

“LEGENDS OF ASHCROFT”

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MY EVOLUTION INTO MUSHING

Ask a room full of people if they read Jack London’s “Call of the Wild” and almost every hand will shoot up. Ask a Baby Boomer if they watched “Sargent Preston and Yukon King” in the 1950’s and you get enthusiastic affirmation.

These two social phenomenons were deep within me when we moved back to Colorado in 2006. Imagine my joy to discover sled dog races in my new backyard outside of Mancos, Colorado! The races attracted world-class mushers including past acquaintances, Rick and Kate St. Onge, who also wished to relocate to Mancos. Rick and Kate stayed with us while searching for land. As a joke to tease them, I taught my Jack Russell Terrier, Mickey, to leap out ahead at the Mush command.

Mickey did not think it was a joke. He never knew he was 12” tall, and became my first “lead dog” ahead of a rescued Rottweiler and her daughter, Annie, and a little kick sled. The Mancos Mush set up a one-mile race just so I would bring Mickey and his reluctant teammates out. He was a hit, leaping in the harness like the huskies, as I ran behind the sled trying to keep up with him. His joy was contagious and I was hooked. That was 2007.

Rick and Kate eventually gave me a real sled dog. Sasha came from a litter of two of their best Alaskan Husky racers. A year later, Sasha was joined by her sister, Rosemary, and two years later by her brother, Chad. I got a sprint sled and did a few 4-mile races. The beauty of these dogs in motion inspired a sculpture, “Born to Run” and my first painting of sled dogs, “Giving Chase.”

In 2014, Roger and I flew to Two Rivers, Alaska and met historian/musher Thom Swan and were introduced to his historic line of freight dogs. “Swanny” dressed in a Hudson’s Bay capote from the late 1800’s and took us onto the surrounding trails. Two paintings, “March on the Mail Trail” and “Questioning the Delay” depicts the historic Hedlund Husky. The following year, Swanny sent me a 4-month old Hedland Husky puppy to ad to my team.

SLED DOGS AND ART

The Sled Dog is to Snow, what the Horse is to the Plains.

Throughout this time, I was continually reading articles and books about sled dogs. It was enlightening to learn that sled dogs and their drivers have played major roles in the history of America for more than 12,000 years from the Arctic to as far South as the San Juan Mountains of Colorado.

The Pony Express had lasted only nineteen months and yet it is familiar to most people. Sled dogs first pulled mail in 1778 near Lake Superior and the last mail was delivered in 1963 – almost 200 years later. I believe that the farthest South mail was delivered by dog team was in my own backyard – the San Juan Mountains, of Southwestern Colorado. This remarkable means of mail delivery over two centuries is largely unknown.

(Otto Mears was known as the Pathfinder of the San Juan Mountains. He built the Rio Grand Southern Railroad through the nearly inaccessible mountain range in the late 1800’s. At one point he had the mail delivery contract between Lake City, Colorado and Ouray, Colorado. Stuart Daniels, formerly of the Hudson Bay Company, suggested using sled dogs for the mail delivery. One story tells of Mears

accompanying the dog team. When one dog became too tired to continue, he put him on the sled and took to the harness himself to help get the mail through.

In the 1880's, Frank Schneider, used four Newfoundland Dogs to deliver mail between Silverton, Colorado and Animas City, Colorado. The dogs were used to haul water in Silverton in the summer.)

Sled Dogs rarely appeared in Western Art. It became my objective is to raise awareness of these remarkable dogs and their drivers through my art.

CREATING "LEGENDS OF ASHCROFT"

Following the trail of history naturally led to Aspen, Colorado, Stuart Mace's Toklat Huskies and the knowledge that Sargent Preston of the Yukon was actually filmed in Colorado!

Fast forward to today and I am proud to show my art with Ann Korogolos in Basalt, Colorado. Through Ann, I met Lynne Mace, daughter of Stuart Mace and the girl who grew up with Yukon King. Lynne has been more than generous in sharing her family history by allowing me to read a family biography, as well as giving me full access to the photography taken in the 1950's.

Lynne also shared an incredible document, "The Oral History of Camp Remini" by Stuart Mace. Lt. Mace trained the Search and Rescue Sled Dog Teams during World War II – first at Camp Hale in Colorado, then at Camp Remini in Helena, Montana, and finally at Fort Robinson, Nebraska.

This is another huge chapter of sled dog history that should be known, for Lt. Mace trained dogs so they could be parachuted into airplane crash sites throughout the Alaskan corridor as well as the North Atlantic corridor. He had as many as 3,000 dogs in Camp Remini. At one point, there were 70 planes that had gone down along the Alaskan corridor where the dogs, surgeons, communications person, and dog driver were parachuted in hopes of saving lives.

At the end of World War II, Stuart Mace purchased some of the dogs, eventually moving them and his family to Ashcroft, Colorado. For 27 years, he would hook up 13 dogs and haul visitors into the Colorado Mountains, always stressing the importance of wilderness.

To celebrate the 70th anniversary of Toklat, I placed Stuart Mace in the valley beyond the Toklat Wilderness Lodge. It was here that he introduced so many to the joy of wilderness over 27 years. I chose to portray him when he was older with white hair and distinctive white brows. He mentions in his Oral History that he always wore an orange scarf made from the parachutes that were used to drop the dogs. Many of the dogs shown in the painting are actual dogs taken from historic photos. Others were augmented from my own collection of historical freight dogs. It was dogs very much like my own Hardy that Lt. Mace brought back to Camp Remini from the interior of Alaska. The harness design with a fleece padded chest area was adapted from a "Siwatch" harness designed for the army.

Creating "Legends of Ashcroft" became a labor of love. I realize that it was Stuart Mace as well as John Denver who helped shape my own love of the wilderness. It was Sargent Preston and Yukon King that led me, as a full-grown adult no less, to hook up a Jack Russell Terrier to a kick sled. All of these trails have converged to find me on the runners of a dog sled at the age of 72 and at the easel daily to share the primal magic of SLED DOGS.