

IDITAROD TRAIL INTERVIEW - BILLY MCCARTHY

September 13, 1980
Ruby, Alaska

BLM Interviewer:

Tom Beck

H83-16-17 UA oral history

SEPTEMBER 13, 1980 - BILLY MCCARTHY

(Tape No. 1 of 1, Side A)

INTRODUCTION

INTERVIEWER:with Billy McCarthy of Ruby, Alaska. The interview was conducted at the home of Billy Captain at Ruby on September 13th, 1980. The interview was for the Bureau of Land Management by Tom Beck.

Billy was born in 1904 near Fairbanks. His mother came to Nulato when Billy was a year and a half old, where she met Billy's stepfather. Billy's stepfather ran a roadhouse in Nulato and later ran the Slough Roadhouse 16 miles south of Kaltag on the Iditarod Trail.

Billy used to be a mail carrier and carried mail by dog team from Ruby to Nine-Mile Point, 30 miles above Kochrines. Billy carried the mail for two years for the NC Company, making two trips a week for \$150 per week. Billy was also a reindeer herder for three years for the Laplanders near Unalakleet.

In 1925 Billy participated in the diphtheria serum run from Nenana to Nome. Billy ran the segment from Ruby to Whiskey Creek.

(Off record at Log No. 0105)

(On record at Log No. 0152)

INTERVIEW

- Q Okay. Where were you stepfather's roadhouses?
A Six miles from old Kaltag and one 16 miles, a place called Slough Roadhouse.
Q Slough Roadhouse was 16 miles, what, southwest?
A (Indiscernible) Slough, it was called. On the other side -- you know, it was on this side of the river.
Q What was the other roadhouse called?
A What?
Q You said he had two roadhouses. Where was the other one?
A Slough and what was the other one?
Q Two roadhouses.
Q Mm hmm (affirmative).
A Sixteen -- or six and sixteen miles below Kaltag.
Q Yeah. The one was called Slough Roadhouse. What was the other one called?
A It was just -- just a roadhouse on the road where his fish camp and where he cut wood.....
Q Mm hmm (affirmative).
Ain the summer when there was no cattle. There was lots of steamboats in them days, and the wood was in great demand.
Q Which one did he run first, the Slough Roadhouse or the other one?
A The one at the fish camp below Kaltag.
Q Six miles below?
A Yeah.

Q That -- they didn't -- he didn't have -- there wasn't a name for that?

A Beg pardon?

Q Was there a name for that one? Did they call it anything?

A No. It was just his summer residence. Fish camp and wood-cutting was his profession in those days.

Q Were both of those roadhouses on the trail there going down to -- what?

A Yeah, the one at sixteen was on the Iditarod Trail. It was over -- I know it was beyond that Slough Roadhouse. There was a lot of travel them days, either on foot, some on skis, some pulling sleigh, pulling from Yukon sleds by the neck. Some that just couldn't afford dogs.

Q What was the Yukon sled?

A Little sleds built in the states. Little flat, no rails on it -- top rails. They just packed their bedding and provisions on that sled, and they nexed over, over to the Iditarod.

Q So they used to stop off on their way from Kaltag down?

A Yeah. They stopped there for lunch, and they -- at Six-Mile, and Sixteen, they made it in one day. Their travel was coming pretty shaky, I remember. There was 16 beds in there on each side of the long log building.

Q That was Slough Roadhouse?

A Yeah. And the beds were all occupied, and on the middle of the floor the people would just lay their blankets down and just slept on that.

Q Was it all one floor, or were there two stories?

A It was one story. Log house.

Q Was there any shelter for dogs there, dog.....

A There was the dog barn. See, I remember the old man got all the (indiscernible) from Kaltag getting moose for the roadhouse.

Q He hired somebody to get the moose?

A Hmm?

Q He hired somebody to provide the moose for the roadhouse?

A Yeah. The Natives from Kaltag going -- a lot of them had dogs, take and pulled us over with dog teams, and on the way back, they'd kill a moose or two. I went over once. Their horse teams, it was a tough place to get -- to cross the river there, a steep bank on both sides. And the horse -- one horse broke his leg. You know. We got him (indiscernible), by golly, the old man, we'll just -- horse meat for the travelers. He had to. You know, we just got it up from Kaltag, and it didn't last a day or two. By golly, I remember he cooked it a long time. It was kind of tough, tough meat, but he cooked it a long time, and they ate it, and they didn't know the difference.

Q So horses used to pull the sleds then, too, huh? And wagons?

A Yeah, horse teams, they went over and they pulled their own hay and oats 'cause there was no stores over in that (indiscernible) country. And they had horses, horse teams, as high as six horses to a team, come by here, by the roadhouse there. And the mail came, was running that way,

too. Harry Lawrence, a fellow named Harry Lawrence was driving the mail from Kaltag over to (indiscernible) country.

Q Did he use horses?

A With dogs.

Q Oh, with dogs.

A These horses, they had work to do over the mining camps. They were hauling wood and stuff for the mining camps. That's where there was -- there was six horses in one -- pulling one sled, you know, pulling their -- hauling their own hay and oats.

Q Did you know Harry Lawrence?

A Yeah. I know him.

Q Mm hmm (affirmative).

A Yeah. He was a mail carrier around Kaltag and down at Holy Cross. I know him well. He died recently at Fairbanks, oh, about 20 -- 20 or 30 years ago.

Q How often did he make that run? Do you know? From Kaltag down to Iditarod?

A He -- I believe he made on trip a month, or every 20 days rather.

Q And he stopped at the Slough Roadhouse there?

A Yeah, he stopped at the roadhouse. And from there on, I don't know whether there's any more roadhouses or not. I guess I believed there was.

Q How long did your dad run it? When did he stop running the roadhouse?

A Oh, he run it about two or three winters.

Q When was that? Do you remember?

A In 1908. The winter of 1908 is winter Iditarod Stampede was on.

Q What'd he do after that?

A We stayed around Six-Mile, kept on fishing and cutting wood for steamboats.

Q Where was your dad from?

A He was a big Swede.

Q Swede? Huh.

A He come up from Stockholm, he used to say.

Q Did he come over the Chilkoot Trail, did he, or did he.....

A What's that?

Q Did he come over the Chilkoot Trail?

A I didn't get you.

Q Did he come over the Chilkoot Trail when he come up to Alaska, or did he come by the sea?

A Oh, he probably was one of them Chilkoot Trail mushers. He came in way before that.

Q Well, when did he come in?

A I don't -- I never did learn. When he -- he used to be mining up around Dawson and that country, 40-Mile or Dawson or someplace. He was a young fellow then.

Q Did you used to help him there at -- you were probably pretty young when he had the roadhouse there.

A Oh, I was a kid about five years old.

Q Do you remember what the place looked like very well?

A What's that?

Q Do you remember what it looked like, the roadhouse?
A Yeah. And roadhouse was full every night. And I don't believe anybody had to sleep out. There was only one building there, the roadhouse, and nobody was turned out.

Q Who did the cooking?
A Old man. My stepfather or his partner. His name was Jerry Oswald.

Q How about your mother? Where was she from?
A She lived there with us.
Q She's from around that area?
A She was from Koyukuk.
Q Oh.
A I was born around Fairbanks in 1904, and my -- when I was about a year or a year and a half old, we come down in a pole boat to Koyukuk and Nulato where she met up with my stepfather. They -- he bought a roadhouse there in Nulato. That was for the travel -- all from dog teams and mail carriers. There were dog teams traveled them days from Nenana to Nome.

Q Did they travel on the river there?
A Yeah, just on Nulato?
Q Mm hmm (affirmative).
A Yeah, it was on the Yukon River. It's about 40 miles above Kaltag.

Q Mm hmm (affirmative). When they traveled, the dog teams, did the trail follow the river, the Yukon River there?
A From Kaltag it went over to Portage to Unalakleet. And from Unalakleet, it went over land. And at times when the water wouldn't let them, or the ice -- they traveled some places by ice. Mostly -- most of the way they traveled by land. I've been on that trail to Nome.

Q Do you go all the way up to Nome?
A Yeah. In 1918 I was up there.
Q Were there a lot of roadhouses along the way there?
A Yes. There was roadhouses every 30 miles from Nome to Nenana, all the way up the Yukon.

Q Where were they? There was one in Nulato. Was there one at Bishop Mountain there?
A Oh, it was above Bishop Mountain. About four or five miles above Bishop Mountain. Johnny and Teske run a roadhouse there, a Native from Loudon.

Q Johnny? What was his name?
A Johnny and Teske.
Q Hmm. Do you remember where some of the other roadhouses were along that run?
A There was roadhouses all along the Yukon and then up the Tanana River. The next roadhouse was at Whiskey Creek. And old Ben Derricks was running the roadhouse there, and he was raised -- he was a mail carrier too. From Whiskey Creek he'd come here to Ruby.

Q What were you doing when you went up in 1918? Why did you go up to Nome? Why did you go on the trail?
A What was I doing?
Q Why were you -- why did you make that trip in 1918?
A Why I had to make that trip, or what?

Q Mm hmm (affirmative).
A Well, the mail was running those days by dog. There was no airplanes here in the country.
Q Were you a mail carrier?
A I carried mail, you said?
Q Yeah. Did you?
A Yes. I carried from here up, up above to Nine-Mile Point, 30 miles above Kochrine. I carried it two years, with dogs.
Q Did you -- who had the contract for the mail?
A The NC Company had the contract at that time.
Q Did you use your own dogs?
A No, I used -- NC bought the dogs. I had to buy the dogs for the NC. Whenever they got old or played out, something, or worn out, I bought new dogs, and I just -- the NC paid me for them -- paid the man for the dogs. If I needed a new sled or things like that; they paid my roadhouse bills. I was -- they didn't -- \$150 a month.
Q Oh, that was pretty good, wasn't it, in those days?
A It was pretty good those days -- for those days when everything was cheap. It was just like \$150,000 when we got \$150.
Q How long did it take you to make that run?
A I made it in two trips a week, from right here up -- I laid off one day in the week just so.....
Q And would you do that from November to March or something?
A Yeah, till we couldn't travel any more. The fellows here, Bob Kennedy -- you probably seen him.
Q Mm hmm (affirmative).
A He carried the mail from here to Whiskey Creek, and then he went down where the ice was running. He done it twice.
Q How'd he make it?
A He got on the river here, on the ice, and he got to Whiskey Creek, and the got off the ice there, above there. He could tell you more about that.
Q I was just in Galena. Edgar Nollner said to say hello.
A Oh, yes?
Q Mm hmm (affirmative).
A Good of him.
Q Said he saw you this summer, I guess, or something.
A Yeah, I saw him this summer, early this summer. I was down there, too, for dental work. He's one of the fellows that's hauled the serum to Nome with me. There's only four of us left. From Nenana to Nome. We didn't go out of the way, but we really -- the first team, every roadhouse, and it went night and day.
Q What segment -- what part did you do?
A I took it to Whiskey Creek. In the night.
Q What was it like that night?
A What was it like, you said?
Q Yeah.
A Oh, it was something we had to do. I was the only available person in town here to drive dogs, and I had a fellow named Brown, Aleck Brown. His wife is living here; she was here too. He had 30 dogs, a kennel of 30 dogs, or 31, and I picked out 7 of the best dogs, his best dogs, and I took the

run from here to Whiskey Creek, and I met Edgar Nollner there. He took it on to Galena, over to the next place below there.

Q Was it cold that night?

A It was really cold. But those days, cold didn't mean nothing to me. I was young and husky, and I didn't wear much clothes, just a sweater and canvas (indiscernible), gee, and I had to mush all the way to keep warm.

Q Did you have to break trail, or was that already.....

A There was a good trail all the way, all along the river. There was lots of travel those days and made it -- kept the trail up. Mail carriers, they had to go every day. Every day they had to go, whether it's cold or rain or anything. Snow storm. Yeah, I remember the days the poor dogs, they hated to go, going against -- up river against the head wind, cold. I had to work on dogs' feet, putting moccasins on dogs.

Q When it was that cold, 50 or 60 below, did it bother the dogs a lot?

A Oh, it didn't bother them, but they didn't like it, I know it. They had to go. Whenever we would come out in them days, they had to go.

Q Was -- how big was the serum package? Was it.....

A What's that?

Q What was the serum package like? Was it heavy?

A The trail?

Q The serum package that the serum was in.

A Oh, it was just a little package about a foot square, wrapped in velvet or some kind of cloth to keep from freezing.

Q Do you know some of the other fellows that ran the trail? Did you -- had you ever met Seppala or any of those people?

A Yeah, I know them all, all the way to Nome, and lots of fellows above here. I met them fellows. Like Edgar Kalland, now you've probably seen him.

Q No, I'm going to in a couple of days, yeah.

A Down at Kaltag?

Q Mm hmm (affirmative).

A He hauled to the first roadhouse out of Nenana. He claimed he hauled it all the way to Nome. I didn't hear him say that, but Edgar Nollner told me that when we was out to Anchorage. He told about the time he started out in Nenana and he took it all the way to Nome. He was no -- no one dog team can do that. All the rest of the fellows below here and above all died off, except there's four of us left.

Q Was Leonard Seppala, was he a nice fellow?

A Who?

Q Leonard Seppala?

A He was a Lap, a Laplander. I know him well, too. He used to come up here for the dog race from Nome. He stopped at our roadhouse down in Nulato many a time.

Q Did they have a lot of races back then, a lot of dog races?

A Oh, yeah, we had races here, and -- but there was no races anywhere. There was just -- at that time, Fairbanks was a young town. There -- right out here -- Seppala quit racing,

and he started racing at Anchorage and at Fairbanks and other places all around, like Tok, Nenana, Tanana, here, Nulato, Nome. They used to have races down in Nome, and they were long races. I read of it somewhere, the races they had down in Nome, 500-mile race.

Q Did you -- you said you went up to Nome one time?

A Yeah, I been there two, three times.

Q You went up there with dogs once?

A No, I was up there with reindeer. Once I went in the spring, I went over in a schooner. There was no engines, just sails, with a bunch of Eskimos. They'd go back and forth, you know, for trading seal oil and mukluks.

Q From where, St. Michael or.....

A From Unalakleet.

Q Oh.

A I was reindeer herding that time. Eleven of us boys went from Nulato over there to the reindeer fur (sic) at Shaktoolik. That's 40 miles above Unalakleet. And while there, Eskimos that.....

(End of Tape 1, Side A)

(Tape No. 1 of 1, Side B)

A Young fellows just go up. Was it an old man?

Q Yeah. But I think he was up more in the Nome area.

A Oh, it was past farther than Nome, I guess.

Q So they had a big fair there in Shaktoolik, huh?

A Yeah.

Q The Laps had a big fair? The Laps had a big fair there in Shaktoolik?

A Selling reindeer fur?

Q Mm hmm (affirmative).

A It used to come off pretty nice, they thought. They had foot races on the tundra. They had every kind of event, heavy load-pulling with the sled deer. My boss, Tungsen, won the heavy pulling contest when it was so many bags of rocks. He pulled it 300 yards on the trail, on the -- right in town there. And they had lassoing contests, every kind of event.

Q Was there a lot of Laps stay around there?

A What?

Q Were there a lot of Laps around there, Laplanders? Or were they mostly Eskimos there?

A My hearing gets blurry sometimes.

Q Were there a lot of Laps there at Shaktoolik? Is that who put on the fair pretty much?

A Yeah.

Q Mm hmm (affirmative).

A Oh, Laplanders, you said?

Q Mm hmm (affirmative).

A There was about 15 Laps that I know of between Unalakleet and Nome. The government -- our government got them from Lapland to train the Eskimos how to herd deer, and they brought their own reindeer with them. That's how the reindeer populations grew so -- to such a -- quite a number.

I don't know if there's as much reindeer now, but the wolves would come around just when I was finished working, and they killed all the reindeer. I know a Laplander, he was about 80-some years old, just before I quit, and they killed most of -- or, rather, a big bunch of his deer. He lost about 40 head, or 50 head, of reindeer. Two wolves come around, and he used to be good on skis when he was young, out in Lapland I guess, and he took a little gloving and pack ax and a rifle, and he took off after them two wolves, and he overtook them in two days.

Q Gee.

A He brought the two wolf skins back. And they were superstitious about wolf. He was out in town that time, and I lived at their home. And we had an upstairs, and the floor was full of (indiscernible), and I watched him sitting down in easy chair or a rocking chair with those wolves spread out in front of him on the floor, and he was drinking black coffee. Every once in a while he'd look at them wolves and he'd bawl them out -- wolf skins.

Q Did you ever travel the trail from Ruby down to Sulatna and Long and Poorman, down in that area?

A Oh, out to Poorman?

Q Mm hmm (affirmative).

A I did.

Q Were there roadhouses along there, too?

A Yes. There was a roadhouse out here at 14, and one at Long Creek. It was a big -- bigger town than -- oh, this town has grown lately, but it used to be bigger than this town. And Poorman was as -- there's more people there than there was here.

Q Hmm. Did they used to haul freight with horses between the two?

A With horses?

Q Mm hmm (affirmative).

A Yes. Until the airplanes come in and we got what's here, they'd come in.

Q Do you remember an area called like Boston Roadhouse there? Do you remember a Boston Roadhouse?

A What's that?

Q Do you remember a Boston Roadhouse down, it should be about around 14-Mile?

A Boston?

Q Roadhouse.

A I think there -- I was -- they had a name, but I don't remember them. I remember Boston, but I don't know where that was. Out from Round Creek or.....

Q No, I think it was around 14-Mile, somewhere around that area there.

A Maybe that's the roadhouse that's called Boston.

Q Could have been. There's another one called the Hub?

A Yeah. It was over the mountain about halfway to Long Creek. And there was, oh, roadhouses all over. There was one at 10-Mile.

Q So Long was a pretty big town in those days, huh?

A It used to be a pretty big town. Now I can't say it's town

now that's been ghost -- ghost town. Like what -- a fellow named Kangas is working there right now. And this summer, two outfits come there, not to be on Long Creek. And one company is working at -- somewhere this side of Poorman. And in Poorman there's mining going on, a man and his wife. Oh, Howard Miskovich, I think.

Q

A Yeah.

A

Q Yeah. Did you enjoy carrying the mails back then? Did you enjoy it?

A

Oh, on the river?

Q

Carrying the mails.

A

I did. I was making \$150 -- oh, I made more than \$150 a month, but I had -- the second year, I had to use my own dogs as the old team was all played out and old. I had to kill them, and I used my own dogs. I got paid for -- extra for my own dogs, 50 cents a day. The leader was more; I charged dollar and a half a day for my leader.

Q

You had to get rid of the NC's dogs 'cause they were.....

A

Yes. I had to kill them all.

Q

Cost too much to feed them, is that.....

A

No, they were old. And steady going like that, also, for seven, eight months, that'd play out any kind of dogs.

Q

What kind of dogs did you use?

A

Oh, malamutes.

Q

Some guys said they used some of those bird dogs. Did you ever use any of those?

A

What's that?

Q

Some guys said they used some of those bird dogs. Did you ever use any bird dogs?

A

I never -- I probably had one or two in my own team, bird dogs, but I never used them for driving mail, hauling mail, 'cause they couldn't stand much as the malamute dog.

Q

People look forward to you coming in with the mail?

A

Many time -- once there was a store right up here. Carbones ran a store, and the dog barn was on this side of there, and I put my dogs away. I brought the mail up to their post office and put the dogs away in the barn, and then I eat at home. I lived up where the store is now. And I started to go up into the store, and there was Ed Grider and all these old-timers sitting around and with their feet up on the stove. And they said I was ingenious. And they were talking around there. He said -- they said I had good play and there was no reason why I'd be late.

And I was taking the dogs -- they didn't see me come in the store. And Pat McCacky and all them doolandars (indiscernible), they knew all about mail carrying. So I said, 'Well, I'm here, fellows.' I got up off the bench, and I said, 'Any one of you fellows can take the mail out. Let me rest tomorrow, and you see how it is on the trail for yourself.' And geez, they was surprised; not one of them said a word. And Carbone was the only man that saw me coming in the store. I said, 'You bunch of goddamned old women, you fellows, I'll stand here and choose who takes the mail out for me tomorrow and see how you like it.' Not one fellow ever answered me.

Q How many years did you carry the mail?
A Two winters. But the time I -- about the time the airplanes took over the mail, I quit. I was through carrying mail, '32 or '33. The winter of '32 or '33. And the airplanes come and took over the mail.
Q Did you carry any -- or did you go -- carry the mail on the river?
A Hmm?
Q Did you work the river at all in the summer? Did you carry mail on the river?
A Oh, the steamboats carried the mail or before the -- after we got through, well, the airplanes took it -- took over the mail completely, summer and winter.
Q Things have changed a lot, huh?
A Hmm?
Q Things have changed since then. You want me to say anything to Edgar Kalland? I'm going to see him in a couple of days.
A And tell him I said hi. He was -- I was up to Tanana just recently, to the hospital, and he come there from Kaltag. He had something wrong with him. I didn't know there was anything wrong with him. He just traveling around like this.
Q I guess he's still running the store up there, huh?
A At Kaltag?
Q Yeah.
A Yes.
Q Did you ever go to Kalland's there?
A What?
Q Did you ever go to Kalland's?
A Oh, I've been to Kalland's?
Q Mm hmm (affirmative).
A I've been there lots of times.
Q Is that his dad that started that?
A Yeah. He named it after him.
Q How long have you been living in Ruby?
A Since 1922 or '23.
Q Did you ever think when you were carrying that serum run that people would be so interested in it?
A That was in 1925?
Q Yeah. Did you ever think people would be so interested in that trip?
A The people of Anchorage, the Dog Musers Association?
Q Mm hmm (affirmative).
A They were interested about us carrying the serum over to Nome from Nenana that they called us all over to Anchorage.

(Side comments)

Q I think they're ready for you to eat.
A Hmm?
Q I don't want to keep you. I didn't know that.....

(Interview concluded/end of audible portion)

This file is part of the a laerger series of interviews
about the Iditarod Trail Project.

See also:

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