

Snowmachines don't last long

by Mike Rostad

Maxie Isaac and Simeon Chunak live in places where dog sledding was once the only way to travel. But the young men say emergence of snow machines replaced dog sledding. However, they happily report that dog teams are definitely not a thing of the past.

The men are students at St. Herman's Orthodox Seminary in Kodiak.

Says Maxie, who lives in the community of Marshall, roughly 80 miles north of Bethel, "I became interested in dogs when I realized snow machines don't last that long. With dogs, you don't have to send away for parts. All I have to worry about is dog feed."

Although dog sledding for Maxie and his friend, Simeon, of New Stuyahok, is often a sport, they say it serves a practical purpose.

Dogs provide transportation to trap lines, hunting and fishing grounds, and neighbors, near and far.

Maxie recalls traveling to Russian Mission. The sky was clear when he stopped at a mud house along the river to spend the night. The next morning he looked out the window. "It was all white. I could hardly see anything. The wind was blowing against the direction I was going to be traveling in."

It was slow traveling to his destination. "I was fighting the winds. The dogs wanted to turn around. Snow would build up on their faces and I'd have to stop and wipe the snow off."

He continues, "When they get to the point where they're really sad and tired out, I run ahead of them and clap my hands to cheer them up. I make it sound like things will get better."

In spring, when Maxie's family goes to the trapping and fishing grounds, the supplies, including the skiffs, are loaded onto the sled, pulled by the dog team. Someone goes ahead of the com-



Left to right, Simeon Chunak and Maxie Isaac near Kodiak.

pany, with spear in hand, poking it into the ice to make sure the layer is solid enough to travel on. When it gets slushy and it's too hard for the dogs to tug the sled, the sled is put on the skiff, which is also pulled by the animals.

The Huskies Maxie and Simeon work with are kept in shape for sled races. Although the men haven't participated in the Iditorad race yet, they've mushed their teams on some pretty rough trails, doing all they could to reach the finish line first.

Simeon, who raised dogs since he was six, fared well when he entered the New Stuyahok mini-carnival junior race in 1978. He came in first, only seconds ahead of another team. He also participated in the 24 mile Dillingham race.

Maxie's first major race wasn't as successful. During his first year out of high school, he raced in a 40-mile, non-stop contest on a narrow trail where the snow was very deep.

"I took the red lantern in that one," he admits, explaining he was last at the finish line.

The next year, he followed a different course. Racers covered the same 25-mile, circular trail in two consecutive days. There were some rugged hills to climb, says Maxie. Especially steep was "heartbreak Hill," where it was necessary for mushers to run along side the dogs, helping them in the climb.

Even though Maxie and Simeon aren't bothered with ordering parts, changing oil, replacing spark plugs, and filling a gas tanks when caring for the animals, "dog maintenance" can be bothersome at times. It's a demanding activity.

Dogs have to be fed, trained, housed; they need individual attention. When the men discuss their dogs, they're referring to more than servants; they're talking about friends.

"Dogs have to have some sort of discipline," says Maxie. "They can be fierce little animals. They see other dogs and have a natural instinct to go and take a bite out of them."

Maxie says it's important to keep dogs from getting too close

to another team. Dogs must also be taught to resist the urge to chase a rabbit or a fox along the trail. "When they smell the scent of another animal, they really go," says Simeon.

Maxie says it's best to start running the dogs after the first snowfall.

During the cold, snowy months, the dogs are kept in little houses. But when the snow disappears, they're taken to a place where they have access to the water supply.

Maxie explains that it's more comfortable for the animals to be outside during the summer. Heat and mosquitos can make it pretty miserable for Huskie that are pinned up. At least when the animals are outside, a breeze will help keep the insects away.

Mosquitos are vicious enemies of dogs. "They're real killers," exclaims Maxie. He means that literally. One of his dogs died after getting sick from a multitude of mosquito bites.

When it comes to feeding their dogs, Maxie and Simeon prepare meals in the same way a concerned mother feeds her children; with much consideration given to a proper diet.

Like their masters, dogs eat a lot of fish. Maxie notes that from one and a half to two hours "before we run, I give them a cup of warm water and pieces of dried smoked salmon."

For regular meals, Simeon cuts up fish for the dogs in the morning. The nets that trap fish for the family also ensnares fish for the dogs. Since the water freezes up during the winter, Simeon says it's important to store up enough fish in the fall, so that, by spring, the dogs still have something to eat.

But some problems are unavoidable. By spring, "We're running out of good fish," says Simeon. It's impossible to go fishing during the ice breakup, so he must do his best to keep his dogs healthy.

"The dogs lose a lot of weight," says Simeon. Luckily, there are other sources of food. "They can eat reindeer moss off the tundra," notes Maxie. What little fish is left over, is used to mix with the moss, to make it more appealing to the dogs.

Simeon spices up his fish with cottonwood lichen, a remedy used by the older folks to clean out their systems.

Right before races, or when they're traveling, the dogs are given light meals. But after the race, says Simeon, "The dogs have a big feast." Sometimes he feeds them Crisco shortening before a race "so they don't have to be thirsty...and eat snow while they're running," Simeon says.

These two men have cared for, trained and nurtured many dogs. Each dog has its own personality and it part of a very important team. When Maxie and Simeon get together, they talk about their dogs with the interest and affection older folks talk about their children.

"You really get close to them," says Simeon.

Of course, each dog has a name; some of them are conventional names like Rover or Speedy; but others are somewhat unusual. Simeon is the one who comes up with the unpredictable names. "Crisco" and "Cisco" were dogs that looked alike. He laughs as he recalls the name he pinned on a dog when he was a little boy. He can't figure out what inspired him to name a dog "Nine-o'clock."

That romantic image of a dog team pulling a sled through an Alaskan woods on a moonlit night is not an image of bygone days.

Says Maxie, "It's really nice, on a night when the sky is clear, the stars are twinkling and the moon is out, to portage through the woods. It's so peaceful."

The only sounds are the breathing of the dogs and the whistling of the runners cutting into the snow.

Photo by Mike Rostad