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Jeff Studdert

Neville Abbott Jacobs, narrator and interviewer

Series: Sourdoughs speak

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Neville Jacobs said man has developed ingenious methods of travel. In the Arctic man harnessed the dog for travel. On the tundra and in the forest the dogs were hitched to sleds. In northern areas dog sleds and dog teams are still important in some rural communities although many families are relying on snow machines for land transportation. In Fairbanks dog mushing has become important as a winter sport. Fairbanks is home to the Alaska Dog Mushing Association. Jeff Studdert was bestowed the title "Mr. Dog Musher" by the Association in appreciation for his efforts to make sled dog mushing a living sport. Studdert was president of the Association for two years and has been a member of the board of directors for many more years. Studdert came to Alaska from Ireland in 1928. His family had an interest in a dredge on Fish Creek beyond Cleary.

Jacobs asked Jeff Studdert how he got into dog mushing. Studdert said he started when he was on Fish Creek. There was a road of sorts at Cleary Summit. From there to Fish Creek it was unbroken snow in the spring. The crew would go in on snowshoes and he came in with a dog team. He started with seven dogs. He has always kept dogs since that time. Jacobs asked him what kind of dogs they were. Studdert said originally it was anything he could scrounge up. In those days there were dog teams used to haul the mail throughout Alaska. Studdert explained the difference between a freight dog and a racing dog. He said racing dogs are lean. The dogs could be any breed. Even now there may be very different looking dogs on the same team. Studdert said he did a little freighting. The people working out in the logging camps would go out in the fall. He went into the logging camps and brought supplies. He always carried the newspaper with him. In those days there was no other communication for the camps. Studdert said tractors were just starting to be used when he came in. For many years most of the work was done with horses here. There was very little work to do in the winter.

Jacobs commented about his nickname "Mr. Dog Musher." Studdert said that is because he has been at it for many years and he has done quite a bit for the mushers. He saw his first dog team in 1928. Joe Stickman was the man who won the Chatanika races in 1928 and that was the first time he saw a dog team. He has not missed a major race since that time. Jacobs asked what the races were like. Studdert said there were two races in those days. The Chatanika race was sixty miles in one day. The Endicott race was a sixteen mile race. They were both in Fairbanks. There was a ladies race. The Livengood race was eighty miles over and eighty miles back. In 1940 it was done in 18 hours. In 1941 it was done in twenty hours. It was a rough race. There was a single trail over to Livengood by sled. The dogs then were different and ran much slower with heavier harnesses. Now harnesses for nine dogs weigh as much as

one of the old harnesses. The dogs now go off in high gear and will be going full speed after ten feet, but at that time the dogs started in a trot. Stickman and Nollner mushed all the way from Nulato to get to Fairbanks for the races. It was over four hundred miles to get here.

Jacobs wondered how many people set out on the overland trails in the winter. Studdert said there were a lot of people on the trails all the time. There would be somebody coming or going all the time unless the temperatures were bitter cold. There were roadhouses along the way. From Valdez there were double ender sleds pulled by horses. He described a double ender sled. They would rotate the horses. They would use double ender sleds with dogs to haul firewood. He used nine dogs. Now the race dog teams are much larger. The mail carriers would use twenty dogs and lots of times two sled with one hooked up after the other. The musher would ride along on skis or an Ouija board. Studdert explained what the board was. He also used a g-pole to steer it. Studdert said the musher would use a brake to slow down the sled so it wouldn't run over the dogs going downhill.

Jacobs asked if it was difficult to build a sled. Studdert said sled building was an art. He thought there were very few people who could build a very good sled. The sled has to be very flexible. They are lashed with rawhide which is known as babiche. There might be six bolts on the sled and the rest is rawhide. People who make the best sleds are the ones who have used sleds and they understand what they need. Studdert told a story about a mail carrier who ran mail down the Yukon. His name was Fred Price. Studdert said the longest he has ever gone was sixty miles. He has mushed at -52 and it was awfully cold.

Jacobs asked him when mushing became a sport for him. Studdert said he doesn't exactly know. He said just assume that he got some dogs and they were a little bit better. Then he wasn't allowed to go until last since he had such a mean bunch of dogs. Jacobs asked why some dogs are so mean. Studdert said it is the same way as human beings. He said now he has more good natured dogs. He can load up twenty dogs in his truck and very seldom has any troubles. He thinks most people want to get rid of the fighters. Jacobs asked about training a lead dog. Studdert explained how he treats them as pups. Gradually they are brought up in the team near the head. The good ones you put up front. When you need a lead dog you take one of the dogs from the front. He talked about commands. Jacobs asked about falling off the sled and losing the dogs. Studdert said they will usually just take off and run until they get tangled. He did have a lead dog that would bring the dogs back to him. He talked about how he would try to get the dogs back in control if he has been knocked off the sled. He said it is hard to explain the feeling to others about being at the back of a fast dog team. He used to love it. He said it is a little like bobsledding. There is a very sensitive balance. There is a lot to handling the sled. It is not something you learn in a day. It takes years of practice and as the old saying goes anything can happen in a dog race and usually does.

Jacobs said Studdert talked about the North American Championship Races. Studdert said he had his own race, the Jeff Studdert Invitational Race. He talked about the rules for the race. They had ten dogs this year. Jacobs asked about falling off a sled. Studdert said you have to learn. He has taken a lot of hard falls and you just have to let yourself relax.