

88-49-160

Yukon 800 Race

Jeff Kennedy, interviewer

Galena, Alaska

1978

Series: Potlatch series

Jeff Kennedy said on June 24-25th twelve crews began the 800 mile long Yukon River boat race from Fairbanks to Galena and back. The first crew to make it to Galena was led by Captain Ed Gustafson.

Jeff Kennedy asked him how he dressed for such an occasion. Ed Gustafson said you take the weather forecast and go from there. Generally you wear long underwear, regular clothing, flotation clothing and then raingear. Everyone wears crash helmets with a full face cover and goggles. They started using an insulated rubber glove this year to keep their hands warm. Kennedy asked what kind of role rain plays. Gustafson said other than it makes you miserable and it cuts down your visibility it really isn't that much of a problem. It works on your endurance a little more. Kennedy asked what his body was telling him right now after seven hours on the river. Gustafson said he feels pretty good. His legs are cramped and there are only so many ways that you can sit. Kennedy asked him about different techniques for guiding on the Tanana and Yukon Rivers. Gustafson said the two rivers are geologically different. The Tanana is a meandering or braided stream river which is generally shallow with a lot of different channels. The channels that you take depends on the elevation of the water. The Yukon is just a big straight river that is deep and gives you the opportunity to run a straight line course. The Tanana River requires more knowledge of the sloughs and channels. Kennedy asked which run he prefers. Gustafson said he doesn't think either is better than the other. The downstream way is just a little bit faster. There isn't that much different. The Tanana runs about five miles an hour and the Yukon runs between eight and ten miles an hour. Kennedy said you have an all-female crew and asked if that is unusual. Gustafson said yes and no. It is the first time that there are two girls in a crew. Jim Movius also has two girls on his crew. Gustafson said he is one of the heavier racers and he needed smaller people. He said he is fortunate to have the Binkley girls who are very capable on the river. Kennedy asked him why he races riverboats and how did he get started. Gustafson said it is one of those things that seemed like a lot of fun. He started about ten years ago when he crewed on a boat. He said as you become more competitive it becomes a lot more work. Kennedy asked about preparation. Gustafson said you go through your hardware completely before a race to make sure there won't be breakdowns. There can still be problems. His tachometer wasn't working on this race. You have to go out and practice and know what your boat can do.

American Indian canoe song by Pete Seeger

Jeff Kennedy said the second captain into Galena was Bill Page. Bill Page told him something about the weather conditions that he encountered. Page said it gets cold especially if it gets wet. He gets dressed for it. As long as you have gloves on and they aren't wet, you have head gear with a face mask, got wool clothes, got a scarf on so the air doesn't suck in anywhere then you are all set.

Charlie Peter and Stanley Frank playing violin and guitar.

Jeff Kennedy said Bill Page explains the difference between racing boats and the regular riverboats. Bill Page said racing boats are a lot lighter and a lot sleeker. They are not so durable. You have to be careful with them. The finish underneath should be smooth all the time. They have air traps so the boat rides on air most of the time. Kennedy ask Moe Samuelson what his function was on the crew. Mo Samuelson said he just tries to help the driver whenever he needs help. When the driver wants to look at the map or check the fuel lines someone has to hold the throttle down. He usually takes care of that. Mo Samuelson said he is the oldest one in the association. He originally came from Bethel. He left there in 1943 and he has been racing since 1962. They used to take off from Circle in 1962 and they called it the Yukon 700. Mo Samuelson is the owner of Slo-Moe Kayak II which was the winner of the 1978 Yukon 800 Race.

49er song

Jeff Kennedy said he is talking to Don Thomas who is the official time keep of the Yukon 800 Race. Kennedy asked him how he got the job. Thomas said he works with a bunch of the racers and they asked him if he'd like to help out. He said it is quite an experience and he is really enjoying it. Kennedy asked what his duties were. Thomas said he times them in to Galena and back to Fairbanks. He does inspect the boats to make sure they have all the equipment that is required. Kennedy asked if he has to stay on the banks of the river and then back in Fairbanks to serve vigil. Thomas said when everyone first got down there he and Holly Anderson were out on the bank of the river in the pouring rain. He talked about his rain gear. Someone finally built a fire for them. He said it is typical of a winter day in Galena. The people in Galena said winter's coming after June 21. He said the people in Galena show them a pretty good time and help the boat drivers out. They let the boat drivers stay in their houses. He said right now they are in the warm up shed and it will be a good trip back now that they are warm and fed.

Song by John Hartford

Jeff Kennedy said they are now one minute away from the start of the return lap from Galena to Fairbanks along the Yukon River and then the Tanana River. He said Ollie Anderson is standing in place with the starting flare gun. The boats are on the river. They will all be leaving at the same time. He said it is almost 4 a.m. and they should be back in Fairbanks by 11:00. Kennedy said the race has started. The boats are now going down the Yukon River. He said Del Hayward is taking the lead. Number 44 has the head start. The first boat should be in Fairbanks by 11:00 or 10:30. The last boat to take off is the Ruby Yacht which has already been disqualified for taking on gasoline up river. He said Jerry Woods is moving out slowly. He describes the progress of the boats.

Unidentified song Peter LaFarge

Jeff Kennedy said he is standing on the banks of the Chena River in Fairbanks. He said it is past 11:30 and looking downriver where the winner of the race will appear shortly. The winner is Bill Page with Moe Samuelson on crew. Holly Anderson is at the finish line. Pike's Landing in Fairbanks is the start and the finish line of the longest boat race in the United States and possibly the world. Kennedy said a horn has sounded. He can see Bill Page coming into the finish line.

I pass a river (in Spanish) by Joan Baez

Jeff Kennedy said Bill Page, captain, Moe Samuelson and Eric Adamson, crew, guided the Slo-Moe Kayak II to victory in 14:53. Bill Page didn't realize at first that he had one and did not know that Gustafson had mechanical problems and drop out of the race. Kennedy asked Page when he first found out that he had won. Page said he kept asking about Gustafson. Page said Gustafson built the boat. Page talked about the barges on the river. Page talked about the cast of the sky on the water which makes you see things because of the reflection on the water.

Song by the Nootka tribe in British Columbia

Jeff Kennedy reads a special announcement from the Alaska Legal Services Corporation. Judge Victor Carlson has announced a special hearing to determine to accept a tentative agreement on the Angayak case. Kennedy read the terms of the agreement.