh just like a fork. I came back home. (Laughs) The next day I had to go out, get birch and make a sleigh. Then I made a sleigh.

Q Did you ever get lost out there?

A No. Huh-uh (negative). I never got lost.

Q How about any bad storms or anything? Did you get into those?

A No. You can tell when there going to be storm when you would go out. You can't get lost around here, yeah.

Q They had the trails staked, did they?

A Yeah, uh-huh (affirmative). There was no place, not like along the coast, to get lost out there, but around here you can't get lost because there's -- right in the middle of the river, you could go out there and there was banks on both sides. You know where you're at all the time.

Q Did the river freeze pretty early in the year?

A In October, uh-huh (affirmative), last part of October it freezes up.

Q Did you have any problem with overflow at all?

A No. It's all right. I don't know (indiscernible). It's all right.

Q The river wasn't real dangerous?

A No, huh-uh (negative). No.

Q You were telling me about this roadhouse. Was it right down here in front of your place?

A It was out there. We tore it down long ago. We used to have it for a garage, but it's all tore down -- came down.

Q How long did it run for?

A Not too long because the airplanes took over everything, you know.

Q In the 20s it was torn.....

A Around the 30s, yeah, around '30, '31.

Q I see Galena's changing a little bit. You got a new townsite up there?

A Mm hmm (affirmative), yeah.

Q A lot of people moving up there?

A Yeah. There was a little village there, about 14 houses or so, the first time, and steamboats used to go by and then they take letters and tie it on a piece of stick and threw it on the beach. (Laughs) Sometimes when you sent letters out you have to put it in a boat and row out. They slow down. You row out to the steamboat and you hand the letter to them, that's all. But when they're going by, no mail -- they just go by coast and they just tied it on a stick and threw it on the beach, that's all.

Q They probably had better mail than now though, right?

A (Laughs). Yeah, mm hmm (affirmative). Yeah.

Q That was pretty much right in this area? Is that where.....

A Oh, yeah. It was out -- or along in there, but up this way,

but it all cut away, the bank.

Q Does it flood here very much in the spring?

A Oh, a few times -- 1925, '45 and then '71 or two, last time about the same -- it got about four feet the last time. But the last time it come over the bank, not much though. (Indiscernible) have a big jam down here -- ice jam down here this side of Bishop Mountain. That's when it jammed, floods around here.

Q Hmm. They tell me you were quite a trapper. You used to -- did you have a trapline or.....

A No, we'd just go out and come back. Sometimes we -- we used to go off this way and over that way long ago.

Q Oh, was there more game then?

A About the -- yeah, there was more.

Q With the airplanes, now things have changed.

A Oh, yeah. Mm hmm (affirmative). Mm hmm (affirmative).

Q Well, I don't want to take up your whole day. Thanks for talking to me. I know you've talked to.....

A Mm hmm (affirmative).

Q .....a lot of people.

(Off record)

(Interview concluded)