

Mary Shields was interviewed on May 30, 2024 by William Schneider at her home in Fairbanks, Alaska. Karen Brewster assisted by recording the interview and periodically asking follow-up questions. The purpose of this interview was to collect some of Mary's memories about dog mushing, especially what it was like being out on the trail, in preparation for an exhibit about Interior Alaska Dog Musher's being developed by the Alaska State Museum in Juneau, Alaska. Mary Shields is potentially one of the mushers to be profiled in the exhibit with one of her dog sleds being put on display. Excerpts or quotes from the recording may be used to accompany the display.

Since Mary has been interviewed previously about her overall dog mushing career, this was not repeated in this interview. It was focused particularly on questions like "What does dog mushing mean to you?"; or "What was it like being out on the trail?"

What does dog mushing mean to you?

- The enjoyment of being out in the country
- Having a relationship with my dogs
- Using dogs for transportation and going slowly and enjoying the scenery and the area you're passing through rather than racing

I can't go dog mushing anymore. I miss it a lot. We are so lucky in Alaska to have so much wild country to travel in without fences. If I was to cross Native land during a long trip, I would ask their permission and thank them for sharing their land with us.

There were times where you felt like you were the first person out there, but a lot of the trails had been used for a long time by the Native people.

What was it like being out on the trail?

- If I were out on the trail taking a break, I'd settle the dogs down for a rest, snack the dogs, and have some hot tea myself.
- I learned so much on the trail, about the dogs, mushing, and about myself.
- I always thank the dogs for taking me on these trips.
- The best part of life is when you're out on the trail.
- You have to watch the weather when you're out on the trail. It used to be that March was the best time to travel with warmer temperatures and still enough snow and good trails. But with climate change things have changed. March is now different.

How do you decide where to camp?

- I look for a campsite where there is good firewood easily available close-by.
- I pick a spot close to an old wild fire burn so it's easy to collect wood, because there are a lot of dead or downed trees there.
- I also collect snags along the trail as I'm passing so I have a supply of wood on the sled when I get to camp and don't have to start by going out to collect wood.
- I also look for a spot with good shelter. Where there are enough trees to tie the dogs to them and close to the trail. First thing I do is put out the stake-out chain that I will use to hitch the dogs to while we're at camp.

- Being near a hot springs is another good spot to camp or near where there is overflow with open water so you can easily get water.
- First thing I do is let the dogs off the lines and let them run loose for a little bit. This allows them to loosen their muscles after a long day of mushing and helps them sleep better.
- I have made insulated beds for each of my dogs from old foam camping pads that I have cut up. This makes it more comfortable and warmer for them when sleeping on the snow and in the cold. It's lighter and easier than carrying a lot of straw when you're going on a long trip. I cover each pad in a recycled dog-food poly-bag to help protect it and so the dogs won't chew on the pad.
- Next thing I do is start to cook the dog food. I use a cooker on a fire, and place a 5-gallon bucket with snow in it on top to melt for water. As the snow melts, I keep adding water. When there's enough water, I add fat and dry dog food and soak it for about 20 minutes.
- I give each dog a pan of food. I only carry two pans with me, so I trade off which dog eats when.
- The lead dog is like the boss, so he eats first.
- I make an extra pan's worth of food that I let freeze overnight and then break into pieces in the morning to use as snacks along the trail.
- Dehydration is something you have to really watch out for both with yourself and the dogs. They don't like to eat food that has too much water in it, but I make sure there's some liquid with the dry food and fat combo. For myself, I don't drink coffee, it's too dehydrating, so I drink orange juice mixed with hot water.
- While the dog food is soaking, I put up the tent. I use a 5'X7' Arctic Oven wall tent with a small wood stove inside for heat. The Arctic Oven tent is insulated, so it's more efficient for heating than those old canvas wall tents. It is tied down with shock cords and has a zipper on the door. There is a window in the front door of the tent that is good for looking out to check on the dogs and make sure everything is ok at camp.
- I sewed storage pockets for the inside of the tent out of sunflower fabric which is bright and cheery when you're camping in the dark winter. And I use a cargo net above to lay things out for drying, like dog booties, boot insoles, socks, mitts, and clothing.
- I snowshoe out a flat area in the snow and I keep the dogs away so that they don't put holes in the tent.
- I stack firewood inside the tent.
- I put the sled alongside the tent and use the brush bow as a helper to pull myself up when getting out of the tent.
- The stove is in the middle of the tent so it heats both sides of the tent. It is an old surplus military stove that I adapted so it is the width of the sled and fits in perfectly for hauling. I put the dog food pans and the stake-out chain inside the stove on the sled when we're traveling.

As I'm traveling along the trail and looking for a campsite, I'm thinking along the way what I will do when I get to camp. To think in advance and be prepared so as not to waste time when I get there. I try to keep things in the same place on the sled so I can be efficient and find things quickly, but I'm not always so good at that.

Although I ran in the 1974 Iditarod Dog Sled Race, I like traveling with dogs and camping better than racing. I did it because I was curious to see how my big dogs compared with the smaller racing dogs.

The Iditarod was different when I did it. It was not as fast and racers were not as competitive with each other as they are now. When I was on the Iditarod Trail, someone bought ice cream in Galena and brought it out on the trail and a group of us 5 or 6 mushers really enjoyed having that treat on the trail. I don't think that would happen in the race now. But all of my dogs made it to the finish line. I did drop one dog once when I ran the Yukon Quest.

People ask whether male or female dogs are better for mushing. I prefer males because they do not go into heat.

I have had the best dogs. I'm glad I had the opportunity to travel with them. I would do it all over again if I had the chance.

One of the things I remember about good days out on the trail is traveling slowly through the country. You are going so slowly with these big dogs that you really are able to know where you are. You can see all the hills and valleys to tell where you are. It's fun to know what it's like on the ground in country that you are used to only seeing from up in an airplane. I would like to take visitors out there with me so they can really feel it.

I like to take advantage of existing trails because it's easier for the dogs than having to wade through deep snow and break trail. And a smooth trail is always better than traveling on a bumpy trail.

Sometimes I'd have to get out in front of the dogs to break out the trail with snowshoes if there had been a big snowstorm or a lot of wind that drifted in the trail. You can usually feel the hard pack of the trail underneath so you know where the trail is supposed to be. You get into deep soft snow when you get off the hard pack.

When I was in the Iditarod and leaving Kaltag, there was a blizzard so the trail was covered by new snow. We had to break trail and there was a spot where I could feel that we'd lost the trail because it wasn't hard pack underneath anymore. Eventually, we found our way back to the main trail by feeling the hard-pack underneath. I mushed back from Nome instead of flying my dogs home, so when I was coming back on this same section of trail, the dogs wanted to go on the detour we'd gone on instead of following the existing main Iditarod trail. It's amazing what the dogs remember.

I use what is called a gee or haw pole sticking out the front of the sled to steer it when I'm snowshoeing. This is better than trying to steer by holding onto the brush bow in the front of the sled.

I feel bad that there are fewer dog mushers and more snowmachiners out there on the trails. The quiet of mushing is wonderful. You just hear the sounds of the dogs panting and jingle of their collars and harnesses. You also see more wildlife because you are moving along quietly.

I sing songs to my dog when I'm traveling along the trail. I make up songs with their names based on old tunes. The dog recognizes it when I say its name. One example, is based on the Beatles' song "Norwegian Wood." ("I had a dog and its name was Blue." Mary sings some of it to show what one of her songs might be like.)

This particular sled (the one being considered for the exhibit) is the one that I took to Russia with me when I dog sledged from Alaska. The toboggan type bottom helps keep the sled up higher and above snow rather than sinking in when it's deeper snow.

One of the things I like about dogs is that they always get me back. I trust them. They are more tuned into things than we humans are.

How do I know where I am when I'm out on the trail?

- I have a good sense of direction.
- I observe the shadows and the sun to keep track of what direction we're traveling.
- I use a compass, and make sure I know how to properly use it accounting for the declination.
- I have maps.
- I trust the compass and the dogs.
- The dogs can feel the trail even when I can't or I can't see it.
- Good lead dogs who can feel the trail are worth their weight in gold.
- If I make a mistake, the dogs know.
- If I think I might be lost and need to backtrack, I will start to cut rations for the dogs and myself to make sure we have enough food for a longer trip than we thought.
- Particularly difficult spots can be by villages where there a lot of interconnecting local trails used by the people in the village for trapping, hunting, collecting firewood, or traveling between communities.
- When I was traveling to Kotzebue one time, I followed a woodcutting trail that went from Allakaket, Hughes and Huslia that snowmachiners had broken out.
- Along that trail, I was told about a spot called "Old Women Creek," where I was only supposed to speak in a whisper to protect against spirits
- I'd also get help from people in the villages, about trails and where to go, but also just in general. One time when I got to Shungnak, I ended up camping on the runway and later an Inupiaq woman came by and invited me to her house.
- One time when traveling with Bill Schneider we were out on the Minto Flats, which can be notoriously difficult to navigate because it is flat with a lot of lakes and it can all look the same to those who don't know the area and the trails. We were at a fork in the trail, and Bill and I disagreed on which way to go. We ended up going the wrong way. I looked around and was able to figure out where we were and where we needed to be and found a way to cut over that got us back to the main trail we needed to be on. This impressed Bill. I guess it was because of my good sense of direction and paying attention to the landmarks and hills around us, etc. Maybe we were never really lost?
- I always seemed to find my way.

- Also, on that trip in the Minto Flats, we had arranged for supplies to be delivered to the village of New Minto, so we were able to ask for directions there as well.
- We sometimes used other people's cabins along the trail if we needed the shelter instead of camping. But it is important to respect other people's property and these cabins and not use up their supplies. Or replenish anything that you use, like firewood or food.
- It's fun to travel up and over the hills and see the country spreading out in front of you from up high.

I wrote a book "Sled Dog Trails" about my mushing adventures, and I sometimes wrote articles for Alaska Magazine.

Gear and packing?

- I would pack the sled with the light stuff in front and the heavy stuff towards the back.
- If I was going on a longer trip, I would send out supplies in advance to post offices in villages. This would include things like dog food, fat, frozen fish, dog booties.
- I learned to use two synthetic sleeping bags, one inside the other, because it was warmer than down and you didn't have to worry about getting wet which can be a problem with down. A pocket of air would form between the two bags that would add extra warmth.
- After so many years of doing this, there were things I learned. I learned that if there were problems, it was usually because of me, not the dogs.
- You have to think ahead to the future and the trail ahead and be prepared.
- You prepare for the worst and hope it doesn't happen.
- I would prepare for possible moose encounters by trying to avoid them by singing and yodeling to make noise to scare them away.
- I learned to sit on my mittens when I stopped for a lunch break so they'd be warm when I put my cold hands back in them.
- I would prepare food in advance to save prep time on the trail, like I would cut the cheese in chunks at home. I would make burgers in advance and freeze them, so I'd only have to heat them up at camp instead of actually having to cook them.
- I used bagels as candle holders in the tent.
- Using a headlamp inside the tent makes better light, but I liked the light from candles better. It was softer. You just have to be extra careful about fire.
- You can also use candle lanterns, but I never seemed to be very good with those.
- I would use an ice hook to stop the sled instead of just the brake.

Being out on the trail at night?

- There were dangers of traveling out on the trail at night. Like you could poke your eye out with branches sticking out across the trail, or you could run into a moose that you didn't see.
- Seeing all the stars of the night sky or seeing the aurora were the joys of being out on the trail at night and camping out.
- It really was awe inspiring and brought me a lot of joy. It made you feel small compared to the rest of the universe.

Through dog mushing, I learned a lot about the wild country of Alaska, about the dogs, and about myself. I learned that if there were problems, it was because of me, not the dogs.

One thing that dog mushing taught me was that nothing you do is valuable unless you put effort into it.