References of Cultural Importance of Sled Dogs

SPIRIT OF THE WIND: An instructional unit in Alaska State History

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Cultural Importance of Dog mushing
SPIRIT OF THE WIND: An instructional unit in Alaska State History
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Introduction:
SPIRIT OF THE WIND: An instructional unit in Alaska State History is a stand-alone unit incorporating elements and readings about George Attla, perhaps the most famous Alaska musher ever. Aspects of his and Athabascan life and culture are explored through viewing Spirit of the Wind, George's story up to 1979, plus related readings.

This instructional unit is not designed as a complete semester-long course in Alaska state history. Rather, it addresses selected aspects of the body of knowledge expected of students completing such a course. It can be used to augment an existing course or as an introduction to Alaska state history.

The elements of Alaska history recognized by the Alaska Board of Education as needed in such a course are listed below. This unit focuses, in part, on aspects of Alaska geography, Alaska's cultures, and modern Alaska.

High School Graduation Requirement:
After a statewide advocacy effort, led by the Alaska Humanities Forum, the State Board of Education amended 4AAC 06.075. This regulation now requires that as of January 1, 2009, the three units of social studies required for graduation must include one-half unit of credit in Alaska history or demonstration that the student meets the Alaska history performance standards. This does not apply to a student (1) who transfers into an Alaska public school after the student's second year of high school or (2) has already successfully completed a high school state history course from another state.

Some elements of Alaska state history:
- Geography: http://www.akhistorycourse.org/articles/article.php?artID=313
- Russia’s Colony: http://www.akhistorycourse.org/articles/article.php?artID=316

Materials for the unit:
Spirit of the Wind: the life of George Attla and his sled dog racing
Study Guide with additional references to:
  George Attla
tuberculosis
dog racing
trapping
subsistence fishing
boarding schools
the Molly Hootsch decision
the relocation of Alaska bush villages
Reading assignments and focus questions for the student to address
An “open book” written assessment
The Athabascans traditionally lived in Interior Alaska, an expansive region that begins south of the Brooks Mountain Range and continues down to the Kenai Peninsula. There are eleven linguistic groups of Athabascans in Alaska. Athabascan people have traditionally lived along five major river ways: the Yukon, the Tanana, the Susitna, the Kuskokwim, and the Copper river drainages. Athabascans were highly nomadic, traveling in small groups to fish, hunt and trap. Today, Athabascans live throughout Alaska and the Lower 48, returning to their home territories to harvest traditional resources. The Athabascan people call themselves ‘Dena,’ or ‘the people.’ In traditional and contemporary practices Athabascans are taught respect for all living things. The most important part of Athabascan subsistence living is sharing. All hunters are part of a kin-based network in which they are expected to follow traditional customs for sharing in the community.

**House Types and Settlements**

The Athabascans traditionally lived in small groups of 20 to 40 people that moved systematically through the resource territories. Annual summer fish camps for the entire family and winter villages served as base camps. Depending on the season and regional resources, several traditional house types were used.

**Tools and Technology**

Traditional tools and technology reflect the resources of the regions. Traditional tools were made of stone, antlers, wood, and bone. Such tools were used to build houses, boats, snowshoes, clothing, and cooking utensils. Birch trees were used wherever they were found.

**Social Organization**

The Athabascans have a matrilineal system in which children belong to the mother's clan, rather than to the father's clan, with the exception of the Holikachuk and the Deg Hit'an. Clan elders made decisions concerning marriage, leadership, and trading customs. Often the core of the traditional group was a woman and her brother, and their two families. In such a combination the brother and his sister's husband often became hunting partners for life. Sometimes these hunting partnerships started when a couple married.

Traditional Athabascan husbands were expected to live with the wife's family during the first year, when the new husband would work for the family and go hunting with his brothers-in-law. A central feature of traditional Athabascan life was (and still is for some) a system whereby the mother's brother takes social responsibility for training and socializing his sister's children so that the children grow up knowing their clan history and customs.

**Clothing**

Traditional clothing reflects the resources. For the most part, clothing was made of caribou and moose hide. Moose and caribou hide moccasins and boots were important parts of the wardrobe. Styles of moccasins vary depending on conditions. Both men and women are adept at sewing, although women traditionally did most of skin sewing.

**Transportation**

Canoes were made of birch bark, moose hide, and cottonwood. All Athabascans used sleds -- with and without dogs to pull them – snowshoes and dogs as pack animals.

**Trade**

Trade was a principle activity of Athabascan men, who formed trading partnerships with men in other communities and cultures as part of an international system of diplomacy and exchange. Traditionally, partners from other tribes were also, at times, enemies, and travelling through enemy territory was dangerous.

**Regalia**

Traditional regalia varies from region to region. Regalia may include men's beaded jackets, dentalium shell necklaces (traditionally worn by chiefs), men and women's beaded tunics and women's beaded dancing boots.
Assignment 1: Watch the movie Spirit of the Wind. It portrays the life of George Attla up to the year 1979. Be prepared to answer the following questions about the movie and his life:

1. How did George Sr., George's father, run his trap line? That is, what was his means of transportation?
2. What was the source of heat for the family cabin?
3. How did the Attla family buy the goods they couldn't catch, grow, or make themselves?
4. How did the family reach summer fish camp?
5. At what age did George contract tuberculosis?
6. Where did he go for treatment and cure?
7. How long was he away from his home?
8. Where did he attend school while he was being treated for tuberculosis?
9. Where is the Fur Rendezvous World Championship race held?


1. Write down the route he took to get from Huslia to the Fur Rondy race site.
2. How many methods of transportation did he use?
3. On a map of Alaska, figure out how many miles he traveled to get to the race.

Assignment 4: If you are interested in sled dogs, read the article on the origins of Alaskan sled dogs: http://www.sleddogcentral.com/features/little_wolf/alaskans.htm

Assignment 5: An important piece of Alaska history was made by both non-native and Alaska native mushers: the 1918 serum run from Nenana to Nome. Read the article about the serum run:

Assignment 6: Working with sled dogs may have unintended or unexpected benefits. Read the interview of George in Mushing Magazine in which he talks about how working with dogs influenced the way he raised his children: http://attlamakingofachampion.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/2012.03-Mushing-Magazine-Part-II-Attla.pdf

1. Summarize or describe how he saw the connection.
2. Might there be a similar benefit from raising and training hunting dogs? Pet dogs? Explain in a paragraph or two your reasoning.

Assignment 7: Late in life, George used his energies to establish a dog mushing program for middle and high school students in Huslia. This is, perhaps, another unexpected benefit
of working with sled dogs. Read his obituary:
http://www.adn.com/print/article/20150215/famed-alaska-musher-george-attla-dead-81

1. Write a paragraph, based on the obituary and perhaps the interview you read, about how the Frank Attla Youth and Sled Dog Care Mushing Program could benefit Alaskan youth. Use your imagination and your understanding about personal accomplishment as it relates to a person’s self-image. Please discuss this assignment with your parents. They will have definite ideas to share with you.
2. Develop a short list of activities in which you are or could be involved that might build your confidence and sense of self-worth in a way similar to the mushing program just mentioned in the obituary.

Assignment 8: Recall in the movie that when George finally returned to his family and community he had been removed from his culture for almost ten years. He had a different set of experiences than his brother. He knew less about the fish wheel and its operation than his brother. In many respects, he was caught between two cultures due, in part, to his boarding school experience. Read the article on cultural assimilation of Native Americans as background for the next assignment:
wikipedia.org/wiki/Cultural_assimilation_of_Native_Americans#Non-reservation_boarding_schools

Assignment 9: In the 1960s and, perhaps earlier, Alaska villagers, mostly native, began to push for local village high schools. They were seeking to preserve family and cultural unity. Read Tobeluk v. Lind, the court case that led to a resolution of this issue:
wikipedia.org/wiki/Tobeluk_v._Lind

See also, the article on the Molly Hootch decision, the legal resolution of the law suit:
http://www.alaskool.org/native_ed/law/mhootch_erq.html

1. How many high school-age students does it take to require the state of Alaska to supply a village high school?
2. Who was Molly Hootch?
3. Make a list of five reasons why you might not like to be sent hundreds or thousands of miles away from home to a boarding school.
4. Suggest one potential advantage that might come to you at a boarding school. You might want to write paragraphs to answer these last two challenges.
Iditarod Sled Dog Education Portal

About the Education Department and Contact Information


Portal for Teachers

http://iditarod.com/teachers/

Left column has specific content area index of educational ideas and materials
ConocoPhillips Healthy Futures is a community initiative to provide Alaska’s youth with greater access to positive role models in sports through the Healthy Heroes project. Founding partners in the project include the Municipality of Anchorage Parks & Recreation, the Anchorage School District, and the Alaska Association for Health, Physical Education, Recreation & Dance ConocoPhillips Healthy Futures initiative and the Alaska Sports Hall of Fame.

This project would not be possible without the efforts of the outstanding Alaskan athletes who contributed their inspiring messages.

The written submissions have been edited here for space considerations. Visit the Healthy Heroes home at www.alaskasportshall.org to read the Healthy Hero contributions in their entirety and find out about opportunities to chat online with your favorite Healthy Hero!

What do you do on an average day to exercise? It doesn’t matter how long you exercise or what activity you choose for your exercise. It matters that you get out and do it every day! — Aelin Peterson

He ran everywhere. If you served under his command in the military, the only time that you were permitted to walk was if you were with a higher ranking officer who was walking. — Col. Norman Vaughn's wife Carolyn on Norman

Make sure the activities or sports you choose are fun and enjoyable. Make daily activity a part of your healthy lifestyle. — Dick Mike

I try to go to the gym five days a week. I lift weights and either ride the bike or run for 40 minutes. — Dean Larson

I started forming good habits early on, so now it’s no problem for me to work out three times a week from 5:30 to 7:00 a.m. — Eric Heil

I carry 20 gallons of water everyday to feed my dogs three times a day plus I pick up after them. In winter I cut and haul all my firewood, shovel snow, travel by snow machine and trap beaver under the ice. In summer I set nets to catch salmon. Basically I move all day, everyday. — George Atla

When you have a spare hour and can either choose to watch TV or get in a workout, make the decision that will benefit you the most. — Karen Patten

My average day of exercise usually includes two workouts. I start my first workout around 8:00 a.m. and train one to two hours. My second workout is at 4:00 p.m. and ranges from 30 min - 1 hr. — Kikkan Randall

You don’t have to run marathons. Just walking — something almost all of us can do — is great exercise and a great way to start down the path of being active everyday. — Kris Tharasson

Alaskans have an advantage in that the wilderness is usually just out our back door, inviting us out. It is easy to stay healthy when hiking, fishing, berry picking and snowshoeing are part of everyday life. — Libby Riddles

I try to make up for my bad eating habits by being very active. Basketball is my favorite sport. I try to play basketball at least two to five times per week. — Ma’a Tosi

Everybody uses a car, but I used to run, ski, or bike seven miles to work. I wasn’t the best dressed person in the office, but I kept a change of clothes I could get in and out of. — Stan Justice

For exercise I play basketball, lift weights and do some long distance jogging. — Trojan Langdon

I try to ski a lot and go for walks. Nordic skiing is also fun in the winter. — Tommy Moe

I stretch, stretch, stretch, strengthening my body to do anything I want it to, which is important for all of the different type of Alaska Native Games events. I build on my core stretches, adding weights to help gravity push me even further. After all of that work, my hope is that I will continue kicking and jumping for years to come. — Phillip Blanchett
References of Sled Dog Health

Harris and Ginger Dunlap: Howl Magazine for Junior ISDRA: Three articles on anatomy of sled dogs, heat tolerance, and foot care
http://www.sleddog.com/sleddog/ezine/howl.htm


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**JOURNAL ARTICLES: The Link between Human-Animal Bond and Mental Health**


Lem, Michelle; Coe, Jason B.; Haley, Derek B.; Stone, Elizabeth; and O'Grady, William (2013) "Effects of Companion Animal Ownership among Canadian Street-involved Youth: A Qualitative Analysis," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 40: Iss. 4, Article 15. Available at: http://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol40/iss4/15


Introduction

I want to teach Alaska Native youth, not only about United States history or world history but also about their own history. In school, I learned about the western ways of civilization but I did not learn about who my own people are. Are we not important enough to be mentioned? Do we not matter? What this omission does to a young Alaskan Native child is cause confusion and negative effects to their pride. When I would visit my grandpa (George Attla Jr.), I would gain a sense of pride in who I was, where I come from, and in addition, I would feel inspired each time I visited him. There was no mountain too big to climb after hanging with the champion sprint dog musher, George Attla Jr. The sky was the limit for me after hearing stories told by my grandfather, which were about my ancestors and the struggles they had to overcome. After hearing these stories and going through these experiences, I felt like I could be somebody in this world and felt that I could also help inspire other Alaska Native youth. That is why I chose to spend a race season dog mushing under the guidance of George and taking distance education classes through the University of Alaska Fairbanks. Dog mushing has been a learning tool and a way to connect residents of all ages in a rural Alaskan community.

In the Alaska Native culture, dog mushing was originally used for transportation, work, hunting, and trapping. Sled dogs can lead a person out of a storm and also sense problems such as thin ice or perhaps the edge of an upcoming cliff. Evidently, the Alaska Native people trusted their sled dogs with their own lives to guide them through the extreme Alaskan climates in order
to go out and search for food to eat or wood to burn for heat. Since the Alaska Native people trusted their sled dogs with their lives and also had to feed them, not to mention their own families, a sled dog had to be of exceptional quality or else it would not survive. The mushers could not afford to care for a dog that did not work hard or care for itself. For example, if a dog team had crossed overflowing water on the ice, then each dog was expected to immediately clean slush and ice from its paws so that the cold temperatures would not freeze their feet.

With the arrival of the snowmobile, came a decrease in the need for sled dogs. A snowmobile may not be able to guide a person through a storm but it could surely be parked and left in one spot for months at a time (providing that a bear does not tear it up!). The efficient snowmobiles can also generate a higher rate of speed and, depending on the type of engine, just as much if not more horsepower to pull heavy loads. Therefore, the majority of Alaska Natives got rid of their dog teams and bought snowmobiles. The few that still carry on the dog mushing tradition mainly use their sled dogs for racing or recreational purposes.

With new technology and new medicines came an easier life for Alaska Natives, which is both good and bad. When the Indigenous people of Alaska first came in contact with the Russians and the Western world, they were introduced to new illnesses that their bodies were not adapted to and many people died. The new medicines that the Caucasian people brought saved many Indians and Eskimos from diseases such as tuberculosis, influenza, polio, measles, and many more. New modern day technology allows for more innovative ways of living, which has helped the Alaska Native people communicate, learn, and access tremendous amounts of information a lot faster and with far less labor than ever before. The downside of the easier, more modern way of life for the Alaska Native people is that since they do not have to work as hard to accomplish daily tasks, they may become lazy! Training, caring for, and racing sled dogs can
definitely provide work for a person who wants to keep themselves busy both mentally and physically.

All my life, I’ve felt stuck between two worlds; the Indian world and the Western world. I never wanted to travel too far in either one of them because in order to accomplish big things as a young Native American, I feel that I have to balance the two worlds and get the best of both of them. I can live the Indian way of life by living off the land, but I can also have a stable job as a teacher in rural Alaska, coach basketball (the game that I love), and inspire young rural Alaskans to go out and achieve greatness in which ever field of study they wish. All of this inspiration and fire to go out as a minority and be the best in the world has been passed on to me from George Attla Jr.

Activities

This past fall and winter, I have been teaching Alaska Native youth how to care for, train, and race sled dogs. I began working with the dogs from early-October 2014 until late-March 2015. The dog mushing duties included feeding once a day, watering at least twice a day, cleaning, maintaining straw, maintaining splits/cuts on dog feet, vaccinating puppies, fishing, building dog houses, fixing broken sleds, running the dogs, dropping dogs from their boxes in the dog truck (when on the road in Fairbanks, Willow, Anchorage, North Pole, Tok, and Tanacross, Alaska.), and making sure trails were well groomed. Each day, caring for the dogs was necessary from six o’clock in the morning until around twelve o’clock midnight. The amount of care for the dogs while ‘on the road’ in the dog truck amplified because every few hours of each day they needed to be “dropped,” as I call it when the dogs are let out of their boxes to relieve themselves or to stretch to loosen up their muscles and joints. Every task that I
was required to do was taught to Huslia children through the Frank Attla Youth and Sled Dog Care-Mushing Program.

Approximately sixty children under the age of eighteen, visited the Huslia kennels weekly. It was no shock to have around forty children participate in and watch weekend youth races hosted by the community. Of the children participating in the program, fifteen were male and fifteen were female. Up to four times per week, pre-school/elementary, middle school, and high school groups took turns visiting the kennels and learning through hands on activities and storytelling. They also had the opportunity to help on weekends at any of the three local kennels. For the ninety minute long classes in the dog yard, I would handle dogs and make sure that the kids were staying on task. The local mushers, teachers, participating parents, and myself all act as positive role models for the children. Local youth now know to perform many tasks associated with the care, training, and racing of sprint sled dogs.

The children who have been a part of the youth and sled dog program have also learned how to handle and care for themselves. They have learned how to eat well and care for their body, dress warm, stay in good physical shape, maintain a good attitude for themselves and their dogs, control their emotions, think ahead, manage time, be responsible, and make a commitment in order to care for and train dogs. [borrowed from “20 things that working with sled dogs can teach youth” by George Attla on July 4, 2012]

Caring for dogs requires much work, and it is a job that you have to love in order to do because dogs can sense your feelings and mood. A winning dog team is a happy dog team, and in order to have a happy dog team, a person has to maintain a good attitude each time they step in the dog yard.

Expected Results
I hope to give a charge to Alaska Native youth’s cultural activity and awareness by participating with them in working with sled dogs (The main source of transportation for Alaska Natives before the snowmobiles were introduced.). So far, there has been roughly sixty students participating in the youth and sled dog program who, I believe, will feel pride in who they are and where they come from just as I have when working with dogs and the Alaska Native elders. There is a feeling that emerges when running dogs that makes a person feel free and natural in a way that presents a sense of what life was like before the mid-twentieth century. Life was tough in the era before rifles, snowmobiles, running water, and electricity so it seems that stories told of those hard times by the elders can inspire youth nowadays to take advantage of the opportunities set forth in front of them and also take pride in who they are and the tough people they come from.

Dog mushing requires a lot of hard work, dedication, sacrifice, critical thinking, teamwork, communication skills (dealing with the media), and plain old toughness in order to keep your composure in high pressure situations and to be happy to care for over thirty animals for months at a time. I feel that Alaska Native youth today can benefit from working and being around sled dogs because there are all different types of dogs that need to be managed and treated in a dog team. The children and I gained critical thinking and preparation skills, while keeping our emotions under control when managing shy, hyper, lazy, sensitive, and hard-working dogs into one smooth-operating team. Dogs in general are very accepting towards humans of all shapes, ages, color, and sizes, because they do not judge people and in this manner they can create a bond of love and friendship with the children in the youth sled dog program. I expect an increase in cultural awareness in Alaska Native youth and also an increase in
communal activity resulting from my participation in the Frank Attla Youth Sled Dog Care-Mushing Program.

Expected Outcomes

I anticipate that the community will benefit with increased communal activity because during the dog races, there are people of all ages participating and making the race become a success. During dog races, there are the youth racing, the adults grooming the trails, adults officiating the race, and there are the Elders cheering for their grandchildren. With an increase in communal activity comes an increase in community bonding and a commitment to teamwork.

Results and Outcomes

The love of dog mushing has spread throughout the community of Huslia, Alaska and beyond. The Frank Attla Youth and Sled Dog Care-Mushing Program, this URSA 388 undergraduate research course, and the Iditarod sled dog race using Huslia as a halfway checkpoint this year have all contributed to the comeback of sled dog mushing in an Alaskan village, which is giving youth and adults an activity to work on and look forward to in their lives.

Families are now becoming interested in sled dogs for not only themselves but for their children and grandchildren. They not only want to participate in activities that their ancestors have done before them but they also see it as a way to help their children/grandchildren grow into adulthood. There is one grandfather who is buying a pregnant bitch from an Iditarod musher so he can raise the pups with his grandchildren in hopes of decreasing the amount of time they spend playing video games.

It is apparent that villages all throughout the interior of Alaska are also becoming interested in starting a dog mushing program for their community. Dog mushing brings great
pride to rural Alaskan communities and with pride comes confidence, which will hopefully lead to success in other areas of life.

Through the youth and sled dog program, Alaskan Elders also experienced a boost of joy and excitement in their lives, because their future representatives are not only carrying on the dog mushing tradition but the Elders also helped train today’s new breed of sprint sled dogs! I gained so many great friends throughout the mushing community and also spent time and got to know my grandparents, Alfred Sr. and Helen Attla. Dog mushing has created a bridge between the youth and the Elders in rural Alaska and has created hopes for a more loving and brighter future.

Reflection

Spending my fall and spring with George Attla, his partner Kathy Turco, my family, the dogs, the community of Huslia, the filmmakers, and everyone who made the race season possible was one of the single best experiences of my life. I am thankful that I was blessed with the opportunity to spend a race season under the training of George while also representing my hometown.

On behalf of the Frank Attla Youth and Sled Dog Care-Mushing Program, I would like to thank Annamaet Dog Food, Ruby Marine, Wright’s Air Service, the Alaska Dog Mushers Association, Huslia Dog Mushers Association, and over fifty private donors for their support. I would also like to thank Patty and Glenn Imus (Fairbanks, AK), Chuck and Tracey Schaeffer (Willow, AK), Roni Noonan-Agre (Tok, AK), and Leonard Sanford (Tanacross, AK) for giving myself, my handlers, coaches, and dogs a place to stay during the race season. I am thankful for Floyd Vent Sr. who let me use three of his top dogs in the 2015 GCI North American. Another shoutout goes to mushers who have helped groom and provide training trails such as Marvin
Kokrine, Bill Kornmueller, Wesley Henry, Floyd Vent Sr., Leonard Sanford, and Mary Woods. To my world-class handlers, filmmaker friends, Catharine, Melissa, and Andrew, and my coaches, the Late George Attla Jr., and also Alfred Sr. and Helen Attla, my dad, Fred Lee Bifelt, and fans from the mushing world, I thank you for the great times that you shared with me and all the lessons that you taught me.

Grandpa George passed away in mid-February but with all the stories, knowledge, and inspiration that he has spread throughout the world, I can only feel blessed to have known him and spent time with him. He has truly touched my life in a positive way, and I look at his life as a model of success. Spending time with the ‘champ’ made me feel confident in my abilities for the simple reason that I witnessed the late George go about his business at one hundred and ten percent in all aspects of his life. For George to be passionate and committed to a sport, to be an Alaska Native world champion from Huslia, and also to be my close relative, inspired me to chase my dreams and believe in myself. His mind seemed to always be working and wrapping around problems in search of solutions. He had a powerful imagination to create different scenarios that could potentially hinder the path to success - and then to resolve them. I always wanted to learn how his mind worked and how he always figured out a way to win. What I think was a huge contributor to his success was his open-mindedness and curiosity to learn and try new tactics. It was extremely difficult for me to be in his presence and tell myself that I could not achieve a goal… I mean, here was the greatest dog man who had ever lived, a guy who overcame so many obstacles through the years that it was downright ridiculous to tell him I could not succeed. He was a true champion and a bona fide legend.

“Heroes get remembered, but legends never die.” - Babe Ruth
References of Cultural Importance of Sled Dogs


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http://jukebox.uaf.edu/site7/akmushing links to many interviews on
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