

The Toughest Man in Alaska

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Joe Redington is a legend who leads a life few others could, or would want to.

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BY J. MICHAEL KENNEDY

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KNIK, Alaska—Joe Redington, who was talking about dogs, as he always does, was sitting in a room that smelled like dogs and a dog was on a bed in the corner.

He was in the tiny one-room cabin down by his dog lot, where he keeps 150 Alaska sled dogs. Just about every nickel he earns goes to feed them.

"I was always doing something with dogs," he said.

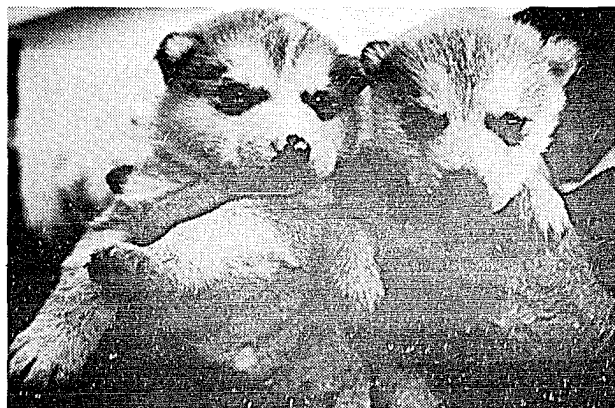
Soon, the chilling winds of autumn would give way to the snows of winter, Joe Redington's time. Already he was jumping the gun, hooking up a team of dogs an old sled, making practice runs over gravel and mud. Time to get started, time to train.

Redington is a legend in these parts, a man who said he once had been given a choice between his first wife and his dogs. He took the dogs.

This year, at age 62, Redington took a dog team up Mt. McKinley, the highest peak in North America. It was a 38-day endurance test—for the simple challenge of being the first to do it—but when he talks about it Redington might just as well be describing what he ate for dinner.

He had a tough time on that old mountain, he says. Translated, that means there aren't many around who could have done what he did—or who would have wanted to, for that matter.

The McKinley climb was more like the dessert than the entree, because Redington is known as the father of the Iditarod, a 1,049-mile sled-dog race from Anchorage to Nome, considered by some to be the last of the great races and one that he helped to start.



GREAT EXPECTATIONS—Puppies have work cut out for them. Times Photos by Cal Montney

A test of stamina for both man and dog team, the Iditarod is an endurance race over some of the most barren land on earth, where a trail can be lost, where a storm can lash out menacingly and make a once-strong person call it quits.

One of Redington's great sorrows is that he has never won this race, not in the six years he has run it.

The best he has finished is fifth, and the years keep gliding by for Redington, a tough man whose life has been a string of adventures, whose story is a good, but improbable, movie script.

Someone short and stocky would have to play the part, someone who would look natural with dirt under his fingernails, a cap of some sort perpetually atop his head.

Redington lives in a clearing on the shores of Knik Lake, once a stop-off on the trail that led to Nome during the gold rush days, about 60 miles outside Anchorage. He and his second

wife, Vi, live in a trailer, their temporary home for the last 10 years. Redington has never had time to build anything more permanent between commercial fishing in the summer and sled dogs in the winter.

Not too long ago, he moved two more trailers onto the land, and one is reserved for color slides he has collected over the years. The lot itself is an incredible hodgepodge of trucks, old cars, new cars, cars crammed with odds and ends because there is no other place to put them, spare tires, oak barrels, hub caps, dog sleds and a few dozen cats.

"You know," he said, "one of these days I'm going to have to clean this place up."

Some things are more important than others.

Redington was born in Kingfisher, Okla. When he was 10, he and his father and brother joined a band of gypsies traveling through the central United States. They used to sell what looked like fresh-churned butter, but wasn't. It would turn the texture of water when it was placed on something hot. They would hit the small towns and hope they could get out before someone tried to spread it on hot biscuits.

The three once bought a car for \$12 in Jersey City, N.J., and crossed the country looking for field work. Twenty-five thousand miles later, they sold the car for \$13 in Mexico and began riding the rails.

By the time he enlisted in the Army in 1940, Redington had seen every state except Florida. He also had tried once to get to Alaska, during the Depression, but hadn't been able to raise the \$34 it took to book passage out of Seattle.

So he went off to war, serving in the Pacific, and was discharged almost six years later. He moved to Pennsylvania, where his family had settled, and sold farm machinery and jeeps in order to earn enough money to get to Alaska.

In 1948, he drove up the Alcan Highway. At the Alaska border someone gave him a husky puppy, a premonition of the direction Redington's life would take.

He homesteaded 101 acres in Knik, moving in when there was nothing but a dirt road back to the property from Wasilla. But after five years he moved to Flat Horn Lake, 35 miles to the west.

"It just got too heavily populated here," Redington said deadpan. Today, Knik is nothing more than a spot in the road.

And all the while, he was learning more about his passion, dogs. He was



BEST FRIEND Joe Redington with his lead dog, Feets, a veteran of the Iditarod races.

hired by the Air Force to do rescue work in the mountains, bringing out airplane crash survivors, and the dead, by dog team. At times he would use as many as 30 huskies on a team. When helicopters took over the work in 1957, Redington took up flying.

That is another part of the legend. He has been in so many crashes that he can't remember them all. He has been in crashes he never reported because he didn't see the need.

Twice has he been rescued. He becomes angry when he discusses those times.

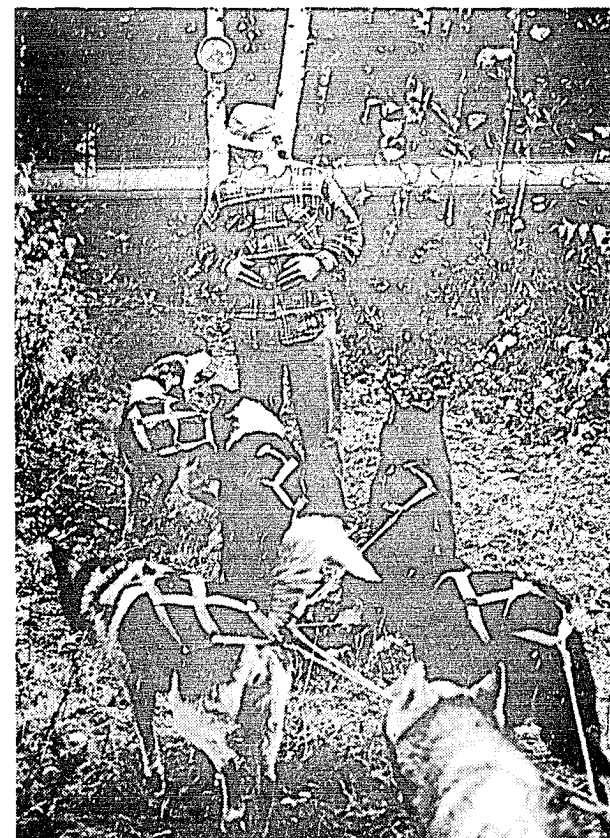
"I wasn't lost. I knew where I was. They didn't know where I was. I didn't want to be rescued," he said.

It has been said that Joe Redington would rather crawl on his belly for a month than have help getting out of a tight spot.

In 1975, Redington was forced to crash land in a remote part of the state in subzero weather. The plane was vertical to the ground, nose down, so Redington cut enough trees out of the way to lower the tail to earth. Then he cut a swath of trees for the runway and took off. Almost immediately the engine cut out and he crashed again.

This time, he winched the plane 100 yards to a frozen lake, lowered it down a 12-foot embankment, repaired the landing gear and took off again. Six days after the first crash and three forced landings later, Redington made it home on his own.

Vi can remember only one time when Redington showed any sign of nervousness about flying. That was when a gust of wind flipped him over



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NOW MUSH!—Already, it is time to train for the March race.

ALASKA LEGEND

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while he was flying just above the treetops on his way home. Redington righted the plane, "but that night he just came home and went to bed," she said.

Now, back to dogs.

In 1968, the Iditarod dog race was taking shape, but very slowly. It needed someone who could make the race go, and Redington decided to move back to civilization.

The Redingtons abandoned their home on Flat Horn Lake, leaving everything behind, and returned to the original homestead in Krik. Redington began knocking on the doors of just about every business in Anchorage, attempting to raise a purse of \$50,000 as prize money for the race.

In 1973, when the first race from Anchorage to Nome was run, Redington was not among the entrants. He had spent so much time begging for money that he didn't have time to train a dog team. But he has been in every one since.

He watched the race gain respect.

In 1977, Redington was given the humanitarian award by the Alaska chapter of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals.

Redington has taken his share of grief along the trail. In 1976, he and his dog team dropped through a river's thin ice. It took him eight hours to dry his dogs and himself and he suffered minor frostbite. He had to quit 131 miles from the finish line.

Another time, he slipped off the icy trail and his leg was punctured by a piece of wood. The leg swelled to twice its normal size, but Redington went on for 800 more miles to finish the race.

As for the assault on McKinley, that was an idea that had been stewing in his head for 10 years. This year, he finally put it together.

Redington, as usual, was careful about being too descriptive, wasting words, making it sound difficult. He would just mention that "every night it was 20 below and the winds were 100 m.p.h. or better, so you know it was a pretty good breeze."

With him were famed mountaineer Ray Genet, fellow Iditarod racer Susan Butcher, who lives in the cabin by Redington's dog lot, and photographer Rob Stapleton. There were others but they fell by the wayside.

Stapleton later described the moment when they made it to safety, bone weary, with Miss Butcher crying from exhaustion in the snow. Stapleton would describe Redington as a man who, when others could not move because of fatigue, would start arranging the camp, getting things going again.

"Joe Redington," he said, "is the toughest man I ever met."