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“We are Prisoners in a Jail of Ice and Snow”: Dogs, Labor, and Loyalty, 1880-1930

by Noe Rangel



Figure 1: Map of Alaska and Yukon Territory showing key locations during the Klondike Gold Rush and early sled dog routes.¹

Introduction

With the piercing sounds of ice cracking and the wind screaming across Norton Sound on the Bering Sea in western Alaska, Leonhard Seppala and his sled dog team ventured onto the frigid inlet as layers of sea ice fractured and webs of cracks appeared under their snow-beaten boots and paws. Canine and man alike fought to stay upright among inhospitable conditions and

¹ Berton, Pierre. *Klondike; the Last Great Gold Rush, 1896-1899*. Rev. ed. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1972.

inclement weather. The shortcut they had taken was now breaking apart beneath them. Suddenly, the ice beneath them broke away, marooning the team as they drifted towards the sea, the shoreline vanishing in the distance. Seppala turned to Togo, his unwavering lead dog. Without hesitation, Togo leaped toward the shore, across unstable ice. When he reached solid ground, Seppala urgently prompted Togo to pull. Togo pulled and pulled, not just the rope, but the weight of the sled, the dogs, and Seppala himself.² Against all odds, the line held, and Togo's strength pulled the team safely back to solid ground, saving the entire relay from inevitable failure.³ Stories like this reveal the roles and significance of sled dogs in the Alaskan wilderness and Arctic frontier between 1850 and 1930. Across this period, sled dogs, among them Indigenous-developed Alaskan Husky types, Malamutes, and later Siberian imports, fulfilled the physical demands of frontier labor even as they became emotional companions and communicative partners who mediated human experiences of isolation, danger, and endurance. This mutual dependence reveals a dynamic partnership forged under extreme conditions.

Scholarship on this topic often emphasizes the economic utility of sled dogs, focusing on their role in the logistics of the gold rush migration and polar exploration.⁴ As seen in Figure 1, the expansion of human settlement and extractive enterprise across the Yukon and Alaskan frontiers was inseparable from the movement of sled dogs. Freight routes, postal trails, and informal supply lines depended on dog movement to connect goldfields, trading posts, and

² This dramatized summary is based on a scene from *Togo*, directed by Ericson Core (2019), which fictionalizes events from the 1925 serum run.

³ This story of Seppala, Togo, and their team of loyal sled dogs took place during the legendary 674-mile 1925 Serum to Nome, a sled relay across the US territory of Alaska to deliver diphtheria antitoxin, which was dramatized in the 2019 film *Togo*.

⁴ Mary R. Tahan, *Roald Amundsen's Sled Dogs: The Sledge Dogs Who Helped Discover the South Pole*, 1st ed. (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2019).

remote communities. Yet, despite their logistical significance, dogs have frequently appeared as secondary figures in the historiography of frontier expansion, seen mainly as instruments of human mobility. Scholars in animal studies, such as Donna Haraway, Harriet Ritvo, and Susan McHugh,⁵ have critiqued such interpretations and argued that mutual influence, emotional bonds, and shared survival are central to the human-animal relationship. For example, Ritvo observed that “the animal kingdom mirrored the human hierarchy, reproducing in miniature the classes and distinctions that Victorians perceived among themselves,” showing how cultural ideas reflected and reinforced social structures.⁶ Building on these perspectives, this paper extends animal studies frameworks into the Arctic frontier, arguing that sled dogs were not just tools of transportation but emotional companions and communicative partners whose shared endurance with humans shows how survival itself becomes a form of relationship. Examining these partnerships within the imperial context of northern exploration and settlement highlights how the human–canine bond underpinned colonial mobility, territorial expansion, and narratives of endurance that defined the Arctic as both a space of conquest and co-dependence. It also emphasizes the economic, logistical, and affective roles sled dogs played in facilitating movement, presence, and administration across these frozen frontiers.

Hudson Stuck, a British archdeacon and missionary in Alaska during the early 20th century, relied on sled dog travel to extend both religious and imperial presence across remote northern settlements. Figure 2, which traces Hudson Stuck’s journey by sled dog across central

⁵ Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008); Harriet Ritvo, *The Animal Estate: The English and Other Creatures in the Victorian Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987); Susan McHugh, *Animal Stories: Narrating Across Species Lines* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

⁶ Harriet Ritvo, *The Animal Estate: The English and Other Creatures in the Victorian Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 2.

and western Alaska, illustrates how the human-canine partnership functioned as a vehicle of mobility, communication, and administration in the northern territories. These mapped routes chart not just the vast distances these expeditions covered, but the bonds of labor and trust between musher and dog that made such journeys possible. Drawing on travel narratives and firsthand accounts of frontierswomen and Arctic explorers, this essay explores the emotional and ethical dimensions of human–canine bonds, recasting dogs as both workers, trusted companions, and moral co-survivors and, within imperial contexts, as agents and instruments of empire whose labor and loyalty sustained colonial expansion across the North. By shifting focus to the multidimensional and often overlooked roles of individual and entire packs of highly trained and seasoned sled dogs, this paper demonstrates how their strength, durability, and unwavering loyalty were conscripted into the broader settler and imperial projects that sought to map, extract, and control the northern frontiers of both the United States and Canada.

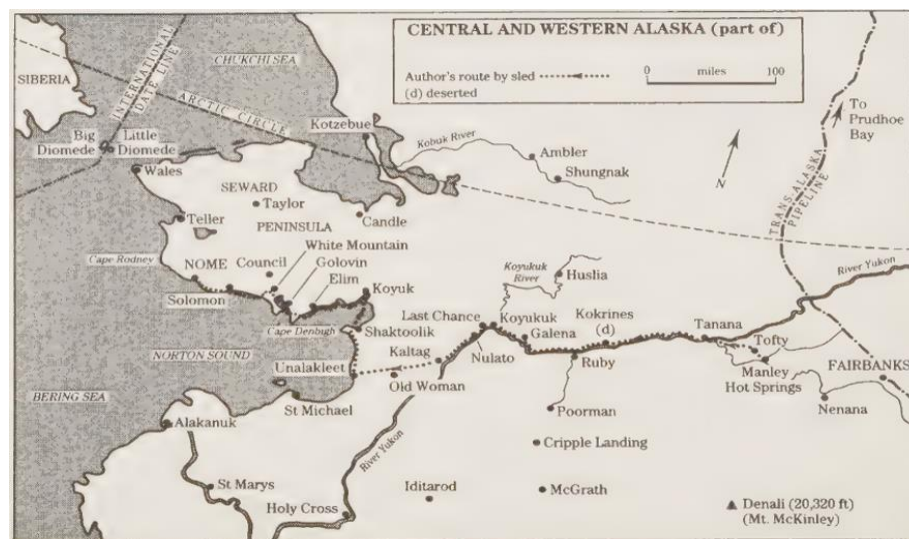


Figure 2: Map of central and western Alaska tracing Hudson Stuck's journey, as detailed in his 1914 book *Ten Thousand Miles with a Dog Sled*.⁷

⁷ Berton, *Klondike*, 7.

“No Roads Lead to Nome”-1898: Economic Utility and Movement of Sled Dogs

In the final years of the 19th century, the discovery of gold in the Klondike region of the Yukon Territory prompted one of the most famous and feverish migrations in North American history. By 1897, the rush was in full swing, drawing tens of thousands of hopeful miners, adventurers, and entrepreneurs northward, all willing to brave the treacherous conditions in pursuit of wealth.⁸ For many, it was not just a gamble but a desperate bid to escape economic hardship and social stagnation in the rapidly industrializing cities of the United States and Canada. Men left their jobs suddenly, abandoning their homes, families, and stable employment for the promise of wealth in a land they had never seen.⁹ There were no roads to the goldfields, and towns like Nome and Dawson City sat at the edge of isolated mountain passes, rivers, and deep snow. The landscape was brutal and largely inaccessible, shaped by nature and wilderness, and the absence of human infrastructure. This section contends that dog labor made this migration physically possible and, in doing so, transformed the Arctic frontier’s landscape into a traversable space.

Sled dogs carried essential goods and mail, sustaining remote settlements where other forms of transport were impossible,¹⁰ extending the reach of empire across the Chilkoot and White passes (see Figure 3). Single-file trails along a narrow ridgeline of snow (see Figure 5

⁸ Leo R. Healy, *Diary, March–September 1898*, Alaska State Library, accessed October 2, 2025, <https://vilda.alaska.edu/digital/collection/cdmg21/id/22924/>

⁹ Tappan Adney, *The Klondike Stampede* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1995), 5–6.

¹⁰ “Dave Scott, U.S. Mail Dog Team Carrier, Upper Tanana Division,” ca. 1920s, Alaska and Polar Regions Collections & Archives, University of Alaska Fairbanks, accessed September 19, 2025, <https://vilda.alaska.edu/digital/collection/cdmg11/id/44272/>

below)¹¹ were the most common in the early years of the rush. The appeal of striking it rich dwarfed the reality that few would succeed, and even those who managed to reach the goldfields would face immense hardships.

People often imagine lone miners pushing through the snow with grit and determination,¹² but survival in the North depended on systems already in place long before the gold rush began. Settlers relied heavily on Indigenous knowledge to survive and navigate the northern environment, particularly regarding sled dogs, sled construction, and seasonal travel routes. Long before Euro-American expansion into Alaska and the Yukon, Indigenous communities had developed sophisticated systems of dog breeding, harnessing, and trail navigation adapted to Arctic and subarctic conditions. Euro-American travelers did not introduce dog-powered mobility to the North; rather, they appropriated and redeployed existing Indigenous modes of animal husbandry and movement, adapting them to serve extractive economies, long-distance freight hauling, and imperial administration, enabling conquest, settlement, and governance while often obscuring the Indigenous origins of these systems.¹³

The frenzied departure from cities across North America was described in newspaper headlines promising untold riches in the Klondike, often exaggerating the ease of striking it rich.

¹¹ *Climbers on the Chilkoot Pass*, photograph, ca. 1898, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, LC-DIG-ppmsca-19576, <https://www.loc.gov/item/2006677478/>

¹² See Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600–1860* (New York: Wesleyan University Press, 1973), on frontier myth and individualism.

¹³ On the Indigenous origins of sled-dog breeding, sled technology, and dog-powered mobility in Alaska and the Arctic, see Robert J. Losey, Robert P. Wishart, and Jan Peter Laurens Looers, eds., *Dogs in the North: Stories of Cooperation and Co-Domestication* (London: Routledge, 2018); *The Inuit Dog: Its Provenance, Environment, and History* (Montreal: McGill–Queen’s University Press, 1995); and *Specialized sledge dogs accompanied Inuit dispersal across the North American Arctic*, *Journal of Archaeological Science* (open access).

In bustling port cities like Seattle and San Francisco, every street corner buzzed with men debating their chances, purchasing supplies, and making hasty travel arrangements. Bankers, schoolteachers, and clerks, many with no experience in prospecting or surviving the northern wilderness, shared the same steadfast belief that they would return wealthy beyond imagination.¹⁴ Lured by dreams of fortune, they boarded steamships bound for Alaska's coastal towns of Skagway and Dyea, only to confront the brutal realities of the Chilkoot and White Pass Trails (see Figure 5). These grueling routes demanded extraordinary endurance and soon became both treacherous paths to the goldfields and vital arteries of economic expansion. A vast support system soon emerged: freight haulers, outfitters, supply depots, and, especially, dog breeders and trainers profited from the constant movement of people and goods. This expanding infrastructure did not eliminate danger. It altered the terms of survival. The journey became a business, and mobility itself became commodified as survival increasingly depended on access to services, animals, and expertise rather than individual self-sufficiency alone. As the *Skagway Bulletin* bluntly advised in 1897, "Every man must carry with him at least one team of sled dogs if he expects to survive the winter trail." The ascent over the Chilkoot Pass often resembled a human conveyor belt, with a line of burdened men stretching endlessly up the icy slope, each required to carry a ton of supplies, sometimes making dozens of trips. (see Figure 5).¹⁵

Canadian authorities required every prospector to carry a year's worth of supplies. This was equivalent to a ton of goods, which had to be hauled in repeated trips. This incredible burden made the journey slow and exhausting, leaving many stranded before reaching the Klondike. The

¹⁴ Adney, *The Klondike Stampede*, 2–5.

¹⁵ William Haskell, *Two Years in the Klondike and Alaskan Gold-Fields* (Hartford: Hartford Publishing Company, 1898), 109–112.

cold was so intense that many men froze in their tracks, their bodies later found lifeless, holding on to their dreams of gold.¹⁶ Exhaustion and malnutrition took their toll, compelling some to turn back. Men broke under the weight of their ambition yet refused to abandon their quest.¹⁷ Many who made it over the pass were in dire straits, either sick or without the funds to continue. Men who had once been successful businessmen or skilled tradesmen had been reduced to begging for scraps in makeshift camps along the trails. Their fine clothes had turned to rags, their confidence to despair, yet they still lingered, unwilling to admit defeat.¹⁸ The infrastructure quickly developed to accommodate the flood of fortune seekers. Saloons, trading posts, and supply depots sprang up almost overnight along the trails, each promising relief to the weary and a chance to spend what little money they had left before reaching the goldfields.¹⁹ Skagway, a coastal port town in southeastern Alaska, roughly forty miles from the Chilkoot and White Passes leading inland toward the Yukon goldfields, became the primary gateway to the Klondike. It was here that newly arrived prospectors scrambled to purchase supplies, negotiate transport, and form alliances with fellow travelers. Skagway transformed rapidly into a boomtown, a place where dreams could be acquired as easily as provisions, but both could vanish just as quickly once travelers began their ascent into the Coast Mountains beyond town.²⁰ The makeshift settlements that formed along the route were often chaotic and lawless, teeming with opportunists who sought to profit from the rush. Newly arrived prospectors, unprepared for

¹⁶ Laura Beatrice Berton, *I Married the Klondike* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1982), 194–195.

¹⁷ Haskell, *Two Years in the Klondike and Alaskan Gold-Fields*, 145–147.

¹⁸ Haskell, *Two Years in the Klondike and Alaskan Gold-Fields*, 210–212.

¹⁹ Adney, *The Klondike Stampede*, 180–182.

²⁰ Colin Campbell, *White Pass & Yukon Route to the Golden North* (Seattle: Press of the Trade Register, 1901), 134–136.

the harsh climate and rugged terrain, usually fell victim to scams, losing what little money they had before ever setting foot on a gold claim.

In her memoir, Laura Beatrice Berton, who traveled in search of gold and witnessed these events firsthand, claimed that more fortunes were lost²¹ due to the predatory nature of many who sought to exploit the rush. For those who made it to Dawson City, the journey from Skagway required crossing the Chilkoot or White Pass. These mountain routes cut through the coastal range and connect southeastern Alaska to the Yukon interior. After crossing these passes, prospectors followed overland trails towards Dawson City. Once arrived, they found a landscape transformed by the rush of gold seekers. What was once a remote outpost had become a bustling town, illuminated by gas lamps, filled with saloons and dance halls, and swarming with miners who had struck it rich or were on the edge of ruin. It was described simultaneously as a land of boundless opportunity and of stark despair. Fortunes had been made and lost, and what remained was a town that held on to the memories of its prosperous past.²² Towns that had flourished during the boom either faded or adapted to new industries, but the legacy of the rush remained.

The Klondike was not just a story of gold but of movement, adaptation, and survival, where people worked with the land and the tools already developed by Indigenous communities. Journalist Tappan Adney, who traveled with fortune seekers and chronicled their journey, wrote, “No road, no signboard, only snow and uncertainty.”²³ The dog knew the way, and the high demand for sled dogs underscores their economic and symbolic importance. The United States

²¹ Berton, *I Married the Klondike*, 170.

²² Berton, *I Married the Klondike*, 224.

²³ Tappan Adney, *The Klondike Stampede* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1900), 17.

government recognized this value as well. In an 1898 report by the U.S. Post Office, it was noted, “Without them (dogs), mail service would halt in the winter.”²⁴ A February 1898 article in the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* stated, “A good dog team is worth more than gold in these parts...men will trade their last dollar for a strong lead dog.”²⁵ Such statements revealed how northern economies, and indeed the state, were tethered to canines: equating a dog with gold, strength, and endurance made them a form of economic value in their own right, turning sled dogs into a living form of currency whose worth was constantly tested.



Figure 3: Photograph of a dog team hauling freight through a frontier town during the Klondike Gold Rush, c. 1898.

²⁴ United States Post Office Department, *Annual Reports of the Post-Office Department for the Fiscal Year Ended June 30, 1898* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1898), 663.

²⁵ *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, “Klondike Fever Grips the Northwest,” February 3, 1898, accessed via Library of Congress Chronicling America archive.



Figure 4: Pack dog, equipped with tin cookware and supplies during the Klondike Gold Rush era, c. 1890s–1900s.

Murphy, as seen in figure 4, might appear burdened, especially in modern standards of animal treatment, but this image tells volumes about life on the Arctic frontier. Murphy is outfitted as a pack dog, not a sled dog, but carrying what appear to be travelers' essentials: a tin cup, a mess kit consisting of a frying pan and a water kettle, a folded blanket or a tarp, and a leather bag, all together probably weighing between 20 and 30 pounds. For a human already laden by heavy winter clothing, boots, and mining equipment, this additional load would have been substantial if not untenable when going through snow and uneven terrain. For a seasoned pack dog, however, this burden was manageable.²⁶

²⁶ Hudson Stuck, *Ten Thousand Miles with a Dog Sled* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1914), 29–31.



Figure 5: Prospectors ascending the Chilkoot Pass during the Klondike Gold Rush, c. 1897–1898.

Sled dogs were not only a source of power but also a source of trust and stability, sensing danger and sustaining people through isolation. Figure 5 illustrates the direct physical burden placed on dogs and the degree to which they were integrated into daily survival tasks. However, labor was not the only burden dogs carried. Beyond the weight of cargo and the demands of travel, these animals also bore emotional significance for the people who depended on them. To fully understand the bond between humans and canines, we must explore the quieter, more intimate moments of companionship, care, and loss. These experiences are often absent from official reports. One traveler who came to embody this dog-dependent life was Josephine DeMott Robinson, a frontierswoman who followed her husband into the interior. Her travel narrative, written retrospectively about her Klondike experiences and published in *McCall's Magazine* between 1927 and 1928, reflects on events that had taken place several decades earlier and offers readers insight into the emotional labor shared between humans and dogs. Through these accounts, dogs emerge as a source of meaning and stability amid isolation.

“In a Land Where the Snow Speaks”- A Woman’s Story: Emotional Labor and Human-Canine Bonds

Josephine DeMott Robinson was not a typical frontierswoman. Born in Queens, New York, in 1868, she came from an urban environment far removed from the icy wilderness of Alaska, yet she navigated one of the harshest landscapes on the continent during the height of the Klondike Gold Rush. Robinson chose to join her husband in the Klondike in 1897, leaving behind life in Cincinnati and entering gold country, an undertaking that was uncommon for women and marked by shared determination and hardship.²⁷ This section interprets Robinson’s memoir to explore how dogs served as emotional co-survivors, providing comfort, protection, and meaning in a world defined by isolation and uncertainty. Figure 6, an Illustration, shows two figures standing together in heavy parkas facing one another amid a white, featureless landscape. There are no visible trails or structures, and the whiteout conditions are disorienting, making it unclear whether it is night or day. The purpose of the illustrations is to capture the isolation and mutual reliance that defined frontier life for the reader, especially for women who endured the North alongside their partners. Her days were structured around the needs and capacities of her dogs, whose strength determined the pace and possibility of travel.

²⁷ Josephine DeMott Robinson, *A Woman’s Story of the Gold Rush*, *McCall’s Magazine*, 1927, 42.



Figure 6: Illustration from Josephine DeMott Robinson's *A Woman's Gold Rush Story*, depicting a moment of resolve and partnership between Josephine and her husband amid the frozen Alaskan wilderness.

An average day for Robinson was shaped by a cycle of labor, care, and constant vigilance. Her mornings began before sunrise as she woke to frigid temperatures in a tent or makeshift shelter in the Alaskan wilderness. Her first responsibility was always the sled dogs. “Before I tended to the fire or the gear or even the coffee,” she wrote, “I say to the dogs, always the dogs first.”²⁸ She prepared for the day’s journey by feeding and tending to the dogs, checking their paws for injuries from the previous day, ensuring their harnesses were secure, and packing the sled. Only after these tasks did she begin her own preparations for travel across the unpredictable landscape. Once on the trail, Robinson’s attention remained fixed on the dogs. She watched for signs of fatigue, injury, or unease. Her dogs often sensed changes in weather or terrain before she could, “I trusted their instincts more than my own,” she wrote. On the trail, trust extended beyond people to the relationship between musher and dog. Time and again, sled dogs sensed dangers long before their handlers did. Robinson wrote, “They knew when the wind

²⁸ Robinson, *A Woman's Story of the Gold Rush*, *McCall's Magazine*, December 1927, 42.

would shift, or the snow would hide a fissure.”²⁹ Travel was grueling, with sled runners catching on hidden rocks and snowdrifts covering gaps and ice. Robinson does not record precise distances or the number of days between stopping points. Through her memoir, we know that travel was an extended, often continuous ordeal shaped by weather, terrain, and fatigue rather than by fixed schedules.

To ease the dogs’ burden, Robinson often walked alongside the sled to lighten the load, trudging through snow that could reach her knees. Periodic rest stops offered brief moments to melt snow for water, build a fire, or catch her breath, yet she was never truly idle during these pauses. After the day’s journey, her care continued into the evening, feeding the dogs, checking their harnesses, tending to their wounds, and preparing meals.³⁰ Such routines echo those described by contemporaries such as Hudson Stuck, who emphasized that nights were typically spent in tents, cabins, or makeshift shelters where humans and dogs remained in close proximity for warmth and security.³¹

The warmth and steady breath of her dogs seemed to take priority over her own needs.³² Her only comfort came from knowing that her dogs were cared for. Robinson repeatedly described how the companionship of her dogs helped ease the loneliness of remote life. They were not just workers, but family, even if she never used such words. That bond was never more

²⁹ Robinson, *A Woman’s Story of the Gold Rush*, *McCall’s Magazine*, January 1928, 39.

³⁰ Robinson, *A Woman’s Story of the Gold Rush*, *McCall’s Magazine*, January 1928, 39.

³¹ Hudson Stuck, *Ten Thousand Miles with a Dog Sled* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1914), 43–44.

³² Robinson, *A Woman’s Story of the Gold Rush*, *McCall’s Magazine*, January 1928, 40.

evident than when one of her dogs³³ became sick with ³⁴~~distemper~~. Figure 7 offers a glimpse of this intimate relationship, showing Robinson on the ground outside a log cabin. Robinson cradles the large dog, holding him close in an embrace that suggests affection. The dog leaning into her, its tail relaxed and ears forward, suggests it is not aggressive but trusting and relaxed.



Figure 7: Mrs. Robinson and the Alaskan dogs she nursed through a severe case of distemper.

Distemper is a canine disease transmitted through contact with infected dogs. While there is no cure for distemper, chances of survival increase with supportive care. Robinson's account of nursing the dog with the same attention and care she might offer her husband or kin³⁵ exposes the power dynamics of an overtly imperialistic time. Robinson writes that she looked after the

³³ Josephine's accounts referred to her dog, but no name was given. This paper will henceforth refer to the dog simply as "the dog" or "the dog she nursed."

³⁴ Robinson, *A Woman's Story of the Gold Rush*, *McCall's Magazine*, February 1928, 36.

³⁵ Robinson, *A Woman's Story of the Gold Rush*, *McCall's Magazine*, March 1928

dog, kept him warm and hydrated, and even adjusted her travel schedule to allow him time to recover, as the dog's recovery was vital to her success.

As Robinson spent more time caring for the dog, she became increasingly attached to him, making his sudden reclamation by an Indigenous man she encountered on the trail deeply distressing. Robinson explained that she had received the animal from this man when the dog was near death, and that once the dog had recovered, the man reasserted his ownership. From Robinson's perspective, the loss was devastating. She had nursed the dog through starvation and exhaustion, watched his body regain strength, and felt his spirit return. She acknowledged that she had no recognized proof of ownership or recourse and could not contest the claim.³⁶ Read within the context of the late 1920s, when Robinson's memoir was serialized for a popular magazine audience, the story is structured to invite readers to sympathize with Robinson's emotional labor while portraying the Indigenous man's assertion of ownership as abrupt and unfeeling. The dog becomes a contested figure through which competing systems of value are revealed. Robinson's account centers care and emotional investment as the basis for ownership, while rejecting alternative conceptions of possession, exchange, or communal claim that may have shaped the man's actions. This episode reveals how dogs served not only as emotional companions but also as symbolic sites where power, dispossession, and settler authority were narratively negotiated.

The void left by the dog's absence was enough that she wished she had let the dog die when it was weakest, rather than parting with it after forming such a close bond.³⁷ As the dog

³⁶ Robinson, *A Woman's Story of the Gold Rush*, *McCall's Magazine*, March 1928, 28.

³⁷ Robinson, *A Woman's Story of the Gold Rush*, *McCall's Magazine*, March 1928

was pulled away, his eyes lingered on her as if pleading with her. That interaction stayed with Josephine, highlighting the emotional toll of frontier life and the complex relationships between ownership, survival, companionship, and love.³⁸ Her reaction underscores the mutual dependence she and the animal had developed, and how swiftly the boundaries between caregiver and companion could blur. From the earliest pages of her account, Robinson places the dogs at the heart of her survival.³⁹ The dogs' reactions to weather, terrain, and danger often influenced her decisions, their finely tuned instincts exceeding human judgment, especially in extreme conditions.⁴⁰ Far from an anomaly, such relationships were central to Arctic survival, with modern mushers attesting that dogs are not simply equipment but companions whose trust must be earned and maintained through care.⁴¹

Robinson's account sheds light on the ethical and emotional frameworks that enabled endurance on the frontier, while also revealing how such bonds enabled settler mobility in ways that made colonial expansion possible. The care she extended to her dogs and the trust she placed in their labor and instincts allowed her to move through, occupy, and consolidate Indigenous space. In this sense, sled dogs served as mediators between settlers, making their survival and authority possible through the relationships and attachments she describes.

The Cruellest Miles: Dogs, Survival, and Ethics in Arctic Expeditions

³⁸ Robinson, *A Woman's Story of the Gold Rush*, *McCall's Magazine*, March 1928.

³⁹ Robinson, *A Woman's Story of the Gold Rush*, *McCall's Magazine*, February 1928, 36.

⁴⁰ Hudson Stuck, *Ten Thousand Miles with a Dog Sled* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1914), 11, 43–44; Sheila Nickerson, *Harnessed to the Pole: Sledge Dogs in the Explorations of Antarctica* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2009), 108–110.

⁴¹ Arnason, A., & Keltner, C. "Human–Sled Dog Relations: What Can We Learn from the Stories and Experiences of Mushers?" *Society & Animals* 15, no. 1 (2007): 79–95.



Figure 8: Musher with his Malamute team outside Nome, Alaska, early 20th century.

In stark contrast to Robinson's intimate frontier journey, this section examines Arctic expeditions between 1853 and 1909, where human-dog relationships were forged in conquest, endurance, and at times, fatal necessity. Figure 8 captures this ethos of unity and resilience, with a musher and his Malamute team posing outside Nome. The dogs are alert and taut, with several howling, perhaps communicating or responding to the musher's commands. The sled is lightly loaded, suggesting this may be a posed moment, but the snow-blanketed background reinforces the unforgiving environment they regularly navigated. Each dog is outfitted with a harness. The relationship between humans and dogs in these settings was not always tender, as seen most starkly in the Polaris expedition of 1871–1873. Led by Charles Francis Hall, the expedition was troubled from the start. Supplies ran low aboard the ice-bound ship, offering little promise of

resupply or escape. Sheila Nickerson describes how the sled dogs, once proud and vigorous, grew thin and restless.⁴²

With the temperature plummeting and no relief in sight, the men were forced to begin slaughtering the weakest of the dogs to feed the stronger ones and themselves.⁴³ Feeding the dogs was essential to maintaining their labor, as the animals remained the only means of hauling supplies, transportation, or launching rescue missions across the ice. As Sheila Nickerson writes, “The men wept as they killed the dogs. They had shared the same tent, the same food, the same songs, and now they were forced to destroy the very creatures who had carried them to safety.”⁴⁴ In these accounts, the line between survival and cruelty blurs, revealing the moral cost of human endurance. Scholar Susan McHugh notes that stories of animal death “return us to the limits of our own humanity, exposing how deeply our lives are entangled with those we claim to command.”⁴⁵ The sailors’ grief reflects the cost of domination and the uneasy recognition that survival often requires the sacrifice of someone else. Some dogs were brought inside the ship during storms and huddled with the crew, offering warmth and companionship even as they starved. The decision to sacrifice them was not taken lightly, yet many men felt guilt and sorrow. This was echoed on later accounts, such as George W. De Long’s Jeannette expedition, where

⁴² Sheila Nickerson, *Harnessed to the Pole: Sledge Dogs in the Explorations of Antarctica* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2009), 35–38.

⁴³ Sheila Nickerson, *Harnessed to the Pole: Sledge Dogs In Service to American Explorers of the Arctic, 1853-1909*. 109.

⁴⁴ Sheila Nickerson, *Harnessed to the Pole: Sledge Dogs in the Explorations of Antarctica* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2009), 109.

⁴⁵ Susan McHugh, *Animal Stories: Narrating Across Species Lines* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 15

the last remaining dog, Wolf, was slaughtered for food just days before the crew reached Siberia.⁴⁶

This juxtaposition of reverence and sacrifice is particularly evident in Robert Peary's North Pole expeditions in 1908 and 1909.⁴⁷ Peary, a seasoned Arctic veteran, built his campaign around a sophisticated relay system powered by hundreds of Greenland dogs.⁴⁸ These expeditions were never just exploratory; they also functioned as imperial displays of power and territorial claims through acts of discovery. Flags were planted, land mapped, and new frontiers claimed, all made possible by sled labor.⁴⁹ He openly admitted that his food supply plan included sacrificing weaker dogs to feed stronger ones,⁵⁰ and it was these animals that carried him to the farthest reaches of the Earth any person had ventured to date.⁵¹ When Peary's lead dog, Nalegaksoah, defeated an Indigenous man's lead dog in a fierce deck-side brawl aboard the return ship, he paraded before the team, victorious.⁵² Matthew Henson reflected on the moment,

⁴⁶ Robert M. Bryce, *Cook and Peary: The Polar Controversy, Resolved* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1997), 478.

⁴⁷ Robert E. Peary, *The North Pole: Its Discovery in 1909 under the Auspices of the Peary Arctic Club* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1910), 45–46.

⁴⁸ Robert E. Peary, *The North Pole: Its Discovery in 1909 under the Auspices of the Peary Arctic Club* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1910), 121–124.

⁴⁹ Robert E. Peary, *The North Pole: Its Discovery in 1909 under the Auspices of the Peary Arctic Club* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1910), 175.

⁵⁰ Robert E. Peary, *The North Pole: Its Discovery in 1909 under the Auspices of the Peary Arctic Club* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1910), 215–219.

⁵¹ Hudson Stuck, *Ten Thousand Miles with a Dog Sled* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1914), 11, 43–44; Sheila Nickerson, *Harnessed to the Pole: Sledge Dogs in the Explorations of Antarctica* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2009), 108–110.

⁵² Matthew A. Henson, *A Negro Explorer at the North Pole* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1912), 168.

admiring the mix of pride, loyalty, and violence⁵³ that even Peary, known for his utilitarian approach, could not dismiss.⁵⁴



Figure 9. An advanced team of an Arctic expedition resting with their sled dogs, early 20th century.

Dogs like Nalegaksoah were often tested under the most brutal conditions, pulling sleds across vast Arctic landscapes, enduring harsh temperatures, and subsisting on minimal rations. Lieutenant Frederick Schwatka's 1879–1880 expedition provides a sobering example. Figure 9 captures this endurance and discipline with a photograph of an advance team resting on the trail, a brief pause amid the relentless movement across frozen terrain. Of the 44 dogs that began the journey, more than 20 died of exhaustion and starvation. Schwatka mourned these losses both logistically and personally, observing that the dogs pressed forward with such resolve despite going days without food that their endurance moved him to deep mourning. In his account of the

⁵³ Robert M. Bryce, *Cook and Peary: The Polar Controversy, Resolved* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1997), 412.

⁵⁴ Robert E. Peary, *The North Pole: Its Discovery in 1909 under the Auspices of the Peary Arctic Club* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1910), 222.

expedition, Schwatka noted the remarkable stamina of the sled dogs: “The dogs, though reduced to the last extremity for want of food, still performed their duties with a fidelity and endurance that excited our admiration.”⁵⁵ His companion, William H. Gilder, noted the dogs’ affectionate nature: “Even when half-starved, the dogs would wag their tails and lick the hands of the children, showing a touching gentleness.”⁵⁶



Figure 10: Illustrations of traditional Inuit sled dog equipment. The top image shows an “Ano” or dog harness, and the bottom depicts a “Qamutiig” or sledge.

The emotional dynamics of these expeditions are not unique to state-sponsored Arctic adventures. They echo the narrative of frontierswoman Josephine DeMott Robinson, whose story

⁵⁵ Frederick Schwatka, *The Search for Franklin: A Narrative of the American Expedition Under Lieutenant Schwatka, 1878 to 1880* (New York: Arno Press, 1976).

⁵⁶ William H. Gilder, *Schwatka's Search: Sledging in the Arctic in Quest of the Franklin Records* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1881), 185.

reveals similar patterns of interdependence between people and animals. While the explorers emphasized efficiency and adaptation, both they and Robinson were grounded in Indigenous knowledge and tools developed by North American Arctic and subarctic peoples. This dependence on Indigenous knowledge is also illustrated in Figure 10, which depicts traditional Indigenous sled dog gear such as a harness and a Qamutiik (sled). These items highlight the essential technologies that contributed to Arctic survival and helped settlers adapt. The qamutiik represents years of improvement, designed for travel over snow and ice. It includes low runners, lash-together crosspieces, and runner modifications optimized for harsh terrain and weather.⁵⁷ Scholarship on these sleds stresses their cultural significance as much as their functional significance. The qamutiik is “not simply a tool of transport but a repository of communal knowledge, intergenerational skill, and environmental attunement.”⁵⁸ The appearance of the harness and sled in Figure 10 signals more than a utilitarian tool. It signals a continuity of Indigenous technological agency and adaptation. Settler and expedition dog teams often borrowed or adapted these sled technologies, yet doing so also involved shifting them into different economic and imperial frameworks. While early, state-sponsored Arctic expeditions of the mid-nineteenth century often treated dogs as essential but expendable labor in pursuit of polar conquest, Robinson’s account offers a contrasting perspective rooted in the everyday realities of the Klondike Gold Rush at the turn of the twentieth century.

In contrast to expedition hierarchies, Robinson’s account foregrounds emotional labor and care. Unlike Arctic crews, whose losses were rationalized within an imperial apparatus that framed suffering as the cost of conquest, Robinson altered her travel plans to accommodate a

⁵⁷ See “Runners of Mud and Ice: The Historic Qamutiik,” *Mushing.com*, March 1, 2010.

⁵⁸ HH Li, “An Ethnographic Look at Contemporary Inuit Dog Race in Nunavik,” 2021.

dog's recovery, treating him not merely as a tool but as kin. This intimacy enables a more empathetic portrayal of dogs as emotional co-survivors rather than expendable means to an end. Robinson's story also exposes the limits of settler authority. The incident in which an Indigenous man reclaims the dog Robinson had nursed back to health complicates any straightforward narrative of possession or control. While Robinson's care forged a powerful emotional claim, she was ultimately unable to secure ownership, revealing that conquest over place did not automatically translate into uncontested control over animals or mobility. In this sense, the dog's repossession can be read not only as a personal loss but as a marker of the incompleteness of settler domination, where Indigenous systems of ownership and authority continued to assert themselves along the trail. At the same time, the similarities between the accounts are equally significant. Robinson and the explorers recognized the dogs' superior instincts and physical endurance, often trusting them over human judgment. Whether leading through whiteouts or standing guard against crevasses, the dogs functioned as physical guides. Their presence made survival possible through both labor and the bonds of companionship, trust, and love.

Conclusion

Sled dogs stood at the center of a power struggle, rooted in Indigenous systems of knowledge and ownership that settlers co-opted but could never fully subdue, even as those same dogs enabled colonial survival and expansion. Long before sled dogs became essential to gold rush logistics or imperial expeditions, they were central to Indigenous systems of mobility, survival, and knowledge in the Arctic and subarctic North. Technologies of dog breeding, harnessing, and sled travel were developed to sustain Indigenous life across snow, enabling movement, exchange, and continuity in environments often mischaracterized as inhospitable;

only later were these capacities appropriated into settler and imperial projects. From the Klondike goldfields to state-sponsored expeditions, sled dogs enabled the movement of people, goods, and ideas across terrain otherwise impassable, facilitating extraction, settlement, and claims of authority over Indigenous space. As laborers, they were indispensable; as companions, they offered warmth and loyalty; and as symbols, they reflected and reinforced the hierarchies, ambitions, and ideologies of empire. The human–dog relationship in Alaska and northern Canada between 1880 and 1930 was dynamic and multifaceted, shaped by necessity, affection, discipline, and domination. Figures like Josephine DeMott Robinson reveal the emotional depth of these bonds, while explorers such as Hudson Stuck and Robert Peary relied on dogs to survive environments that continually tested human limits, and to establish frontier infrastructure in the service of empire. Seen through the lens of Animal Studies, this history repositions sled dogs as integral to the making of empire while underscoring how animals elsewhere, whether in mines, battlefields, or city streets, have been bound up in human projects of labor, conquest, and survival.

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