

arctic traveler

with Joe Henderson & Andrea Loveland

A Brief History of the Alaskan Malamute

The Alaskan malamute is one of twelve ancient breeds and one of the oldest Arctic sled dogs. The breed was named after a native tribe called Mahlemuit Inuits, who settled in northwestern Alaska over 5,000 years ago above the Arctic Circle. However, the malamutes' history in Alaska reaches back even earlier than that.

Evidence from archeological excavations at the Mesa Site, a 12,000 year old Paleoindian hunting lookout located on the northern flank of the Brooks Range to the west-northwest of Anaktuvuk Pass, suggests that the hunters at that time may have used malamutes in their hunting endeavors. It is unclear whether sleds were in use at that time, so it's unknown whether the malamute was used in a freighting capacity in that respect, however, it is believed that the malamutes' strength and endurance was utilized through their packing capabilities. They played a vital role in helping Mesa hunters in their hunts, both by stalking and harassing the game and also to pack their harvest.

Not only were malamutes valuable for their working traits, but they were also an integral part of the family unit and were treated as such. Early European explorers were impressed with the way the Mahlemuit people incorporated their dogs into every aspect of their lives, welcoming them at family meal times, nurturing them as though they were children, and even relying on the malamutes to watch after their young children while they went out hunting. Throughout history, malamutes have been hailed as excellent family dogs.

According to one of the early breeders of AKC-registered malamutes, Paul Voelker, the malamute was portrayed in bone and ivory carvings dated to 12- to 20,000 years old. He believed the Alaskan malamute was the oldest breed in North America and that they probably had the longest relationship with man. Voelker is quoted as saying, "...the Alaskan malamute for untold generations was raised with the Eskimos, pups and kids on the floor together. I've seen little babies crawling in among the pups to nurse off the old mother dog."

With the onset of the Gold Rush in that late 1800's, serious prospectors began to realize the need for strong dog teams that could pull their heavy freight. Prospectors learned one of the many benefits of using a malamute team was that their caloric requirements were quite low for their size compared to other working dog breeds. Additionally, because their innate desire to pull heavy loads and their hardy physical traits afforded them the ability to withstand the most brutal arctic

conditions, the Alaskan malamute became one of the most sought after dogs.

The Mahlemuit people knew the value of the breed and were sure to get top dollar for their loyal companions, upwards of \$500 per dog – not bad considering that amount would equate to over \$10,000 today. The prospectors got their hard earned money's worth out of these dogs because they were also useful in the summer months for packing supplies and even barging small boats along waterways and tended

“He is a ceaseless and tireless animal who loves to pull.”

Hudson Stuck, in reference to the Alaskan malamute

to live long and healthy lives.

The malamutes' significance as exceptional freight dogs did not end with the wane of the gold rush. From the 1890's to the early 1960's, dog mushers were contracted by the United States Postal Service to deliver mail to the remote regions of Alaska. Most of the teams included Alaskan malamutes. The dog teams reliably delivered mail across the state until they started to get phased out by airplanes. The last team of mail carriers retired in 1963.

The malamutes' service to our country went far beyond delivering the mail. They were also utilized in the armed forces. During World War II, malamutes pulled sleds in slow covered areas that were inaccessible by horses, airplanes, or any other modes of transportation. They freighted weapons and ammunition and also served as search and rescue dogs. It was during a stint of military boot camp for dogs that the largest documented team of malamutes was hooked up for a training exercise. Fifty-three malamutes were harnessed into one gi-



gantic team and pulled an army truck full of soldiers over a distance of six miles.

Malamutes have historical significance in their contributions to Arctic and Antarctic expeditions. Alaskan Malamutes pulled heavy freight on the Antarctic expeditions of Peary, Amundsen, and Byrd to the South Pole. The successful exploration of the Antarctic continent could not have been accomplished without the help of Alaskan malamutes who were efficient travelers even on the most rugged terrain and were capable of working for weeks on end inexhaustibly.

Alaskan Malamutes also provided transportation and companionship for Ernest de Koven Leffingwell's pioneering geologic mapping of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge and the Arctic coastline in the early 1900's. They were there when Leffingwell first speculated that Prudhoe Bay would become one of the most significant oil fields in North America.

Hudson Stuck, an Episcopal Archdeacon who successfully climbed Mt. McKinley via the south peak in 1913, also traveled Interior Alaska with a team of malamutes on missionary service. He was enamored with the malamute, claiming that "...There was never an animal better adapted to environment than the malamute dog. His coat, while it is not fluffy, nor the hair long, is yet so dense and heavy that it affords him a perfect protection against the utmost severity of cold. His feet are tough and clean, and do not readily accumulate snow between the toes and therefore do not easily get sore, which is the great drawback of nearly all 'outside' dogs and their mixed progeny. He is hardy and thrifty and does well on less food than the mixed breeds; and...he will eat anything...The malamute is affectionate and faithful and likes to be made a pet of..."

In the 1960's Roger Burggraf, a Fairbanks-based malamute breeder, hauled freight with his malamute team for the park service in Denali National Park. Some of the earliest dogs in his kennel, Taaralaste, came from a talented lineage of malamutes that served in the armed forces and also made their debut in Hollywood in a 1961 Walt Disney production called "Nikki, Wild Dog of the North."



For nearly 30 years, Joe has been conducting Arctic expeditions with our team of malamutes, keeping the spirit of remote exploration alive and facilitating our malamutes to do what they were born to do. One of his most recent expeditions was a 3-year project called the Project Leffingwell Expedition, the first year of which resulted in the longest unsupported, unassisted solo dog sledding expedition on record (unofficial). He traveled with the team for five months without resupply.

In 2010, after a multi-year research and political effort by students at Polaris K-12 School in Anchorage, the Alaskan malamute became Alaska's official state dog. It's an honor for the breed to be recognized for their rich history within our state and abroad.

Sources:

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Joe Henderson has been working with malamutes for nearly 30 years. In his early days of dog mushing, he tried just about every breed of sled dog there was, and decided to stick with malamutes because he found them to be the most appropriate dog for his personal dog sledding endeavors. He's not been disappointed with his decision. For more on Joe and the team, please visit www.alaskanarcticexpeditions.com.

Andrea Loveland, the Arctic Traveler's wife, holds a Master of Science degree in structural geology and works for the State of Alaska. She is the logistics coordinator for Joe's expeditions and enjoys raising and caring for their malamutes. The couple is looking forward to the birth of their first child in July!