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Frank Wolf (left) and Andy Sterns gear up after a night of camping.

## Meeting the challenges of early spring breakup

River ice is melting and hungry grizzlies are never far from the minds of the riders

**Kevin Vallely**



### ICEBIKERS

*In the freezing cold of February, 1900, a young man named Ed Jesson began an amazing cycling expedition that started in Yukon Territory and ended on the West Coast of Alaska. When he rode his bicycle*

called "the portage" has existed for millennia.

We spend our first night at the small Tripod Flats shelter cabin 55 kms out of town and wake the next morning to heavy wet snow that turns to a steady rain by our departure.

Our day of riding is slow and wet as we are engulfed in a rain storm. Toward the end of the day the trail moves on and off a small river with poor ice and open holes, but our minds are elsewhere.

We've noticed fresh tracks from a large grizzly that seems to be using the same route as us. The paw prints wind back and forth across our path and are the size of large dinner plates. Singing at the top of our lungs we soon find the small Bureau of Land Management shelter cabin called "Old Woman." Taking its name from the 260-metre black pyramid of rock that stands guard over it, this small log cabin is an oasis in a hostile environ-

into Nome on March 29, he carried with him copies of newspapers he had packed at the start of his trip, bringing what was then the latest news to the residents of the community. Kevin Vallely, Andy Sterns and Frank Wolf (left to right in picture) left Dawson City, Yukon, just over five weeks ago and began following the route Jesson blazed. Here they are forced to cycle through slush, with grizzly bear tracks uncomfortably close, as spring comes earlier than expected.

It's 6 o'clock in the morning and I'm standing almost waist deep in water somewhere in the middle of the Unalakleet River and I can't but wonder what I'm doing here.

A large low-pressure system exploded in from the south, bringing extremely warm temperatures and a deluge of rain. Our winter landscape has become a wet springtime marsh. The frozen trail is now deep slush and countless creeks have burst their banks and are running open, but the worst thing of all is the overflow.

Excess water in the landscape has migrated to the river basins, where it is now running above the already frozen river surface, creating a river on top of a river with a sandwich of ice in between. It's impossible to tell how deep it is or whether it conceals bad ice below. Overflow has hit the coast hard and we're in the midst of it.

Things started to change the morning we left Kaltag. A local native man told us that a section of the Yukon River opened up south of Galena where we had been two days earlier and that we'd better watch out for the grizzlies, since three had been shot around the community in recent days. It would seem that spring has arrived, and with a sense of uneasiness we begin our 160-km overland journey to the Bering Sea. Originally used as a trading route by the indigenous people of the interior and the coast, this part of the trail

ment. Local legend has it that an old woman lost her son and has been searching for him ever since. Her wailing cries can be heard on the wind, and occasionally her lantern will be seen on the mountainside.

When Andy mushed Iditarod in 1995 he became ill at this cabin and barely made it into Unalakleet. Feverish and confused, he somehow made it the 80 kms into town without shouting a single instruction to his dogs. When he recounted the story at the checkpoint, an old man smiled and said the old woman brought him in. Tradition says that one leaves food at the cabin for the old woman, but the BLM forbids it because of the bears. We leave coffee as a compromise.

*"As I got near the coast it grew cooler and the trail better until I struck the Unalakleet river which had two to four inches of water running over the ice and here I had to walk or ride about 6 miles down this little river. I found it easier and safer to ride the wheel but could go only a little faster than a walk as the hind wheel would throw water all over my back when I tried to speed up."*

This excerpt from Jesson's diary indicates he had his own difficulties on this final river to the coast. We finally reach the Bering Sea two days later than expected and we realize now that winter has run its course. We still have more than 500 kms to reach our destination, and everything is melting around us.

The next week or so will be tense, as we will try to move faster in deteriorating conditions. A major hurdle ahead will be the 50-km crossing of the sea ice of Norton Sound.

If everything goes as planned we might be making our next installment from Nome.

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