

## **Jerry Dwyer**

In 1920, Southern California Edison was in the beginning stages of building the Florence Lake portion of the Big Creek Project. The job would take about seven years to complete, with workers toiling year round 24 hours a day underground building tunnels between Huntington Lake and Florence Lake. Obviously, the winter months are the worst time of year in the mountains, and elevations of over 9,000 feet didn't make the job of getting light supplies, medicines, and mail to the workers (who were isolated in camps) any easier. The winter weather with nearly 20 feet of snow on the ground made that task nearly impossible. The primitive roads that existed at the time were completely impassible during winter, as modern snow removal equipment hadn't been invented yet.

Enter Jeremiah (Jerry) Dwyer and his Alaskan Dogsled team. Jerry knew his dogs and his job very well. He rarely spoke of himself, (known as Silent Jerry to the Edison folks) and his background was a complete mystery. But he spoke often about his dogs... Patsy (part Malamute and part Gordon Setter), Dooley (a cross between Malamute and Sheppard), Riley (half wolf and half St Bernard) Barney, Whiskey, and Trim (who were all crosses of Staghound and Airdale), and Babe, the powerful lead dog who was  $\frac{3}{4}$  Wolf.

Once the Edison execs were satisfied that Jerry knew how to handle his dogs and the harsh winter weather, the team became the lifeline to the marooned workers in the mountains. Each day, the team made one-way trips between the Huntington Lake Post Office (Camp 60) and the workers at Camp 61, six miles on the other side of Kaiser Ridge. Jerry and his dogs went up the hill on Monday and came back down again on Tuesday. During the summer, the dogs were kept at Camp 61C, on Kaiser Pass, where they would be more comfortable in the hotter weather.

The dogs were cared for by Jerry as if they were his children. He fed them fresh salmon, when he could get it, which the dogs loved. For the winter, he made special leather booties for the dog's paws, so that the snow wouldn't ball up on their feet. The dogs didn't like the booties and they would jump around when he put the booties on them.

Markers were attached to trees every 100 feet at about 15 feet above the ground, so that in the deep snow Jerry would know where the road was located. At one point, one of the workers became homesick and decided to go home to see his family in Fresno for Christmas. Against all advice, he set out for home, but not before three of his co-workers could go with him. They reached Camp 61C on Kaiser Ridge, where shelter was available for anyone who might need it during storms. They stayed for a short time, but then continued their trek.

The snow was waist deep. They hadn't gone far when the homesick man grew exhausted. His companions set him at the base of a Juniper tree, where he would have some shelter, and they returned to Camp for Jerry and the dogs to take the man down the hill. But, by the time Jerry arrived, the man was dead.

Babe, Jerry's fabulous lead dog, died of heart failure, in 1922 on the hill, while in harness. She died in Jerry's arms, and he deeply grieved her passing. He buried Babe in a grave on Kaiser Pass, near the road they often travelled together. For several years, when the flowers were blooming in the mountains, Jerry would place bouquets at Babe's grave.

At first, Babe's grave was just a square of stones and a hemlock cross, leading some visitors to wonder if that wasn't the grave of an old miner. But later, Whiskey and Trim would also meet their maker on the hill, and Jerry buried them near

their friend, Babe. Upon Babe's passing, Patsy took over for a short time as lead dog. But ultimately Riley, Babe's son, would follow in Babe's footsteps as lead dog. Riley took no quarter from the other dogs, often biting their ears when they misbehaved.

As his dogs died off. Jerry would recruit dogs from the camps of Cascada, or Big Creek as it is now called, to fill out his team. In fact, a second dog team was in action for a time, made completely of dogs from the Cascada and Huntington Lake area. Jerry dogs couldn't care less when they passed the other team on their daily jaunts, but the second team would go wild barking and chomping to get at Jerry's team. Jerry would just continue onward with his typical "mush, mush, mush." I think he just wanted some breakfast.

At the conclusion of that portion of the project in 1927, Jerry and his team left the Sierras. For a time, the Redinger family, who had befriended Jerry, would receive post cards from various places, sent by Jerry. Never was a return address included, and his last post card came from Seattle Washington. Jerry remained a mystery, just as he had lived.

Or did he? An article in the Hartford Connecticut Hartford Daily Courant, dated Sunday August 10, 1924 explains a bit of Jerry's earlier life. Around 1900, Jerry left his home of Manchester, Connecticut for Alaska and the Klondike Gold Rush, one of a party of fourteen Connecticut men that went to Alaska. In time, they all gave up and eventually went home, but not Jerry.

Jerry found success with his gold prospecting, but just enough to lead him from place to place and never really make a fortune. He loved Alaska, he loved the outdoors, and he loved his solitude. His real fortune was in his caring for others. There are many stories of Jerry's unselfish steadfastness regarding his friends. At one point, one of his friends in Alaska was very sick, so Jerry went out in horrible

blizzard conditions to bring back medicine. He was known for fighting the fierce cold and wind, even when the Native Alaskans couldn't be paid to go out. When another friend broke his leg, Jerry dragged the man on a sled to the nearest village to get proper care.

Jerry would work 36 hours straight mining his claim, then set out for new mining claims. All over the Alaskan coast, Jerry's mining claims were strewn along every river, and there is not one worthwhile mining area that he did not venture into. When there would be talk of a gold strike in an area where Jerry had already been, he would frequently retrace his steps and resume work on his old claims.

Jerry was 55 years old in 1924. He was described as "a strong man in middle life, closely knit and alert. He treads with the step of a mountaineer, and is capable of incredible endurance." At age 55, he was still capable of running 100 yards in 11 seconds...which, for 1924, is not bad.