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SATURDAY, MARCH 15, 2003 SECTION E

MOUNTAIN TREK

Mountain villages of Vietnam offer view of fascinating folklife, E6

FLORIDA LOOKS BACK

South Florida's Science Museum shows the cool side of a hot state, E8



Friends on the trail help as bikers battle bitter cold, snow

In the freezing cold February, 1900 a young man named Ed Jesson began an amazing cycling expedition that began in Yukon Territory and ended on the west coast of Alaska. When he rode his bicycle into 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. Kevin Vallely, Andy Sterns and Frank Wolf (left to right in picture) left Dawson City, Yukon, just over a week ago and began following the route Jesson blazed, heading towards the community of Eagle. But as Kevin writes, they found conditions much different than they had expected when they hit the trail.

Kevin Vallely



ICEBIKERS

Thursday morning March 6 dawned cold and sunny as we head down Front street to the bank of the Yukon River and the start of our journey to Nome. The -35C temperature and strong head wind gives us a solid wakeup punch as the river takes its first swipe at us. A huge cloud looms ominously just north of Dawson City signalling open water ahead, and we are sobered by the thought that the river is not fully frozen. We

quietly slip down the bank to the ice below and are finally off.

Our trail is the remnant of the Yukon Quest sled-dog race that went through this section of the river about two weeks earlier. Unfortunately during the interim it has seen a foot of snow and storm-force winds leaving us with a path essentially no different from the landscape around it.

We start pushing our heavily loaded bikes almost immediately and become profoundly aware of what we've got ourselves into.

During the course of the next few hours we struggle to maintain a pace of three km/h, frustrated by the deep snow and the condition of our route.

We push inland to avoid a large stretch of open water and manage to start riding our bikes on a narrow, winding bush trail. It ends at the cabin of musher Tommy Taylor, whose kennel of 30 or so sled dogs go wild at our arrival. Dressed in well worn brown overalls stained from

See **MUSHER KNOWS** E10



Frank Wolf (left) and Kevin Vallely pause to adjust their equipment as minus-35 cold grips Yukon. DAVID EDWARDS/SPECIAL TO THE SUN

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Musher knows something greenhorns don't

From E1

years of kennel work. Taylor stares at us as blankly as we ride up his pathway.

"The good trail ends here," he says with a light brush of his hand. "Where are you guys headed?"

"To Nome" we say with some hesitation and this brings a look of surprise and compassion to a face that rarely expresses either. It's obvious he knows something we don't but it's too late now and we head onwards.

*The good trail ends here ...
Where are you guys headed?*

DOG MUSER TOMMY TAYLOR
on encountering Kevin Vallery, Frank Wolf and Andy Sterns in front of his Yukon cabin as they pedal towards Nome, Alaska

After dropping down to the river we are again forced off our bikes and it dawns on us that our estimates for daily distance are drastically wrong as we move at less than half the speed we had hoped.

We have only packed three days of food to get us to the community of Eagle, our next food drop. Our adventure has definitely begun.

The surface of the frozen Yukon River has everything from skating rink smooth sections of glare ice to kilometers of tortured ice jams known as jumbled ice.

In among this are sections of open water that, for whatever reason, never freeze regardless of temperature.

As days pass we follow a delicate line through this frozen landscape of ice, snow and moving water, all the time alternating between riding and pushing our bikes.

On day four we reach the site of the old Gold Rush community of Forty Mile

which, in the late 1800s, housed thousands but now has a population of two. Sebastian Jones and Shelley Brown have spent their winters here for the last 15 years and are inhabiting what is arguably the oldest structure in the Yukon.

Built in the 1880s as the general store, this one-storey log structure is adorned with a moose rack at its entrance and a bed spring across its front window to keep out furry marauders.

With the hint of a British accent and piercing blue eyes, Sebastian invites us to stay the evening.

A burly beard and imposing physique conceal a man who enjoys reading *The Economist* and is as comfortable debating world politics as he is line-up for this year's Iditarod.

Our gracious hosts replenish our food supplies and we head on towards Eagle the next morning.

"We passed everything on the trail and made the roadhouse half way between 40-Mile and Dawson for lunch but thoroughly tired. After lunch we lay on the bunks for a short nap and started on to 40-Mile. Williams wanted to wait until morning as he was all in but I got him started and we made 40-Mile in time for supper."

In this excerpt from his diary, Ed Jesson describes the journey we just spent the last four days retracing. We are stunned to think that a man who just learned to ride a bike a week before his departure did in one day what it took us four long, hard days to achieve. Clearly things have changed.

We arrived in Eagle seven days after leaving Dawson and are slowly becoming trail hardened. The route we have chosen is remote and rarely traveled but we are starting to feel comfortable on it.

The weather is still desperately cold and windy with overnight lows in the -40s and won't be changing for any

time soon. Today we will begin the 250-km journey to the tiny community of Circle at the edge of the great Yukon Flats.

We expect a terrible trail with much pushing but are enthusiastic nonetheless and hope to make it in eight days.

The next leg of the trip is so long that Kevin, Frank and Andy may still be in the wilderness of Alaska one week from now. The next Icebikes update will appear in the Travel section as soon as possible after it is received. Follow the progress of the Bikes on Ice expedition on their Web site www.bikesonice.com



Bikes On Ice trail to Nome, Alaska