

Significance

Iditarod, abandoned terminus of water route from the Yukon River to the Innoko gold fields, represents almost a stereotype association between commercial activity and natural resources extraction seen in other Alaskan communities, e.g., Dyea, Sunrise, Hope, Knik, Matanuska. Many such settlements were established, boomed briefly, and gradually faded as the focus of activity shifted from the break-in-bulk and transshipment points to centers closer to basic functions. As one such community, Iditarod is, on a regional basis, associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of Alaska history.

Historical Background

In the late summer of 1908 two prospectors, W.A. Dikeman and John Beaton, who had been to the Innoko district earlier that year but were not encouraged by the outlook there, ascended the Innoko in a small steamboat. On reaching the southwestern branch of the Innoko, now named the Iditarod, they ascended that stream as far as the low water of the season would permit and there built a house which has since been called "Discoverer's Cabin." This structure, now demolished, was on the main river about eight or nine miles below the site of Iditarod.

During early winter, Dikeman and Beaton sledged a prospecting outfit southward from their winter quarters across several low ranges of hills to Otter Creek and decided to look for gold in the valley of that stream at a point about 12 miles above its mouth. They were rewarded by finding gold at a depth of about 12 feet on Christmas Day, 1908.

Information about the new prospects did not spread rapidly, and it was not until the summer of 1909 that other prospectors gathered there from the Innoko and Yukon districts. Almost no mining was done during the summer of 1909 as most of the several hundred people on the Iditarod were mainly concerned with obtaining enough supplies to enable them to remain through the coming winter.

In spite of these handicaps, some gold was mined from underground drifts in the winter of 1909-10. Reports about this work were either sent out in such optimistic form, or so magnified, that a great deal of interest in the new district was aroused. As a result, when navigation opened on the Yukon in May of 1910, over 2,000 people and a considerable amount of supplies and machinery were bound for the Iditarod area.

Iditarod became the commercial and social center for the mining camps, which, in the most productive year of 1912, removed gold and silver to the value of \$3,500,000. Springing up in June of 1910, the town soon boasted 600 residents, who were described by a contemporary U.S. geological surveyor (Eakin, 1913) as following "parasitic pursuits of minor importance to mining."

Among these may have been the weekly dances and basketball games held at the Arctic Brotherhood Hall, or perhaps the annual "Pretzel Dance" held by girls from the "Row" and reported to have been quite a lively affair.

Such festivities were well reported for Iditarod's first newspaper, THE OPTIMIST, which was produced almost immediately by editor Ed Wylie even though it was handwritten on manila paper. In September of 1910, THE IDITAROD NUGGET, edited by Major J.F.A. Strong (who was to serve as territorial governor from 1913-1918), began publication that was to end in 1911; but the earlier (July) THE IDITAROD PIONEER, edited by George M. Arbuckle, was to last until September 27, 1919.

Spiritual welfare of the community was attended to by the Reverend S. Hall Young, a Presbyterian, and for a brief period by Archdeacon Hudson Stuck, an Episcopalian. During the latter part of 1911, Father Rossi, a Jesuit missionary arrived from Nulato to see to the needs of the Roman Catholic residents.

In 1914, a school was operated in Iditarod with one teacher and nine pupils.

Fires were a major problem for the town. On April 4, 1911, a fire raced through the business section for an estimated property loss of \$75,000. A week later residents voted 259 to 56 to incorporate and at once the problem of fire protection was considered. On June 7, the City Council voted to buy two steam pumps, 1,000 feet of four-inch main, and 2,500 feet of fire hose, and to contract with the Cascade Laundry to provide steam for the pumps on a 24-hour basis.

Before any of the equipment could be installed, another fire broke out on June 25. Gasoline lights at the Board of Trade saloon, as they were being repaired, exploded and caught the muslin ceiling on fire. The conflagration spread, burning an entire block of the business section.

Generally, from 1910 until 1917, Iditarod prospered, with the value of incoming merchandise steadily increasing. After that, however, as many left the isolated town to enlist in the war against the Kaiser, both population and production rapidly dropped.

In 1922, the Guggenheim Syndicate purchased every claim on Flat Creek and converted all operations to dredging. Fewer miners were required, for, although large crews were required to chop wood for the dredges' steam engines, only six to eight were needed to run a dredge on a 24-hour basis.

Iditarod, even in the face of the dramatic population decrease, remained the commercial center of the district. Many of the smaller businesses had closed down by 1923-24 but the town was still in operation. There were five general merchandise stores, one dry goods store, and a postmaster.

The first airplane landed in the Iditarod District between 1925-26 and this truly marked the end of Iditarod. No longer were the steamboats the only alternative to an arduous overland journey to or from the town. The community did remain a freight deposit station because all freight, equipment, and supplies continued to come up the Yukon, Innoko, and Iditarod rivers on barges.

In 1930, Iditarod disappeared from the annual list of incorporated towns, and during the next decade only a few people remained; the focus of activity having shifted to Flat. Headquarters of Day Navigation, Iditarod continued to serve as a river landing, but this role too almost disappeared after a 1942 federal order closed all gold mines and the War Production Board then ordered all machinery not in use to be confiscated for the war effort.

Day Navigation closed down and one man, Jose Mitchell, remained in Iditarod as the Northern Commercial Company storekeeper. In 1951, Mitchell left and Iditarod was completely abandoned.