

Transcript Summary

UAF Oral History Call No:	2016-15-15
Date of Recording:	1955
Length of Recording:	00:13:48
Original Media:	Dictabelts (red)
Digitized By:	Northeast Document Conservation Centre using IRENE method
Digitization Date:	December 2024
Narrator:	Clyde 'Slim' Williams
Interviewer:	It would appear that Richard 'Dick' Morenus gave Slim Williams the Dictabelt recorder and Slim is just telling stories into the machine by himself. Dick is not on the recording at all.
Others Present:	N/A
Recording Location:	Chicago, Illinois
Transcriber:	Leslie McCartney
Transcription Date:	January 31, 2025
Access:	The dictabelts were donated to us by the great-nephew of Dick Morenus who inherited them from his mother (Dick's niece). Slim and his wife never had children so there is no next of kin. We have a signed Letter of Transmittal on file from Dick's great-nephew. For public/electronic use.
Where to Find this in Text:	These recordings were made by Clyde 'Slim' Williams so that Richard 'Dick' Morenus could write Slim's story in book form. It was published as <i>Alaska Sourdough, the Story of Slim Williams</i> by Richard Morenus (1956). New York: Rand McNally & Company. The book is available on Internet Archive https://archive.org/details/alaskasourdoughs0000rich/mode/2up or in the Elmer E. Ramuson Library, F909.M75 Alaska Collection. Where possible, the pages of where some of the transcribed stories appear in the book are noted.

(00:00:00)

Slim Williams: [Slim starts mid-sentence] boy was all but pushin' and her kickin' or doin' somthin' to take the weight off of those dogs. They always do it. That's just in the game, that's all. Save your dogs all the time, never mind the man, but save the dogs. But I'll betcha outta that 100 miles that boy was on his feet for 90 of 'em. It's just done and I don't think it's any extra in man or I think there lots of men right

who do it. But it's just, well ... he's done it and likes it and that's all there is to it. [dead air from 00:00:35 to 00:00:38]

00:00:38

Now that's what we'd do on our mail run we just protect our dogs all we could whether it was my team of somebody's else's, you just protected 'em and kept your sled the in best of trails kept your dogs a goin' as best you could and now we used to at night, when we'd gonna stay all night, while we'd run our sleds up on a ... on some brush. We had a man that took care of the dogs, he'd cook the feed and feed them when we got in and he would have bush out on the river or on the trail where we was and we'd run our sleds up on that. We'd have two generally with oh, there'd be some of 'em from 12 to 16 feet, 22 inches wide, that'd made a trail wide enough for dogs to run on and we'd run our sled up on that ... those bushes. That was so it wouldn't freeze. Now there was enough friction or heat. It didn't make any difference it was 40 below zero. You come in with that load on that runners and let 'em set on the ice and it'd freeze to the ice. Next morning you'd have a devil of a time startin'. So we had to run 'em onto these brush.

00:01:48

Well next morning when we gotta ready to go, why, of course our load was all on the brush and a little hard to start. Well we had a man there to help us start and if it started a little hard, why we'd just reach down and catch the tow line in our hands and pull it up just as high as we could between our legs, right to our crotch. Then we'd use ... let out a whoop at our dogs and they would lunge. Well as they would lunge they would jerk that line outta your hand and it'd just snap you know and that jerk as a rule would get a man outta just pretty near any hole. [dead air from 00:02:27 to 00:02:34]

00:02:34

[Slim starts off far away from the microphone making it hard to hear him.] [inaudible] from 250 to 300 dogs on the Yukon on the mail. Now I don't say mail, no, because there was freight, there was passengers, there was what have you, there was a limit of mail and then if somebody had a load of freight to go you took it and anything is to go why, went with you. That is the only transportation. Now our dog feed come up the river as a rule during the summer on the boat. And that meant tallow, cracklings, anything that was grease. And we'd also have salmon occasionally we cook but we'd have cornmeal, we'd have rolled oats, we'd have rice, anything we could get ahold of that ... it was cheapest, didn't make much difference which rice, made awful good feed so did cornmeal, rolled oats and you would put about a pound of tallow or whatever you had, grease, or half a pound of grease per dog, and then you would cook it. Give a dog all he could eat once a day, that's all he got. It was feedin' 'em salmon, dried salmon. We'd figure on about 2 pound to the dog. Now that would just the same as feedin' him around 5 pound of fresh salmon, 'cuz you take a 5 pound salmon and you'll dry down to about 2. So we switched food around quite a bit and give 'em a change and kept 'em in the best condition.

00:04:13

Now we figured that around 40 miles was just about all a dog could stand the year around, every day. So we tried to give 'em a rest. We drive 'em 100 miles but we'd try and drive 'em 25 or 30 the next day or maybe not at all, or, maybe when was back we'd tryin' get 'em 60 miles. We'd just do things like that to keep our dogs from just over workin' 'em so of course they was always ready to go. A dog would just kill 'imself that's all there is to it. You just keep on gettin' 'em along while he's just work himself to death and love it. I dunno why but they do. [dead air from to 00:05:01]

00:05:01

Some of it's too bad ones. And the Thompson Pass and the [Slim says Isabella but it is Isabel] Pass. Well this mail started out of Valdez and hit a blizzard on the Thompson Pass and was snowed in and buck snow and after it got over why it bucked snow for a couple of hundred miles got to the Isabella Pass and that was snowed under. Buck snow there and it come in 20 days late into Fairbanks. Now of course they was a clause in the mail contract there, an act of God excused you for bein' in so, pretty near anything went. Well it got in 20 days late by horse into Fairbanks and from there to Nome it was another 8 days before we got in late ... before we got it into there. So the first ... the latest mail that I know of went into Nome 28 days late and that was just one of our tough winters. We'd have good winters and we'd have bad winters. We'd have early fall, we'd have late falls. But of course our late fall was always tough on the mail. They ... on the Valdez trail they would take it man for a while, then they got horses and tried it with that and always get through, but a lot of times awful late.

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That was happen to really when until the airplane took over. And so the dogs on the Yukon. They was pretty busy to the airplane took over. Now the last mail down the Yukon generally went by boat. Then the next mail would come up by steamer to Nome that way. And then come up the river, up the Yukon ... uh, Yukon and Tanana to Fairbanks and Nome ... er, Dawson by steamer when the ice went out you see. The ... the ice with the ... mail would go right down behind the ice as it went out and take the mail down. By that time the steamer would be into Nome and the steamer would pick up the mail and bring it back up the Yukon then after the ice had went out and the mail would run all summer by steamboat. Those steamboats was a quite a thing Dick. You know that thing runs about 8 miles an hour all the way and they burned wood. And, passengers on the boat, everybody they'd stop about oh, Lord, every little whip stitchin', load up wood on the boat and then a man stand there and just shove wood in that boiler just as hard as he could. He'd just have time to shut the door that was about all and then he'd open and throw in another stick. Of course when they got to the Five Finger Rapid they had a ... a cable there that for, oh, pretty near a quarter of a mile they'd just towed the darn thing by winch.

00:09:06

Up through that Five Finger Rapids. But the boat's comin' down I've often wondered how they ever missed it. Boy that was tough. They'd be comin' down there and ya know I'd like the ... water runs 20 miles an hour through that ah, Five Fingers and they'd be comin' down that. They had to out run the water to get steerage why you know. And they'd come through that rapids and when the nose of the boat just about two-thirds of the way through, plus their 100 feet high on both sides ya know, and, you could throw a rock across it. And there wasn't ... didn't look like over 6 feet on either side of the boat to go through. But they'd run the nose of the boat right up, you'd think it's gonna hit that cliff and spite of everything you could do and they'd give it a swing and she'd swing off and she'd always get through alright. But a lot of times you just wonder how they's gonna make it I'm telling ya. [dead air from 00:09:03 to 00:09:06]

00:09:06

Oh yes I was gonna tell ya about drivin' 50 dogs. Well I had these pups in Nome and mail was always spring of the year and of course we used to always take our dogs. Fellas made that a business, importin' dogs in the winter and the summer time. They'd set up a fish wheel on the Yukon or ... catch fish anyway and nap any place you could and they'd feed the dogs and they'd charge you from oh, 5 to 10 dollars depend on the year and the time and everything, a month to feed your dogs. So I was figurin' on getting these boarded and there was 50 of 'em. And 4 sleds of course and I had to take some food along with

me, mush, to feed the dogs. And by the way Dick, that do ... that word mush comes from a French Canadian marche¹ and we just shortened it up to mush to make our dogs go.

00:10:06

But these had to go to Kaltag so I just hooked 'em up and course now I had 10 good leaders in that bunch. And 4 sleds and oh, not much, enough, I'd say maybe 1000 pound on the sled is all. And they just no other way ... easiest way to get 'em there was to drive 'em there. So I just drove 'em as ... well, just easiest way out, that was all. Oh, by the way, I was gonna tell a about that rubbed out on the last one that fella freezing to death. Well, we was on Mankomen Lake and this fella was about 20 miles above us. He wasn't a trapper, he's just thought he could trap. You know so many men just gotta a idea just set out a trap and the animals come to it. Well I'm tellin' ya, that's ... to get to be a trapper that takes a man a lifetime, many of 'em only learn half of it but so many men get it in their head and that so he just figured well, gee, we can make money trappin' why couldn't he? He had some traps too so he moved into this cabin. Well a move ... a good trapper won't have moved in that close to us that was all.

00:11:17

But we knew he wouldn't get over 5 miles away from the cabin, old cabin, we didn't want it and didn't want to use it 'cuz we like to trap high in the mountains. I always did because your traps would look clean. You set 'em down in the snow and snow come unless you set up spruce tree of course. A lynx trap is alright, a marten or anything like that but a fox trap or wolf trap, I like to get high in the mountain. They like to get up there too in the winter because it's easy goin' where the wind blows all, where its bare ground for miles you know. I like that. It got a little hard on your sled a little hard on your dogs but and you do because you gotta run, but nevertheless I like it. Well we was figurin' on runnin' over the mountains and he was in quite heavy timber so it was alright with us but early in the winter he come through, took a notion that he was through trappin'. He did go out. Well we had a trapline runnin' over the mountains about 20 miles, same way he was going, then he hit a river and he followed down the river about 10 miles towards cabin.

00:12:22

Well there'd been ... we didn't know this of course we coulda saved a life we had any idea so bad as he was but he just didn't seem to know much. But there'd been a little snow on the river, well it snowed over as far as that's concerned, it had blowed off our ridge, you could still see the tracks follow it, always could because you'd go over there and when the snow was on and it'd leave tracks but on the river it had blowed over and it was plumb clean you couldn't see any tracks at all. So we put 'im on this trail that went over the ridge and he got to the river fine without any trouble but when he got to the river there was no traps ... tracks to follow. And you hit the river right square. It had turned until you went right square into the river. And when he got there it ... you could just tell by his tracks he didn't know which was up and which way was down. Well we never thought of that at all. So of course when a man gets lost he gets excited, when he gets excited he wants to run, when he run he gets to sweatin' and when he gets to sweatin' and if it's cold weather, he freezes to death. Well that's just what this fella done. You could tell by his tracks. He had run over a ways one way and maybe fall in the snow and get up and go some other direction tearing along you know or some other direction he just had tracks scattered all around there and we'd see where [end of recording].

¹ Transcriber's note. The French word for walking is marche.