

MailTrail 202 'Stampede start' is Feb. 21

by Betsy McGuire

Now that dog driving (mushing) is growing more in popularity each year, a wider variety of races are coming into existence for the competitive drivers. Most of those drivers are finding the middle distance races (200-300 miles) more feasible because of the smaller costs (compared to the Iditarod and Yukon Quest), the purses being offered, and the fun in starting a race one day and crossing the finish line within the next two days.

The Mail Trail 202, sponsored by the Upper Kuskokwim Musher's Association, of the McGrath area, is one of these races. This 202-mile race is run to commemorate Ben Eiselson's first Alaskan air mail flight that originated in Fairbanks and concluded in McGrath on February 21, 1924.

This year's running of the Mail Trail is the 4th annual and is boasting a total purse of \$12,750.00. The race organizers say it's still in the growing stage and each year the experience, organization, and field expand a little more. The first race was held in 1983 with seven teams entering and Eep Anderson of Takotna taking home the 1st place trophy. The 1984 Race was run by ten entrants and brought mushers from as far away as Bethel, including the winner, Nathan Underwood.

Last year the field grew once again with the total number of competitors reaching 14, making the 1985 winner, Warner Vent of Huslia, work hard to earn his money.

The 1986 race will begin, as in all past races, in a stampede start on the Kuskokwim River in front of

McGrath, to the sound of a single shot at 5 p.m. on February 21, 1986. The teams will be lined up on a common start line in positions previously drawn and all teams will take off at the same time, using separate trails which eventually join onto the Mail Trail leading towards Nikolai. This makes for much fun for the spectators and even more excitement for the teams.

Out of McGrath the trail takes the Iditarod Trail to the 1st checkpoint of Nikolai, about 60 miles away. From Nikolai the trail passes through Medfra, into the hills and down to the Nixon River into Babe and Irene Anderson's camp. Out of the Nixon, the trail winds into the community of Takotna where a four hour mandatory layover will take place. The teams will then drive out towards Ophir, turning back to Takotna at the Independence Creek Bridge. Leaving Takotna again, the mushers will travel over hills, going around Sugar Loaf Mountain, down onto the Kuskokwim River and back into McGrath.

Sign-up and payment of the \$250.00 entry fee (\$50.00 refundable to all finishers) is accepted upto the starting time. It is required that all mushers attend the Mushers' Meeting at 5 p.m. at the Captain Snow Center on February 20th.

For housing arrangements drivers from out of town are encouraged to call Sally Peterson at 524-3451. For other information call Melody Strick at 524-3276, Bob Magnuson at 524-3866, or Irene Anderson at 524-3281.