

# TRAVEL

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SATURDAY, MARCH 1, 2003 SECTION E

## THE OTHER LONG ISLAND

Far from the bustle of modern Nassau lies the Bahamas best-kept secret, E10

## ANCIENT MEET MODERN

Life in Morocco is a constant contrast of the old and the new, the mysterious and the familiar, E11



# On ice bikes across Alaska: the expedition begins

In the freezing cold February of 1900 a young man began an amazing expedition that commenced in Yukon Territory and ended on the west coast of Alaska. When he reached Nome on March 29 he carried with him copies of newspapers that he had packed at the start of his trip, bringing what was then the latest news to the residents of the community.

Today Kevin Vallely, Frank Wolf and Andy Sterns fly out of Vancouver on their way to Dawson City to follow the tracks of Ed Jesson and those of Max Hirschberg, another explorer who made the same trip in same spring, arriving in Nome in May of 1900. Hirschberg celebrated his 20th birthday on the trail. In a series of weekly articles in the Travel section throughout March The Vancouver Sun will follow their progress. Vallely, Wolf and Sterns carry with them copies of today's Vancouver Sun and Seattle Post-Intelligencer, which they will deliver to Nome in honour of their predecessor and trailblazer.



Kevin Vallely (left) and Frank Wolf are ready for a long ride.

So you boys think you're pretty tough, don't ya?" says Jay Heller, the mayor of the small native community of Ruby, who has kindly let us bed down for the night in his cabin.

It's March 2000, and two friends and I are making a marathon ski traverse across Alaska. We met Jay that morning as he was checking his trap line, and he invited us to his little log

cabin perched on an escarpment overlooking the mighty frozen Yukon River.

"Well, back in 1900, there was this young fella named Jesson who rode his bike clear 'cross Alaska from Dawson City to Nome. That's a thousand miles on a bike. In the middle of winter, over a century ago! You see boys, we Alaskans are a different kinda breed ..."

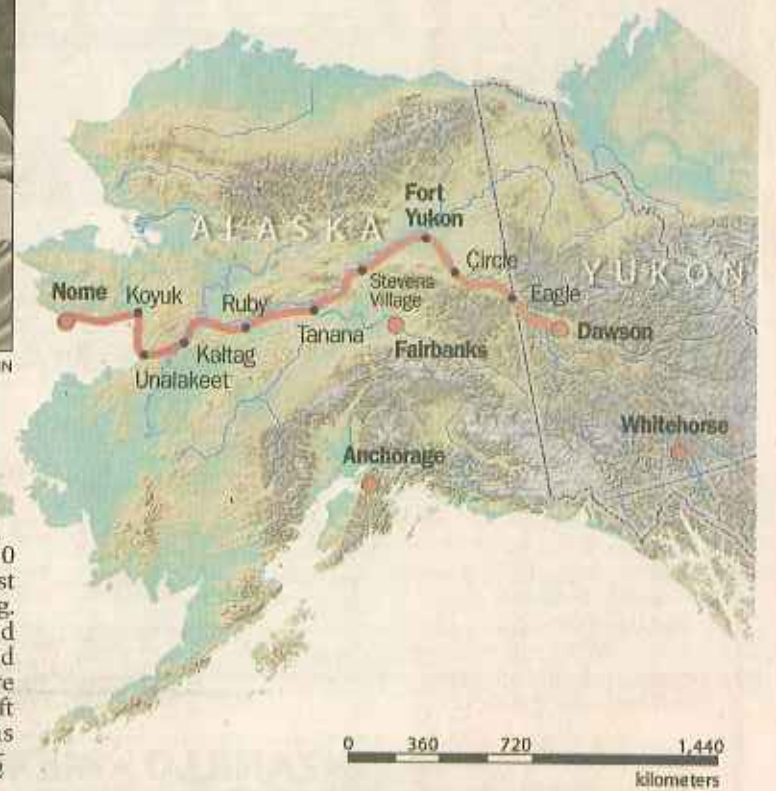
And so it went: an unbelievable

tale of a young prospector battling his way across an unforgiving landscape of ice and snow, becoming a local hero; an Alaskan legend. It would be a year later that I would find out that the story Jay told us was actually true.

The late 1800s was a special period for the Yukon and Alaska. Gold fever had swept the continent and a rag-tag flotilla of thousands made their way north to a

swampy patch of land at the confluence of the Yukon and Klondike rivers. Dawson City became the classic boomtown, swelling to a size of 40,000 people, and becoming the largest Canadian city west of Winnipeg. The irony of the Klondike Gold Rush is that virtually all the gold fields were staked a year before the stampede and all that was left for would-be millionaires was

See **YOUNG PROSPECTOR** E2



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# Young prospector couldn't ride a bike

From El

hard labour, poor wages, and despair. So, in the fall of 1899, when rumours started to echo of a gold strike in Nome, thousands of idle stampedeers started heading north down the Yukon River.

At first they travelled by boat, but as winter took hold they would start to use dog teams, lashing all their worldly possessions to sleds and gliding down the frozen surface of the river.

Ed Jesson had come to Alaska in 1896 to prospect for gold, and was running a small trading post in Star City, about 190 km (120 miles) down river from Dawson, when the stampede to Nome began in 1899. He would see first hand the worn out men and dogs struggling on their way to Nome, and figured there had to be an easier way.

Writing in his diary " ... that my fever was up to the breaking," Jesson decided it was time to join the ranks and head north. Incredibly, he would do it by bicycle.

The bicycle, or "wheel" as it was often referred to then, was in fact a popular means of transportation at the turn of the century, and numerous journeys of varying lengths had been made to and from the gold fields of the Klondike. It's documented that two, and possibly four, individuals made the amazing 2000-km journey from Dawson to Nome by bicycle; but it would be Ed Jesson's journey that would catch people's imagination.

Jesson kept a detailed diary of his famous ride and it would prove to be one of the best per-

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GLENN BAGLO/VANCOUVER SUN

Kevin Vallely (at handlebars) and Frank Wolf display one of their fully loaded bikes. Vallely, Wolf and Andy Stern of Fairbanks, Alaska are riding from Dawson City to Nome, re-creating a

*Next morning I went down to the A.C. store and got the wheel. I could not ride it ... Anyway I had to stay in Dawson eight days to learn that wheel ... I took about 25 headers into the snow and the dogs would jump on top of me and almost smothered me ... this was the only fun they had all winter so I played the rabbit and tryed to keep ahead of them.*

ED JESSON

February 1900, Dawson City, Yukon Territory

tendency to become thick and unworkable in extreme cold; so all our bearings have been repacked with a special lubricant to combat this.

We've equipped the bikes with double-wide aluminum monster rims that will allow us to ride a huge tire, at very low pressure, with little risk of a pinch flat. Amazingly, this makes riding on snow possible. On the front and back of the bike we have racks to carry panniers, and a small one-wheeled trailer, on which to tow our heavier gear.

We have fitted special down poggies on the handlebars that will shield our hands from the wind and keep them insulated. The result is a rather unique looking three-wheeled contraption specifically designed for the task.

Clothing for cold climates is a tricky affair requiring a three-layer system to be most effective. Closest to the skin we wear moisture wicking Lifa underwear — top and bottom — with an

you finish). Finally, when we do stop for an extended period, we will cocoon ourselves in our specially designed down jackets and pants which will keep us warm without the necessity of physical movement.

Rounding out our gear needs are, -50C down sleeping bags made by the French down apparel manufacturer Valandre, and a four-person arctic expedition tent from Norway's Helsport. Designed for expeditions to the North and South poles, this tent can withstand the worst that Alaska can throw at us. With boots that are rated to -100 C and gloves designed for high altitude mountaineering, I think we've got the cold licked.

The physical preparation for such an endeavour is different from what one might expect. It consists predominantly of taking it easy and trying to get fat. Going into something like this supremely fit would leave you tired and flat within weeks.

On the trail we will be averag-



IAN LINDSAY/VANCOUVER SUN

Heavy-duty insulated boots are needed for the team's cycling trip across Alaska.

conditions up north I know we're in for a classic adventure. Alaska is experiencing a year of low snow and inconsistent temperatures this year making our route challenging. Certain sections of trail are routinely dropping to -40 C, while other sections have had above zero temperatures.

There is lots of snow in some sections and none in others. The swift-moving current of the Yukon River creates hazardous ice conditions at the best of times; as a result, the seesawing temperatures of this winter have increased the danger somewhat. Add to this, wild animals, ground blizzards, and the utter remoteness of this part of the world and

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