

George Beck Collection, UAF

# Biederman Camp and Mail Carriers on the Yukon River



Above: Biederman camp, ca. 1930. Left: Cargo sled built in 1922 and used by Ed Biederman on his 160-mile route between Circle and Eagle, Alaska. Donated to the National Postal Museum in Washington, D.C.

Like so many others, Adolph “Ed” Biederman came to the Yukon River searching for a fortune in placer gold—but he ended up instead as one of Alaska’s most celebrated dog sled mail carriers. Born in Bohemia in 1870, Biederman came to the United States at the age of thirteen and ended up in San Francisco when news broke of the 1900 Nome gold strike. Arriving too late for paying claims, he got a job with the Northern Commercial Company and became a contract mail carrier between Tanana and Rampart on the Yukon River. Eventually he received the route between the towns of Eagle and Circle and by 1918 he built a cabin roughly halfway between the two towns (and across from the mouth of the Kandik River). He also met and married Bella Roderick, an Athabascan woman who was the granddaughter of the famous Yukon Flats chief Shahnyaati.

## The long haul

In those days, delivering the mail on the Yukon River required a reliable dog team and true grit. The 160-mile route took six days one way and, after a rest day, six days back. Biederman did this thirteen times each winter, covering 4000 miles of rough trail. He would start out from Eagle with a load of mail, often exceeding 500 pounds, and hope that river ice and snow conditions were favorable. Traveling northwest, sometimes on the river and sometimes on overland trails, he followed a string of roadhouses located at intervals along the way. Because he planned on a warm meal and a roof over his head, Biederman never carried bedding or tents or even much food. “My dad, he never believed in stopping to have no tea,” recalled his son, Charlie Biederman.

Ed and Bella had five children and two of their sons, Charlie and Horace, helped with the family business and learned the route. In the summer mail was delivered by passing steamboats, and the routine at the Biederman camp changed. The family boarded as many

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*The things Biederman has been through would fill a book. I suppose no man knows more about sled dogs, or winter weather, or making his way alone in wild country.*

—Ernie Pyle, 1937  
*Washington Daily News*

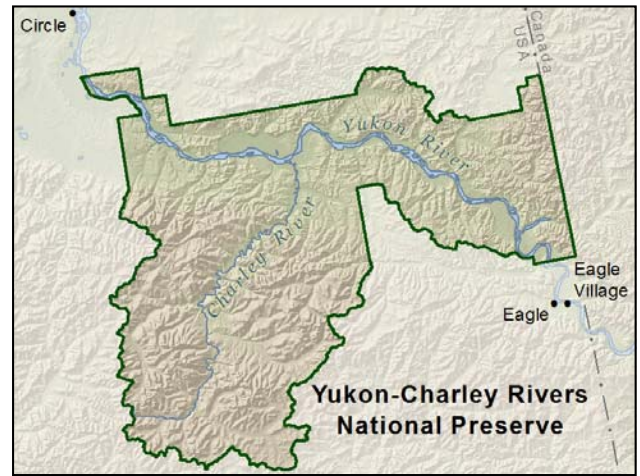
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as sixty dogs for miners and trappers who did not want to care for sled dogs in the off-season. Feeding their own team and the boarders required a great deal of salmon, and the Biedermans were known for their twin fish wheels and salmon drying operation, where they processed nearly three tons of fish annually.

In 1925 tragedy struck. When Biederman's dog team was en route to Eagle at the start of the mail delivery season, the barge they were on hit a rock and the entire team drowned. Without his seasoned dogs, Biederman had to borrow a team from Eagle. He then accidentally drove this unfamiliar team through a creek covered in water trapped on top of the ice. With his moccasins soaked through, he tried to reach the next roadhouse but before long his feet began to freeze. His frostbitten toes and parts of each foot had to be amputated. Even so, Biederman was back to work the next winter with triple layer socks and rabbit fur stuffed in the empty toes of his footwear. When a reporter for the *Washington Daily News* stopped by the camp, he described Biederman as "a footless dog-team postman who's tough as nails."

### End of an era

Horace Biederman later recalled how at the age of fifteen he was taken out of school to substitute for his father, and for a time father and son ran the trail together, particularly early in the season when the river ice was not yet solid. Horace later shared the route with his brother Charlie until in 1938 when the Biedermans lost the mail contract permanently to airplane pilots. The aviation age had arrived in remote corners of Alaska, and it was the end of an era for dog-team mail carriers and freight haulers. Ed Biederman continued to maintain the camp until 1945 when he died and his family moved permanently to Eagle. Today the Biederman Camp is on a private inholding inside Yukon-Charley Rivers National Preserve, and site still reminds visitors of the region's tradition of self-reliance and the many hard miles of dog driving by mail carriers on the Yukon River ice.



View of Yukon River at Biederman Camp, 2010.

### For more information

Chris Allan, Historian  
 Yukon-Charley Rivers National Preserve  
[chris\\_allan@nps.gov](mailto:chris_allan@nps.gov)  
[www.nps.gov/yuch/historyculture](http://www.nps.gov/yuch/historyculture)



Clockwise: Bella and Ed Biederman near the banks of the Yukon River; Charlie Biederman at age 16 with mail sled at Eagle; boarded dogs at the Biederman camp; one of two Biederman fish wheels. Photographs from the 1930s, UAF Archives, George Beck Collection and Eagle Historical Society.

