

## BILL THOMSON MAIL RUN INTERVIEW

Diane: Hello, this is Diane Parenti, it is November 23, and I'm speaking today with Bill Thomson, who is a former resident of the Mt. Lorne area. Bill was the founder of the Commemorative Mail Run from Carcross, Yukon, to Atlin, British Columbia by dog sled. This was a re-enactment of the mail runs that took place during the years of the Gold Rush here in the North. So Bill, what year was your first mail run?

Bill: We started in 1975, and continued consecutively for 30 years.

Diane: And you went all of those 30 years – you never missed a year?

Bill: Never missed a year. Sometimes I wished I hadn't gone, but that's not the point.

Diane: Yeah, you stuck it out. That's a long time. And what led you to heading up this project?

Bill: Well, I think I have to back up a bit and talk about some of the people that were involved prior to my going. As I said before, we came to the Yukon in September of 1971, and subsequent to arriving in the Yukon I met a very interesting fellow by the name of Fitzgerald. And Fitzgerald was an ex-RCMP, retired, that got the position as manager of the game branch at the time. And I fell in love with Fitzgerald, for many reasons. Primarily, he was an Irishman, and my father was Irish. The only difference between my father and Fitzgerald was that my father had a brogue that he never lost, and Fitzgerald didn't. They both loved horses and dogs. They both told it as it was. They were very, very frank, straightforward individuals. Fitzgerald and I hit it off, and after being introduced to quite a number of the noted outdoors people of the Yukon - people like Stephen Frost of Old Crow, and Alex Van Bibber, Wilfred Charlie from Carmacks – he asked me if I had ever run dogs. And I said yes, I had, but not really run dogs. My friend and I, when I was a young fellow in Kamloops, very young, 12 years old, hooked up two hunting dogs to a toboggan, and we would take them in to our big camp that we had set up, about 10 miles out of Kamloops. And that was my introduction to dog sledding, and I didn't know anything at all about it.

So that's where the conversation ended that day, but as time went on, it became apparent that he had something else in mind. And he said to me, "Would you be good enough to give me a hand with the Rendezvous?" And I said, "I don't know anything about the Rendezvous. I'm a real Cheechako in the Yukon." And he said, "Well, the Rendezvous is dog sled races, and outdoors cooking and all that kind of stuff. It's a winter carnival, and would you be interested in helping me do it?" And I said, "Certainly, I'd be delighted." So that was my start of dog sledding, or being associated with dog sledding in the Yukon.

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After a period of time, the Rendezvous came in February or March of the next year, and so for the first year I just got my feet wet, seeing how this was done and what was taking place. And then the next year he said to me, "Why don't you look after the dog sledding venue for the Rendezvous?" So I said, "Well gee, I got lots of spare time." You know, I was manager of White Pass Petroleum, and I didn't have to work too hard, so I said, "I'd be delighted to do that." So I became involved in getting the trails in, and making sure there was enough ice, over which I had no control, but I didn't realize that, and making sure that everything was done sort of half legally. So I ran it for a couple of years, and then he came one day and said, "Bill, you're going to have to take over this whole operation, because I'm not well." And I said, "Geez, that's too bad. I'm sorry to hear that."

Well, he turned out to be another Louie L'Amour. He could tell stories, and my dad was exactly the same way. He would tell stories all night long, and everybody would laugh their heads off, and it was always funny. And Fitz was the same, except Fitz's stories were all true stories.

So anyway, I took over the operation of the Rendezvous dog sledding venue, and it became quite apparent that these mushers would bring their dogs to the Yukon, or from villages, or from Whitehorse, with very little training and expect them to perform like real champion dog sledders. And in reality, looking back at it, we all knew absolutely nothing about dogs and dog sledding. I mean, it was criminal. They would run the dogs for three days at Rendezvous, and then they'd just take them back and put 'em away, and they'd complain about having to feed their dogs all the time. So I thought there's gotta be a better thing than this. So I thought maybe I could interest somebody in starting some kind of a program that meant that they had to train their dogs for a period of time.

At that time I was president of the Rotary Club, and I met a young fellow, and I'm terribly sorry, I don't remember his name. But he was the head of the post office department here, and he was shortly afterwards transferred to Prince George where he passed away. But anyway I asked him if it would be possible to get permission from the post office to run a mail run from Carcross to Atlin on the old mail route. And he said, "That'd be a wonderful idea but I can't authorize it, but I'll see what I can do." So in due course, he came back and said, "The post office department are delighted to having a re-enactment of the mail run, but you have to be sworn in as a mail carrier." So I said, "Well what does that entail?" So he said, "Well it doesn't really entail very much, just that they're making sure that you'll say you'll behave yourself and that you'll get the mail through."

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So I'm sworn in as the official mail carrier for the dog sled group, and now we gotta start organizing a trip. At the very outset I'd like to point out that this was not a race. This was just nothing other than a good will, friendly trip for dog sledders. So we decided that we would try and follow the old mail route, and we went over Striker's Pass. Well, Striker's Pass was terrible. I mean, anybody that thought that they were gonna go on an easy trip should think again, because it was a terrible, terrible trip. There's two little lakes at the top of the pass, and they, I'm sure that you sunk down a foot every foot that you went ahead, you sunk a foot in the snow to get there. It was terrible. We lost more brush bows. There was one tree at the bottom of a hill, I think there was 12 brush bows piled up that were broken. The sleds were inadequate, the dog sledding equipment was inadequate, the clothing was inadequate, dog food was inadequate. Everything about it was amateurish. However, we finally got to the top of the pass, down the other side to Tutshi Lake. And there was a trail on Tutshi Lake, put in by a trapper, so we followed that trail through the pass, Tutshi Pass, to Mrs. James' cabin. And Mrs. James was a delightful little lady that had a cabin at the mouth of the Tutshi River. And she invited everybody in for tea, and very few of us accepted the invitation.

Diane: And can I just ask you here, how many teams were there that year?

Bill: There were 14 teams took part.

Diane: O.K., so quite a few people to invite in.

Bill: Well, and they came staggering in for over a period of half a day. Well, two teams never made it over the pass. They went around, what they thought was the right way, which turned out to be the route that we eventually instituted, but that was Paul Sheridan and Jerry Couture. They got lost and they went around on the lake. So, we finally got down to Tutshi Lake, or to the mouth of the Tutshi, and then it's a straight run down the Moose Arm to the end of Moose Arm. And Mrs. James told us that that's where - nobody knew where the trail went. Nobody had the foggiest idea where they were going. They were just following the leader, as it were. If the leader went left, they went left too. So anyway, we got to Moose Arm, and there's two cabins at Moose Arm that were built at the turn of the century for the dog sled mail carriers. At that time somebody owned them; I don't really know who owned them, but we used them anyway. And it was not particularly cold, but it was freezing, because I woke up in the morning, and I had hung my moccasins out on the ridge pole, or on the eavestrough of the cabin, above the door. And after we lit the fire and got the cabin warmed up, the water ran down and dripped into my moccasins, filled my moccasins full of ice, which I wasn't pleased about, but that was neither here nor there, that's just one of those things. So we had a wonderful trip, and a typical dog sledding group. There were two or three that enjoyed a drink along with the

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rest of us, only they over enjoyed their drinks, and some of them got a little rowdy. And anyway, we had a wonderful night's sleep, with nobody had a proper stake-out chain, dogs were tied all over the place, dogs were chewing their rope off and were loose, fights were breaking out all over, guys were staying up all night trying to catch their dogs. I mean it was absolute pandemonium, just absolutely amateurish. But we enjoyed it, and not knowing any better.

So the next day we got up, and the order of business was clean up the mess around the camp, and make sure there was sufficient wood in the wood box, and kindling for the stove in case the next guy came along in dire need of warm, and a fire. So we got everything all set and we headed out, but we headed out on a trail this time, because there was a trapper came up from Atlin, and this trapper put in a trail to Moose Arm, to the cabins at Moose Arm. And he would overnight at Moose Arm and then turn around and go back. So now we have a trail through Jones Pass that's just an excellent trail. Well, we thought we had it made. So we head out on this trail, and it was substantially better than anything we'd run into so far. So we got to Atlin Lake, and there's a cabin at Atlin Lake that's still there. I have a photograph of it. And the trapper, there was a young fellow that was trapping out of this cabin, so he invited everybody in for coffee as they came over the pass, and a few of us took exception and had coffee with him.

Why we did this, I don't have any idea, but anyway, we started across the lake. Whether he told us to go straight across the lake or not, I don't know, but we went right straight across the lake. And we find out after we'd gone out on the ice for a ways that there was only seven inches of ice. Well, seven inches of ice is far more than you need, but it gives you a creepy feeling when you hear the ice cracking and rrrrpp ahead of the sleds, you know. Anyway, we got across the lake, and then we went down the east side of the lake for miles and miles and miles and miles until we got to a bay about five miles outside of Atlin, and teams were strung out as far as you could see, and you can see a long way on Atlin Lake. And the teams were strung out for miles, back behind and ahead of us and what have you.

So we decided that it wasn't fair to go into Atlin, all one after the other. So the best thing to do would be to go in, and stop at this little bay and wait for everybody to catch up. And then we'd all go in together, so we'd go in together from this little bay into Atlin and there'd be a nice welcoming committee. Well there I'm going into Atlin, and there's old Norman Fisher. When we got to Atlin there was a welcoming committee, a big welcoming committee, and they had one of the original mail carriers was there. And so he took the mail, and we went to the post office with the mail. And then we started parking our tents, or sleeping bags, down on the ice at the marina where all the boat ramps are, and we camped down there. Most of us spent the

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night there, and then the next day somebody came down with a pick up and trailer to take all the dog sleds, and everybody had their own transportation back home. So that pretty well finished off the mail run for the first year.

Diane: And was the mail that year stamped with anything special showing that ...

Bill: No, the mail was a very small, insignificant little envelope that had "Carried by Dog Team" on it, and Atlin Commemorative Mail Run, or Carcross Commemorative Mail Run.

Diane: Oh, so it did have something on it showing ...

Bill: Oh yeah, oh yeah, oh yeah. The stamp was worth six cents, and the envelope I think we sold for 50 cents apiece. And the money that we raised, we donated to, and I'm not sure who got the first kick at the cat that year, but we saved enough money that we could have envelopes printed the following year, and give some money to children with hearing disabilities. And so it continued from there. It was a charitable organization, and year after year after year, the amount of money increased, and the number of teams - we had, one year we had 42 teams went.

We started out by having dinner in Atlin at Eiko Stenzig's place, but that got to be too big a deal, so we then decided the best thing to do would be have dinner along the way. And so, at Moose Arm every year, for years, we put on a steak feed and what have you at Moose Arm, a big party. And it got to be quite a large do, because people brought their children, which quietened things down. And by now snow machines are very common. We quit at the right time.

Diane: So, we'll get back to the envelopes and the fund raising in a minute, but I want to just back up a second and ask you - so you didn't like the route you took over Striker's the first year, so what change did you make in it after that?

Bill: Oh, we followed the lakes around after that. Mind you, it was much further, and in some years a lot of overflow, which is scary as hell, but nobody drowned and nobody got anything more than their feet wet. Well, that's not really true. Mark Stenzig went through the ice with his snow machine and Harry Kern pulled him out, but that was in later years. But no ...

Diane: So that was a much easier route, a much better route to go.

Bill: Oh much better, much better, for something like that.

Diane: And it still only took two days, so one overnight.

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Bill: Oh yes, two forty mile trips. It was an overnighter. Well, then it got, there was Atlin had their Atlin Fun Days were just booming at that time, and two young fellows were running Atlin Fun Days. One was a game warden and was transferred to Prince George, and the other one was a young fellow whose father owned the motel, and he died in a house fire in England a couple years later. So that sort of cancelled out the Atlin Fun Days aspect of it. But for a couple of years we had great parties and dances and dog sled races and weight pulls and all the rest of it in Atlin, on the third day.

Diane: So there was a crowd waiting for you there, as you came in, and they cheered and ..

Bill: Oh yeah, always a crowd waiting, oh yeah. There was always a lot of people. When the dog teams started coming in there was lots of people down there.

Diane: That sounds like some wonderful times and amazing that you carried on with it for so many years.

Bill: It got better and better as time went on, but it also got – Mother Nature started to catch up to us. And if you don't think that there was a temperature change and a climate change in the world, you should have been on the mail run a few times, because there were times when we were absolutely sure that we're not going to make it, we'd have to turn around. But we always found a way around the mud holes and around the overflow and the ... but when a lot of people become involved and kids and what have you, it's too dangerous, so it got to the point where we thought, while we're ahead we'll quit.

Diane: Yeah, good idea. So getting back to the fund raising part, I know that you and your wife Millie did a lot of work, and you spent hours on this aspect of it, the fund raising. And the envelopes – I'm sure a lot of people aren't too clear about what those envelopes involved, so can you explain a little about that?

Bill: Well, actually, after about the fourth or fifth year it really wasn't that much work, except when the envelopes started coming back to be cancelled so we could take them to Atlin and to Carcross and have them cancelled by the post office department, and then put them in the international mail system. To give you an idea where the mail went, some of the "carried by dog team" envelopes went to 22 different countries in the world. So, a lot of them – well, it was fairly easy. You knew that by a certain date you had to have the art work ready. So who do you get to do the art work? Well, it's got to be artists. And some of them are pretty stingy with their efforts, and some of them are very, very gracious. Lots of them did two or three envelopes. Once you got the envelopes, then you got to make sure that the printers are going

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to print them for you so you can get them out on the street in time. And then you gotta make sure that the envelopes go to Vancouver and to Kamloops and all over so that people sell them and get them started again, but they gotta send them back to you. And yeah, I mean it was not what you'd call a great deal of work, but it was – it kept you busy.

Diane: It's fairly involved. There's a lot of parts to it.

Bill: Oh yeah. We made a lot of money, and I'd just as soon not say how much money we made.

Diane: Oh that's fine.

Bill: But I think pretty nearly every penny that we made was accounted for, so there was no skimming or anything.

Diane: And every year you chose a different recipient or charity for the proceeds.

Bill: We had children with hearing disabilities, mushers entry fees, the Shrine(rs), Education of Dog Drivers, just to mention some of the things we became involved in. The Shrine got the best kick at the cat because they got what was left over. The last year that we ran it, we found that we had an additional \$11,000 in the bank, so we donated the whole works to the Shrine. The Yukon Shrine club apparently has a commitment with the humane club, I guess you could call it, to contribute \$10,000 a year towards the Children's Hospital. So we thought this would be, there was lots of organizations that we had contributed to that seemed to be their given right that they should get money, so we just cut them off the list. I mean it was that simple.

Diane: You mentioned that the envelopes went to 22 different countries, which is just amazing, and I imagine some of those countries involved sending them to fairly famous people?

Bill: Oh, the Queen got one.

Diane: Oh, the Queen?

Bill: Oh yeah, the Queen got one. Yeah, she's famous. She got one.

Diane: Did she send you a response?

Millie: The Prime Minister. A couple of them did.

Bill: Oh yeah, the Prime Minister. A couple of Prime Ministers got them.

Diane: Was that Chretien?

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Bill: Chretien got one, I'm sure. I don't know. I didn't keep track. It's like the names of the people, it would have been great to have a great long list of the names of the people that took part. Dolly is better at remembering who took part, because she collected the money most of the time.

Diane: Oh, we can ask her then.

Bill: So she had it down pretty pat.

Diane: But you did receive responses from some of these people like the Queen and ...?

Bill: Yeah.

Diane: They did write back to you, or acknowledge that ...

Bill: Yeah they did.

Diane: Oh that's great.

Bill: And there were some very interesting people involved too, people that you would never really think. Ted Harrison did two envelopes, two envelopes, Hon?

Millie: Yes, two.

Bill: Two, yeah.

Millie: Chief Judge Bladon - he did one. Jeff Blaydon.

Bill: Oh yeah, Bladon did one.

Millie: And, well there were 30 different ones.

Bill: There was a lot of interesting people involved, both on the mail run and contributing to the effort.

Millie: Wendy did two of them.

Bill: Yeah, Wendy did two.

Diane: Oh, your daughter. Oh, that's great. And you were certainly one of the interesting people involved. And I hear that there's a sign with your name on it, somewhere along the trail, towards the end.

Bill: There's a sign at Moose Arm that says "Bill Thomson's Point".

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Diane: Oh, and we're looking at a picture of it now, so we have proof of it. There it is.

Bill: There's going into Atlin, the first day.

Diane: Well, maybe we will wrap up this part of the conversation, and we can look at pictures after that ... well, is there anything else you'd like to say?

Bill: Well, being a mouthy bugger, there's probably lots of things I'd like to say, but I have, no ...

Diane: You think you've covered most of the important points.

Bill: I think I've covered most of it.

Diane: Well, I really want to thank you very much for sharing your interesting, and I think this is an important story for people to hear...

Bill: Oh very, very.

Diane: and it's been a real pleasure. I also want to thank Claire Desmarais for your technical assistance.