

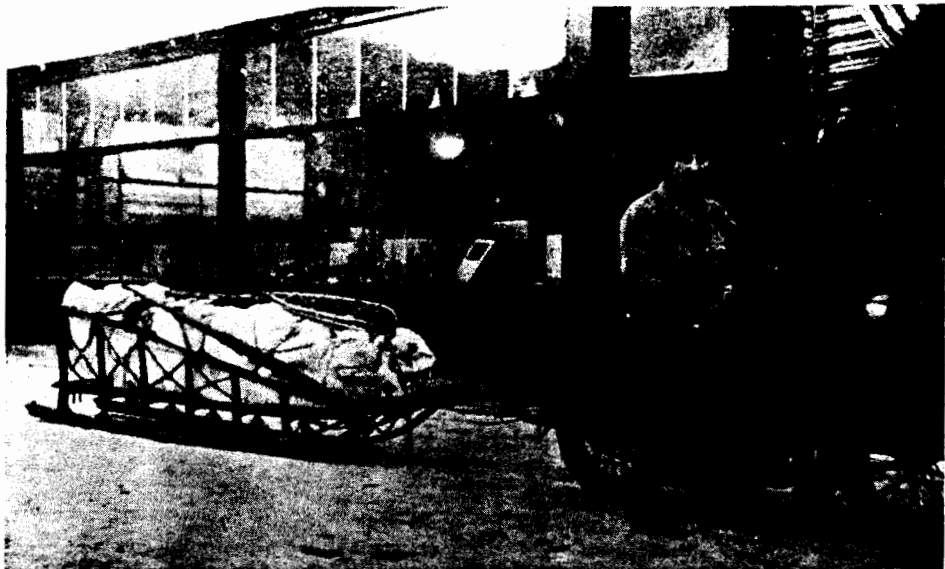
Sam White, Alaskan

By Sam O. White

Part III—Northern Game Warden

THE two-year taste of Alaska I'd had with the U. S. Coast and Geodetic Survey made my home state of Maine look little. And mosquitoes in February at my new post along the Gulf of Mexico were pretty hard to take. I wanted to get North again, but it became increasingly apparent that the Survey would not return me to Alaska for many years. Then in March of 1927 I got a telegram from the Alaska Game Commission offering me a job and naming an attractive figure. I accepted by return wire, shipped off for Juneau, and after a three-month training period was "home" again in the Alaska Interior by July.

In those days there were no roads to speak of and commercial aviation was just getting underway. I'd met Noel Wien a few years before at Nenana and had hopes of getting this pioneer pro to teach me to fly. But plane service was still confined mostly to population centers out of Fairbanks and Nome to river villages where there were handy gravel bars in the summer or ice strips in the winter. So far as the Game Commission was concerned, travel was strictly a matter of river boat or dog team, depending upon the season. I guess this was just as well. After a winter of dealing with free-thinking dogs, I really appreciated it when I finally got airborne.



The author at Fairbanks in 1927 with a somewhat unorthodox winter rig which traveled well on city streets but not so well on bush streets.

I checked in at Fairbanks where Frank Dufresne was agent-in-charge for the Game Commission. I was to be stationed at Fort Yukon, but my first assignment was to guide a predatory animal expert to the upper Tanana and Ladue river area near the Canadian border, which was heavily infested with wolves.

We left Fairbanks early in July and joined forces with John Haydakovich, a trader on the upper Tanana, on his large scow-type river boat which was loaded

with about two tons of supplies for his posts at Tanana Crossing and Tetlin. The Tanana from Big Delta to Tanacross is a pretty bad piece of river. John had a native crewman stationed at the bow with a long hooked pole. When the going got tough, the poleman would hook into a crevice in a bluff or rock, and the one-man pull would break the deadlock. But it took expert timing between the poleman and the boatman.

We spent August in Tetlin while the predator expert taught the natives how to trap wolves in the summer without harming other valuable fur bearers. There were more native people in that country then, and they were busy bringing in meat, which the squaws cut in thin strips and dried for the winter. A mammoth caribou migration showed up while we were there, and the woods were literally alive with the animals from Big Delta to Nabesna.

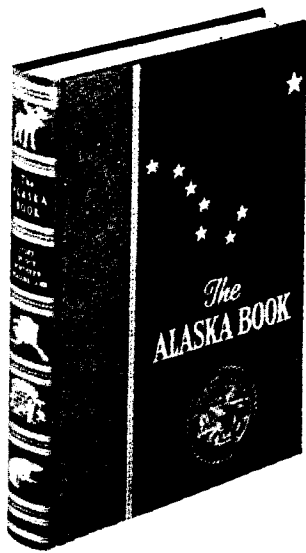
In September we took a two-week trip north along the border into the Ladue River Valley. Here, too, caribou in great numbers, along with many moose, filled the valleys and covered the hills. Wolves were everywhere, and seemed to concentrate their depredations on the caribou which were easier to find and pull down.

In attacking caribou, the wolves literally eat them alive. They catch up with one, grab a few mouthfuls of meat, hair and hide, and bolt it down. The caribou runs on, spewing blood, but the wolves overtake him and the process is repeated. I have seen three wolves down a caribou five times, the fifth time being



Fur was king in Interior Alaska in the late 1920s and Fort Yukon, which had been founded by fur traders, was still the main fur center.

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Snubbing the outfit over a cut bank on the Porcupine River in 1928.

final. I have also seen live moose with large holes eaten out of them. They usually live from one to three days. The wolves don't come back to them, but let the ravens finish the job.

It is claimed that wolves kill only the sick and injured. It is possible that they concentrate on these, but I also know that six wolves can take the biggest bull moose at his fightingest best in September. I saw that happen on a bar in the Toklat River. I circled and watched for an hour, but the fight lasted longer than that because it was underway when I got there. When it was over, an acre of the bar was torn up and devastated. I have a conviction that four wolves, or maybe three, could do it, too. But back to 1927.

We stayed on the upper Tanana until late September and then returned to Fairbanks. Here I outfitted, and in late November took off with a fifteen-dog team for my new station at Fort Yukon via Circle. En route I picked up a prisoner with strychnine and fur in his possession and sent him back to Frank in Fairbanks. The trapper duly reported, handed Frank the evidence and admitted his guilt. Talk about the honor system. But there was a spirit like this all through the Interior in those days.

One evening I was all beat out and stopped at a roadhouse. The proprietor was very drunk and quite hostile, but said I could stay if I furnished my own sleeping bag and did my own cooking. I agreed to this and went out to take care of my dogs. On my return, the owner was in a towering rage. He accused me of stealing his bottle of hootch. I

knew it could not be far away, so I pacified him by offering to help him find it. We started with the most likely place, in the bunk, under the bunk and behind the bunk. Then we branched out and I spotted it where he had dropped it—bobbing up and down in the slop bucket. He promptly offered me a drink, which I more promptly declined. I didn't get much rest that night, what with putting out a fire he started with a candle and being accused by him of trying to burn down the joint. But morning came at last and, with much relief, I took off.

My trip wasn't made any easier by my strange and willful lead dog. For the first week or so, he and I didn't see eye to eye, so to speak. He was a good worker and knew all the commands, but executed them only when he happened to agree with them. And sometimes he thought up some pretty wild ideas all on his own.

Running down off the north side of Eagle Summit we came upon an abandoned cabin which had started to glacier in from a nearby creek. The door was frozen shut, but a half-window was open on our side. This window caught my lead dog's attention. He made a dash for it and jumped right through the opening into the cabin. The other dogs gleefully followed, and within moments they were all inside with the nose of the sled wedged tightly into the opening. There was no prying the sled loose, nor the frozen door open. Finally I took my ax and went to work on the stove pipe hole in the frozen sod roof until I'd chopped an opening big enough to get through. Then I proceeded to untangle



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the dogs and boost them out of the stove pipe hole one at time by the dim light of a candle. It was long after dark by the time I got done, but I couldn't stay in the cabin because an overflow might bust loose during the night and trap me. So I hitched up the dogs and went down to the first timber where I si-washed for the night.

I arrived in Circle City a few days later and stopped at the Tanana Roadhouse which was run by a Mr. and Mrs. Joe Romaker. The next morning it was sixty degrees below zero, so I holed up for the cold spell which lasted a whole week. The roadhouse was an old rambling two-story structure, with sleeping quarters upstairs. Its floors and stairway were warped, and two cables attached to vertical timbers on either side of the house ran across its ceiling to hold its bulging walls in place. My room had a sagging unlevel floor which squeaked and groaned with every move I made. But it was a comfortable room and roadhouse.

Mrs. Romaker was a frail but energetic little old lady and a wonderful cook. She kept busy in the kitchen, and the moose stews, roasts and steaks, together with home-baked bread and pies of wild blueberries and cranberries, were out of this world for flavor. Joe was

a big easy-going chap, always telling stories of the "early days." He kept busy lugging wood and stuffing it into three different stoves, one of which was a large one-hundred-gallon drum. He'd stoke the stoves, sit down and tell me a story, and then it would be time to stoke the stoves again. All in all, it was a very pleasant week.

Well, finally it warmed up to thirty below, so I took off on the final three-day lap to Fort Yukon. The next morning the temperature dropped to fifty-five below, but I was committed and had to move or run out of dog feed. That night at the second shelter cabin it was sixty below, and sixty below it stayed until I arrived at Fort Yukon.

Fur was king then, and Fort Yukon was the fur center of Alaska. There was a roughish sort of roadhouse here, run by Bert Stewart and George Davies, who served excellent meals and were doing a land office business. The lowliest nat-

ive would come in with \$3,500 in fur by Christmas, and some would match that a second time after Christmas. But many of them didn't go out a second time until "rat" trapping season rolled round. They had it made for that winter.

Two white brothers by the name of Mason who trapped in Canada but had a home in Fort Yukon would average \$16,000 a year. Another white trapper worked his line like a farm. He had cabins or caches every ten miles or so, and spent his summers putting wood at each place and grub in the caches. Then when winter came he had nothing to do but trap. He took a specified amount of fur each year and when he had filled his self-set quota, usually

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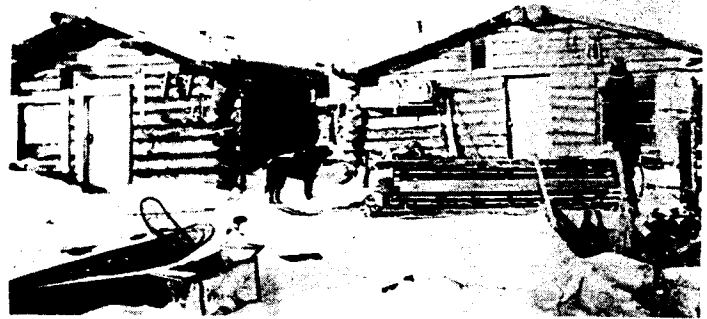
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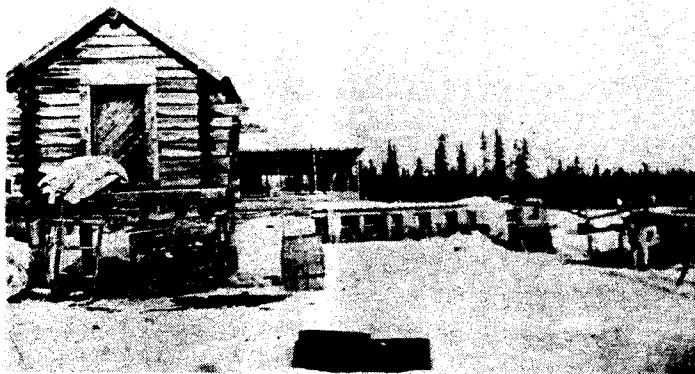




Mail carrier Curley Wells' sled at the 22-Mile shelter cabin on the Circle-Fort Yukon trail.



The Porcupine River is not heavily traveled, winter or summer. This was Shuman House in 1928.



The Alaska Game Commission's dog food cache and kennels at Fort Yukon, 1928.



Two of my dogs, Pink and Bum, on the Chandelar. The wolves were bad at this camp.

about three weeks before the season closed, he'd quit.

These chaps invested wisely and were well-to-do. That May when the first boat came down the river, I remember overhearing them talking stocks and bonds with a bunch of tourists who were amazed that these backwoodsmen had such a keen knowledge of finances.

In December I made a short patrol to Rampart House on the border to contact the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. One day on the way I overtook a native family which had stopped to make tea. They had a month-old baby well wrapped in fur, and since it was forty-eight below, I was interested in seeing how they kept the baby warm. They had cut a bunch of crotched willows and stacked them about two feet high close to the fire. They laid the baby

on top, and the heat from the fire worked its way up through the branches. That evening I reached a shelter just after dark, cut plenty of wood, and was just ready to settle in when this native family and another showed up. There was just room for all of us to stretch out on the cabin floor. Dinner and breakfast came out of my grub box and sort of strained it a bit.

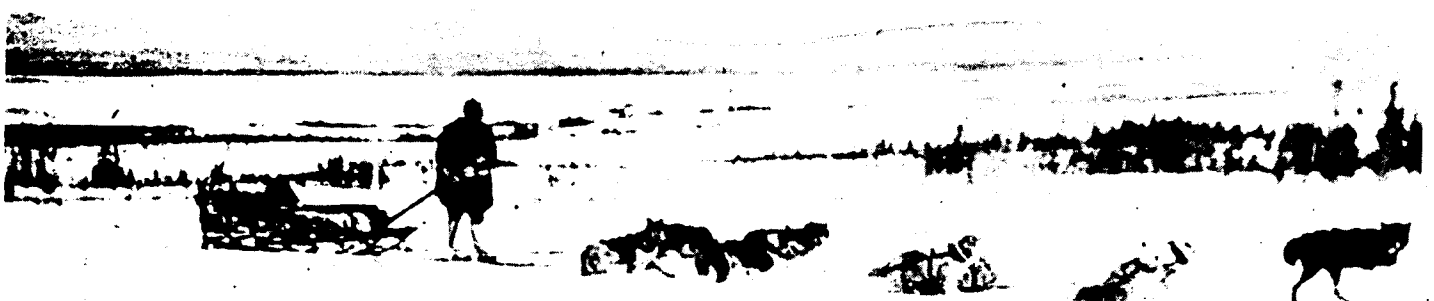
As I entered the Ramparts at Howling Dog Rock, I heard a dull rumbling and the familiar clickety-clickety of hooves. Around a bend of the Porcupine River came a solid front of caribou. The dogs went wild. I had to tip over the sled and anchor it to a pile of ice to hold them. The caribou, many thousands of them, kept coming. When the leaders drew near, they sheared off towards the south bank and passed within fifty feet of me.

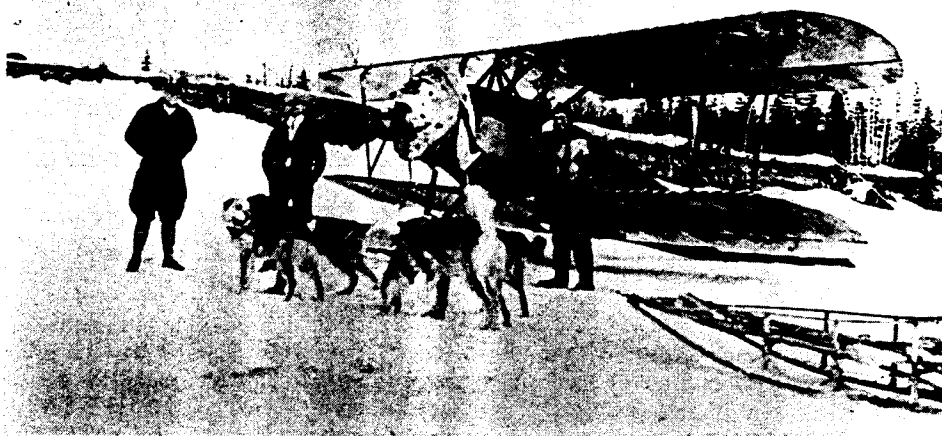
I climbed on a hummock of ice and looked over the sea of brown furry backs.

On the south shore opposite me was a big whirlpool of open water. I'd been warned about it by a trapper, W. C. Curtis, and before the caribou showed up had heard its gurgling and sucking sound. As the herd sheared away, many of the caribou were crowded off the ice into the whirlpool. I watched them go around and around until they got to the vortex where they dropped from sight under the ice. It was obviously the dogs that had turned the herd, but I was helpless. If I had loosed them, they would have run sled and all into the caribou, and that would have been worse.

When I arrived at Rampart House just across the Canadian border that night it was sixty-two below. Two native

On the trail near Circle Hot Springs during a patrol in 1928.





By 1928 the airplane was doing wonders in shortening the time required to cover Alaska's vast distances. This was Ed Young's plane at Fort Yukon.

dogs froze to death and were promptly chopped up and fed to their teammates. Rampart House sits on the side of the hill atop the steep banks of the Porcupine River. The winds sweep through here, and it is very cold. I stayed two days, conferring with the RCMP.

Dan Cadzow was still operating his trading post at the time. His volume of grocery turnover was not large, but the volume of fur he took in was fantastic. Silver dollars were the smallest change at his trading post: six cream crackers, such as came in barrels, \$1; four candles, \$1; and so forth. Under these conditions, my grub box didn't get half filled.

Dan had a two-story frame house with hardwood floors, the only frame house north of the Yukon. Rachel, his native wife, was a very fine old lady and was respected by everyone the length and breadth of the land. Dan often took trips stateside, and Rachel went with him. He would charter a special train and tour the country, and then they would return to Rampart House. He had a new boat nearly every year, and didn't take pains to preserve the old ones during break-up.

The old frame house is abandoned now. The last time I was there it sat forlornly empty, its white paint and green trim peeling. Rachel lived there alone for several years after Dan died. She was a wonderful old lady.

That February I left Fort Yukon to make a patrol by Beaver to Caro and Big Squaw and return via the Chandalar and the native village which is now Venetie. I had the mail trail from Fort Yukon to Beaver, and a trail of sorts from Beaver to Big Squaw. At Orenzie Crossing I left most of my outfit in a shelter cabin and followed a trapper's trail up the Orenzie.

The trap line belonged to one Joe Roberts, a Portuguese. On my way up the creek I removed three lynx and several mink from his snares, and turned

them over to him upon my arrival at his cabin. He had roughly \$7,000 in fur which was a heap of money then. He also had a new and very well built cabin. He could sit on his bunk and eat off the table and also attend to the cooking on the stove. He had about seventy-five pounds of sausage made from moose meat and moose casings which was expertly spiced and delicious. He also was eating lynx meat, but did not urge me to partake.

Two oldtimers, Charlie DeBien and a McDaniels, were wintering at Caro, the abandoned mining camp. A native woman and her seven-year-old child also were trapping there, and doing real well.

At a shelter cabin on the way from Caro to Big Squaw I found an elderly Eskimo couple and a seven or eight-year-old child. They were all stark naked. It was fifty below outside, but the cabin was hot and filthy. The ventilators were stuffed up tight and a three to four-inch layer of caribou hair covered the floor. They professed not to speak English or understand it.

I unstuffed the ventilators, got my grub, and cooked my meal, making a liberal allowance so as to have some left over for them. When I finished eating, the man came over to the table (he had put on a pair of caribou pants) and said quite distinctly, "Baby (the child) got no milk. Me got no bread." Well, I gathered up all my dishes so they could not touch them and put the left-overs in a gas can and gave it to them. The old lady removed a man-sized chew of tobacco from her mouth and laid it on the table. They ate the leftovers just like animals eat. They had been living on straight caribou and rabbit meat along with an occasional ptarmigan they could snare. I was glad to get out of that mess.

At Squaw Creek mining camp I found two elderly men, Carlson and Amero, working hard sinking holes and hauling

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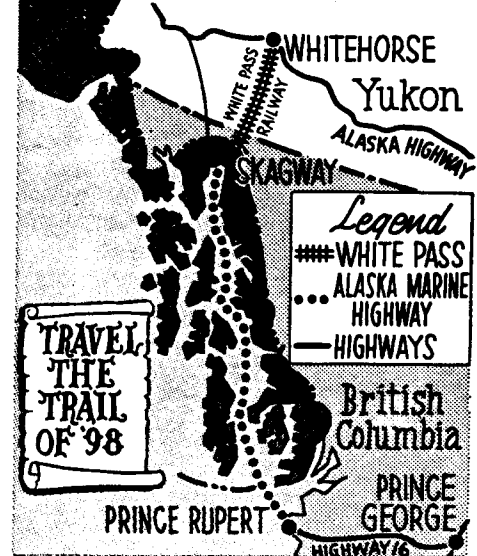
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spruce logs three miles uphill with a dog team. I stayed two or three nights and since it had warmed up I started the return trip with a long run by moonlight. I stopped just long enough at the shelter cabin to give the elderly couple a can of coffee, some sugar, and what cornmeal I could spare. They received the gift stoically, and if they appreciated it, they did a good job of concealing it. I had never seen people so destitute, and I was depressed for days.

From Caro I left the trail and took off down the Chandalar River, a stream of many channels and wide gravel bars. The snow was deep and it was hard going. The dogs got ornery. When we came to a cross channel where ice was in sight with no snow on it, the leader made for the clear space and I could not stop or turn him. Within moments, the sled and dogs broke through. Standing in swift water up to my knees, I grabbed an ax and cut the tow lines. The dogs took off to the woods on caribou trails, and I let them go. It was twenty degrees below zero. I got everything out of the water but one bale of fish that went under the ice. Then I rushed up onto the bank, got a big fire going, and got into some dry clothes. After that I retrieved the dogs from

where they were wound up around some trees.

By that time it was dark, so I pitched the tent, set up the Yukon stove and cooked a meal of sorts with plenty of hot tea. Then to top it all off, the wolves began to howl, close up and on all sides. The dogs were terrified. I brought them in close and built a brush fence around the dogs and my tent. Caribou by the hundreds of thousands were all over the place, but those wolves were much more interested in my dogs. It seems they love dog meat above all else.

I didn't get to bed at all that night, and come early morning we set out again. The dogs were slow and mean, and a fight started which I broke up quickly and firmly. We floundered through deep snow until about noon when I spotted what looked like a fresh-broken trail ahead. I urged the dogs toward it, but about three hundred feet short they covered down and would not move. I grabbed my 30-30 carbine and went over to the trail. It was about four feet wide and packed solid, and had just recently been made by a bunch of wolves. I could see them flitting about in the woods on the east bank, but they were a bit too far away for the 30-30. About that time, the dogs took fright and came lunging over to me. Then I became the leader and got them away from there.

That night I camped on a point with gravel bars all around except for a small neck of timber which I fenced off with brush. I slept, and to heck with the wolves. They were howling everywhere, but would not come over the open bars or through the fence. The next morning the dogs were ready to cooperate for once, and we left in a hurry. We arrived at Chandalar native village in the late afternoon, and two uneventful days later I was back in Fort Yukon.

On another trip in March, I was threading my way up a mountain stream with the same dog team. I came to an ice jam with a fair-sized body of water backed up behind it. Remembering the oldtimers' warnings of "gushers," I made my way carefully around it. Back on the creek, I was urging my dogs along when I realized they were very nervous. About the same time I became aware of a sullen roar up ahead which was getting louder by the second. There was a small willow island close by between the main channel on the south shore and a smaller channel on the north shore. I headed the dogs for the island and got prompt and enthusiastic cooperation. Just then I saw a wall of tumbling ice blocks coming around the bend, spouting water ten feet high.

We got onto the willow island just as the flood hit the upper end of it. Ice piled up at the head of the island and both channels were seething cauldrons. The water rose to my knees, but almost at once it started lowering as the torrent swept on. In five minutes the water was down off the island, and in twenty minutes the small channel was dry. We crossed over and I pitched camp right there and spent the rest of the day and that night drying the gear out. I was pretty well shaken up over the experience. But it proved again that it pays to listen to the old sourdoughs.

On one of my last patrols with that team before the spring break-up, I had made the run up the Birch River and had headed the dogs up a high bank to pick up the trail to Circle City. As the sled progressed up the bank, it went slower and slower. Finally when the dogs disappeared over the top, it came to a dead halt. I snapped the tow line, yelled dog team language, and heaved on the gee pole. It did no good. Finally, figuring the tow line had fouled, I climbed up over the bank. There lay fifteen dogs, all stretched out in the sun, sound asleep.

That just about convinced me that there must be a better means of transportation than a dog team, and within a few more months I was to find it—in the air.

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