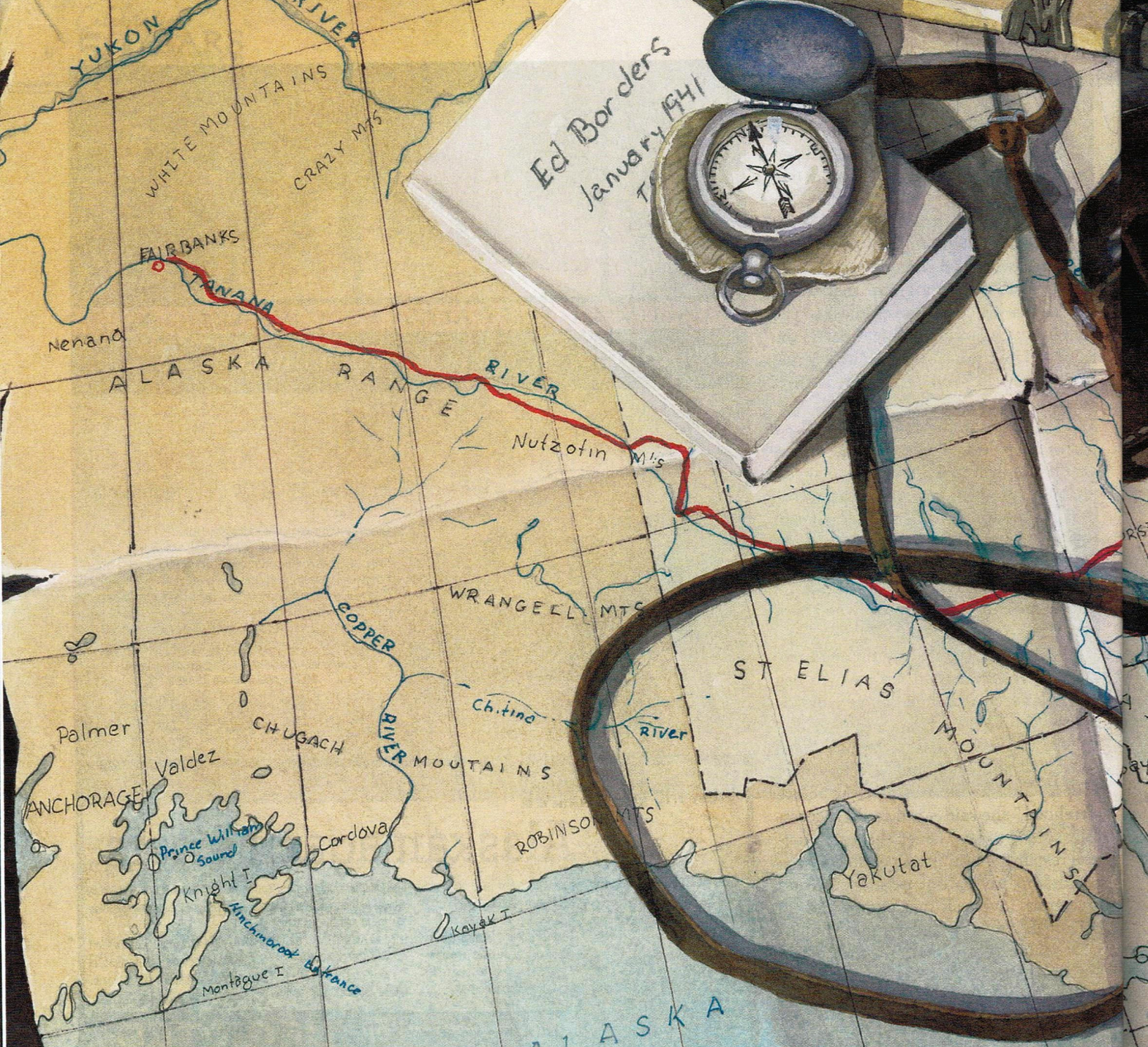

Pioneer of the Alaska Highway

Ed Borders' lonely trek in the winter of 1941 proved that a road was possible


YUKON
BRITISH COLUMBIA
Liard River
Teslin Lake
Atlin Lake
STIKINE RANGES
SKEEL MOUNTAINS
KLAPPAN RANGE
SPECTRUM MTS
Nass River
Taylor R
Bell Irving R
Skeena R
CANADA
UNITED STATES
Stikine R
Stewart
Hazelton
Smithers
Nass River
Skeena River
60°
58°
56°
54°
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Story by Bryr Ludington • Illustrations by Bob White

Elden Borders hoisted his 50-pound pack into the back of Roy Lund's mail truck at the edge of Fairbanks one January morning in 1941. He'd lashed his skis to the pack filled with maps, an eider-down sleep sack, cooking gear, his journal, surveying equipment, a .22 revolver, cans of beans and bacon fat, and a 16-millimeter motion-picture camera. It was nearly 30 below with a cutting wind, and the *Fairbanks Daily News-Miner* photographer had already left, but a tall, graying man with a thick, frosted mustache waved and waited until Lund's truck disappeared into the ice fog before he retreated to the protection of his own idling vehicle.

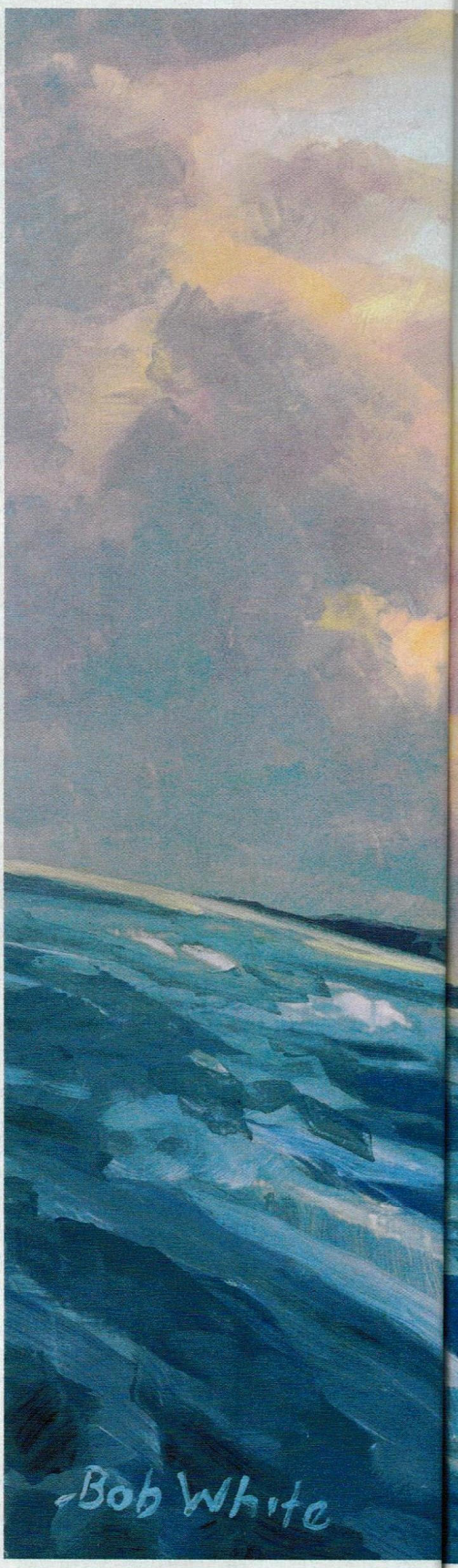
In Borders' hands was one map that was more important than the others, the one that the mustached man, Donald MacDonald, had come all the way out to Ladd Field to deliver. On the map was a long, dotted line that MacDonald had traced a hundred times since the 1920s when, as a young, ambitious highway engineer, he realized that the vast, northern territory where he lived would be stuck in an indefinite adolescence unless someone built a permanent route from the northwestern states. He'd imagined a highway, a massive feat of engineering linking the riches and possibilities of Alaska with the support and supplies the state's emerging infrastructure would need to grow. For decades MacDonald campaigned for the construction of this international highway. While his ideas were met with ridicule and skepticism, he maintained that, in theory, it was possible.

MacDonald believed the road could be built, but no one had actually traveled the length of his dotted line—all 1,500 or so miles of it from Fairbanks to Hazelton, British Columbia—to see if there really was a continuous, passable route for a highway across the vast, unmapped distance. Ed Borders was perfect: young, strong and arrogant enough to make the trip, by ski and on foot, in the winter when he could measure snow depths and storm conditions. He was also handsome, charming and articulate, with black hair and a disarming grin, which, assuming he survived the trip, would make him an excellent spokesman for MacDonald's campaign.

In the rumbling cab of Roy Lund's mail truck, Borders removed his thick mittens and unfolded the map, peering at it through clouds of breath. It was a fastidiously traced copy of the most recent print, including all of the information MacDonald and his new International Highway Commission had compiled about the route. Some stretches were filled with details on topography, locations of settlements and known trails, but long segments of the dotted line were surrounded by blank space, except for the occasional scrawling of a river or a tiny triangle representing a mountain peak. Borders refolded the map, closed his eyes and ran through a mental inventory of his gear, hoping he hadn't forgotten anything, worrying that he'd never be able to carry everything he'd actually need.

His equipment had been tested, he was confident of that. He'd taken the last 10 months off from study at the University of Alaska to train in the foothills of Mount McKinley, skiing, camping and trying to imagine every survival situation he might encounter on his expedition. After trying multiple pairs of skis, he chose a thin set made of waxed ash. His parka was made of silk and down with a wolverine ruff, and weighed nearly as much as his 7-pound sleeping bag. He'd learned to condense the amount of food he needed to pack by making pinole, a high-calorie mixture of two parts ground cornmeal, one part sugar and one part dried currants. He also brought powdered gelatin to dissolve in his tea for extra protein. Heating a kettleful of snow over even a small fire would give him an energy boost against the cold.

As Borders thought ahead to those tiny fires in the frozen wilderness, the bouncing truck came to a stop, and he realized what he'd forgotten: camphor gum, the priceless fire-starter and possibly his most important tool against starvation and hypothermia. He admitted his slip-up to Lund, who agreed to send him the camphor by plane, but told him he wouldn't turn back for Fairbanks until he'd driven to the end of his delivery route at Big Delta. This meant Borders would have to do without until he reached Tanana Crossing, a week's travel down the trail.



Before they left Richardson, Borders stopped into the Army recruiter's office and signed up for Selective Service—he'd been irked by a rumor around Fairbanks that this expedition was just an elaborate

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means of avoiding the draft. Inside, the walls of the office were plastered with recruitment posters and newspaper headlines: *Mussolini Declares War! Churchill Warns Nazi Invasion is Near!*

It wasn't a coincidence that MacDonald's international highway idea had only recently received serious attention. President Roosevelt was nervous. Things were heating up, both in Europe and the Pacific, and the Aleutians were beginning to look like an open back door that the Japanese might stride right through. Roosevelt established MacDonald's International Highway Commission to evaluate a number of possible supply routes from the Interior to fortify a vulnerability in the nation's defense. The commission settled on MacDonald's route, and the aging engineer made the trip to Washington, a visit he had been requesting for decades, to present the commission's findings. But without more details on the landscape, weather

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conditions and other potential obstacles, the government refused to fund the project, sending MacDonald back to Alaska empty-handed and discouraged. When he got home, a letter was waiting for him with good news: a young mining student named Ed Borders was offering to scout the trail to collect the information missing from MacDonald's map.

As far as Borders was concerned, he'd been headed north since he was a boy, and had been preparing, in a way, for this expedition ever since. He read inexhaustibly about Alaska, the pioneers and Eskimos. He spent every minute he could in the woods, often at the expense of his studies. At 21, three years before he set out on MacDonald's trail, Borders dropped out of school, said goodbye to his mother in Hot Springs, Mont., and hitchhiked to Seattle where he used the last of his money to buy passage on a steamer to Seward. With no plan, no friends and no money, he disembarked into the drizzle of early May. He found no work, food or shelter so he continued north. When a vigilant railroad bull ejected him from a freight car headed for Anchorage, he walked the last 100 miles of track to the bustling city. Over the next year he worked as a laborer in the freight yards, as a spike driver, a prizefighter and a timber packer in a coal mine before a premature detonation in a deep shaft left him with a fractured skull and a severe concussion. Unable to work, Borders enrolled in the mining program at the University of Alaska in Fairbanks. His first year, clouded by the head injury, was spent wondering where he belonged, where he was headed. He sent melancholy postcards to his mother, asking her to send nothing but love, because that was all he could absorb at the time. On winter evenings, he listened to voices crackling over the radio from isolated communities across the state, arguing heatedly about the political stalemate that had halted the highway project. A space for someone was being cleared, a need for someone had been established, and Borders began to wonder if they were all waiting for him.

In Big Delta, he helped Lund load mail and supplies into the cable car across the Tanana River. Lund released the brake and together they plunged toward the icy water to the bottom of the cable sag, then muscled their way back up to the south platform. That afternoon, Lund turned back for Fairbanks and Borders was on his own at the end of the road, 91 miles from the dorms at the University of Alaska and 1,500 miles from his destination.

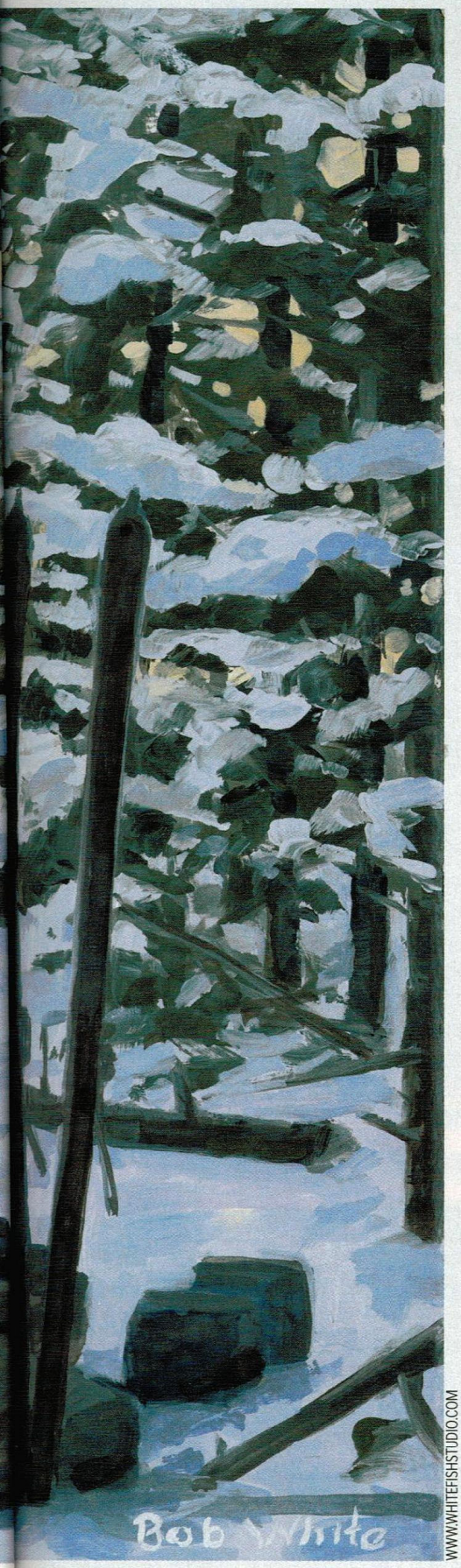
Although Borders knew that for most of the trip he'd be traveling under his own power, he planned to hitch a ride with any dog musher willing to haul him up a trap line or two. In Big Delta, three Native trappers, Alec Joe, and Paul and Art Healy, agreed to give him a ride. Borders set up the movie camera and filmed the teams racing off into the woods. Then he shoved the camera back into his pack and hurried to catch up.

It took three days to reach the end of the trap line near Healy Village. At the huddle of cabins that made up the Healy Trading Post, Borders followed one of the trappers inside. While the trapper traded a lynx fur for a sack of sugar, a

pair of pants and a pocket watch, Borders heard the sound of an approaching propeller. He ran outside and watched as a small plane landed on the frozen river behind the trading post. When the mail was unloaded, Borders was surprised to be handed a parcel with his name on it. He pressed it to his nose and inhaled the unmistakable scent of camphor gum.

Filling in the Map

He set out alone the next morning, making good time while the daylight was strong but stopping early to make his first camp before sunset. A stand of spruce made a natural shelter, the camphor gum lit immediately into a blazing fire and, after a good meal of tea and pinole, Borders dozed as big, drowsy snowflakes floated down, sizzling in the dancing flames.



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As the days of travel stretched on, news of his expedition spread both ahead and behind him. Men came out to meet him, and families offered him shelter in exchange for news of the places he'd passed through. He took letters and packages for delivery to relatives farther down the trail. He stopped at radio outposts to send messages back to Fairbanks and articles ran weekly in the *Daily News-Miner* with updates of his progress. But after he crossed the logged swath of land that marked the border between Alaska and Canada's Yukon Territory, distances between settlements and friendly faces lengthened and there were many weeks of nothing but silence and snow.

Deep in this lonely expanse, Borders lost his way. On the map, he was at a point where MacDonald's dotted line crossed a wide area of blank paper and he had no landmarks to look for. He had a rough compass bearing, but the woods were dense, the landscape undulated with waist-high hillocks. He felt constantly nudged off course. At night, he burrowed into snow banks or huddled under overturned tree roots, but he slept little. The hills were filled with the howling of wolves, echoing such that they seemed always to surround him in the night. He kept his .22 nearby and stoked the fire as high as he dared, watching for rogue embers, and tried to boost his confidence.

One morning, after hours of struggling through unbroken snow pack with snowshoes damaged by the uneven terrain, Borders detected a faint depression in the snow. At first he told himself that it was only a meandering game trail, traced by moose and wolves through the woods. But after a while he saw ax marks on tree trunks and knew that a long-unused trail lay beneath the drifts. He changed back into his skis and picked up speed, hoping the trail would lead him to company and shelter.

The trail eventually flattened into snowshoe tracks and began a winding descent. Borders followed the switchbacks easily, happy to be making such good time. He loved to ski, and his slow, walking progress over the last weeks had been tedious. Flying down the mountain, his heavy pack balanced precariously over his darting skis, he felt elated and powerful. But as he cut around a steep hairpin turn, something dark moved on the trail in front of him and he tripped and tumbled into a furred and struggling body. The wolf snapped at Borders, tearing at his clothes and biting down into the thick sleeve of his parka. Borders' skis tangled beneath them. The steel jaw trap clamped around the wolf's hind paw held the animal fast, and they wrestled and fought, unable to escape each other. Borders found a heavy stick and struck the wolf, stunning it. He pulled himself up and sank a knee into the wolf's ribcage, leaning into the heaving chest until the injured animal suffocated beneath the pressure. Borders gathered himself and his strewn belongings, made sure the wolf hadn't bitten through the skin, and put on his snowshoes. He was exhausted, bruised and the cold poured in through the tears in his pants and parka. He left the limp body in the snow and continued down the trail.

At the foot of the hill, a tiny village lay silent in the snow. Smoke curled from the chimney of one cabin and a bent old man emerged to greet him. The man introduced himself as Old Sam and invited Borders in without asking his name. Inside the dark, damp cabin, Old Sam encouraged him with a wave to make use of the fire to cook. The old man eased himself down, lifted a pipe and smoked silently. Along the wall, the little eyes of two toddlers peered at Borders as he unpacked his last can of frozen beans and a square of bacon fat. Two women stared at the fire, hair hiding their faces, wheezing through suppressed coughs. A third woman, Old Sam's wife, lay on a pile of blankets with her back to them, her body wracked with spasmed breath. As Borders warmed the can over the flames, a tiny hand reached out and touched the bacon. The boy's mother immediately snatched it back and gave it a slap but he managed to stick the greasy finger in his mouth and continued to suck it while tears rolled down his cheeks.

Borders asked Old Sam about trails beyond the village. He shook his head and said that it had been many years since he'd traveled in that direction except on the frozen river. On the map, Borders found what he thought must be the river Old Sam referred to, but it wandered far from his course.

After Borders mended his clothes and snowshoes with hurried stitches, he packed to leave. At the last minute, he handed the bacon fat and a small satchel of salt to the young mother, and headed outside with Old Sam.

Old Sam led Borders up the valley as far as he could go, pointed to a distant peak below which he thought there had once been a trail and wished Borders good luck before turning back. Borders crossed the frozen river and struggled over a ridge before his skis brought him

Continued on **page 80**

ED BORDERS: *continued from* **page 35**

to an icy cliff of schist.

As the sunlight faded behind him, he looked over the edge into a vast and wide depression in the earth that ran south-southeast into the haze. He stood above the oldest trail on the continent—the massive trough that runs from the Arctic to Mexico and beyond. This was the trail along which Donald MacDonald had drawn his dotted line, the path chosen by travelers for thousands of years. The line ran a protected length between two massive mountain ranges, the Alaska and the Rockies, and then turned south to follow the rolling western foothills of that great central range until it connected with a well-worn route to Washington State.

End of the Road

The International Highway Commission had chosen MacDonald's route, known as "Route A" because of its geographical logic. All other routes ran around or through the Rockies, over difficult and inefficient paths. As Borders could now attest, Route A marked an ideal passageway through a natural corridor to the states. He pulled out the map, marked his location, and knew he was just where he needed to be. He looked down again into a rising fog and imagined a sturdy road running up that valley to Old Sam's cabin, bringing food, medicine and family.

He spent the night on the ridge and woke the next morning with a new idea. He laid his skis in the snow and tied a few heavy sticks across them as a sturdy frame. To the frame, he lashed his pack and fashioned a harness out of the detached shoulder straps. He put on his snowshoes and set out, pulling his new toboggan behind him.

As far as Borders was concerned, he'd been headed north since he was a boy, and had been preparing, in a way, for this expedition ever since. He read inexhaustibly about Alaska, the pioneers and Eskimos. He spent every minute he could in the woods, often at the expense of his studies.

By the end of that day, he began to recognize landmarks that were noted on the map and was reassured that he was indeed back on course. The next week found him back in civilization; he passed through a number of tiny villages. Villagers laughed to see the stocky white man hauling a sled like a dog. Borders just smiled and waved. In Burwash Landing, on the icy shores of Lake Kluane, Borders met a young Native trapper named Babe Dickson. Shy around the pretty young woman, Borders instead admired her dog team. Among her huskies was a giant, 125-pound Mackenzie River husky she called Windy. Not nearly as efficient to feed as the smaller dogs on her team, Windy was an awkward addition to the pack despite his great strength. Borders liked the big dog immediately, with his permanently lowered ears, angled eyebrows, and tendency to growl whenever Borders approached. He imagined traveling the hundreds of miles ahead of him with a partner to share the load and the loneliness and offered Dickson what money he had, but she refused. She looked Borders over, sizing him up, and told him there wasn't enough money to buy her giant husky. Then she untied Windy's tether and handed it to him.

Borders renamed the dog Butch and, although it took many days for the dog to accept his new situation, they soon became a working team. Butch warned Borders of wolves and thin ice, guarded the camp at night and pulled the heavy toboggan. Borders shared food and shelter with his irritable companion and was grateful each day for the company.

They traveled onward to Whitehorse and Atlin, arriving in Telegraph Creek, British Columbia, on April 1. They followed the Klondike Trail south, trekking across the Ground Hog coal fields. After crossing the Bubiche Mountains and falling in along the Skeena River, Butch and Borders met the oncoming spring and were forced to abandon the toboggan

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and skis and split the remaining load.

As they moved south into warming weather, so did news of their success. Newspapers in Seattle, Portland, Ore., and Helena, Mont., ran stories about the intrepid adventurer—the first on record to make such a journey. A few days before they reached Hazelton, after 91 days of travel, a welcoming party set out from the Anderson Buick Company in Seattle in two black, 1941 Fireballs. They crossed the border into British Columbia where they contacted the provincial government to arrange a police escort in Hazelton. The flashing convoy arrived in the quiet town, sirens blaring, and met the two dusty travelers only an hour after they walked out of the woods. Photos of the celebration and parade that followed show Borders, worn and tattered but grinning, leaning back on the hood of a gleaming Buick while Butch sits at his feet with a pack and snowshoes still tied to his harness.

The Buicks carried the team back to Seattle, where Borders was reunited with MacDonald. He handed back the map, now filled with notes and new details along the dotted line. The next days were filled with interviews and exploding flash bulbs. *People and Places* magazine ran a five-page article on the trip and included photos of Babe Dickson and the Tanana cable car, as well as posed photos of a well-groomed Borders in full gear with a laden Butch scowling at his side.

Borders and Butch began a lecture tour, showing his 45-minute film and campaigning for support of the international highway project. They appeared in New York, Chicago and other major cities, spending nearly a year on the road, speaking to as many people as possible. But after Pearl Harbor, Borders felt that their efforts belonged elsewhere. He volunteered for service in March 1942, enlisting Butch as well in a military canine unit.

Borders joined the new First Special Services Force out of Fort Harrison, Mont., a joint endeavor of the Canadian and American armies to build a special commando unit. They recruited men with backgrounds in logging, forestry, hunting, skiing and other intensive outdoor activities. They trained in parachuting, hand-to-hand combat, mountain climbing, night skiing and other stealth operations.

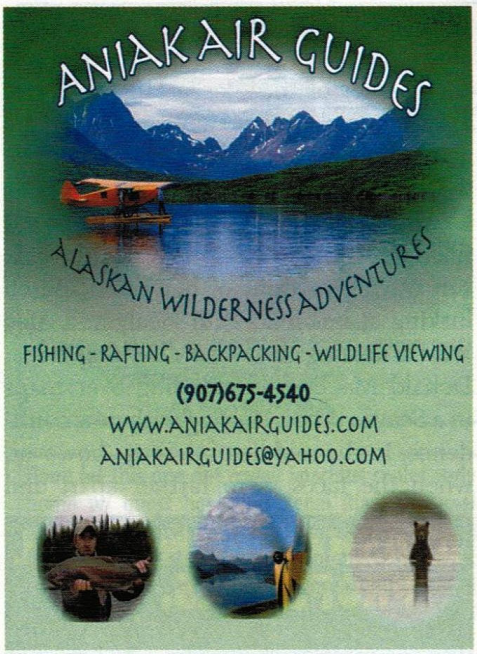
Their first mission was the raid on the occupied Aleutian Island of Kiska. Then, in the fall of 1943, Borders' unit joined the U.S. 5th Army in northern Italy. There, they became famous for stealth attacks, striking the enemy at night with black boot polish smeared on their faces, prompting the frightened Germans to dub them the Devil's Brigade. The FSSF volunteered to dislodge the Germans from an impenetrable encampment in the crater of the dormant Monte La Difensa, which tens of thousands of regular troops had failed to conquer. They parachuted in during the night and scaled the 100-foot cliffs behind the encampment. Although they succeeded in driving the Germans out in just more than three hours, the Devil's Brigade suffered a nearly 77 percent casualty rate in the raid. Among these was 27-year-old Capt. Elden Borders, shot on Dec. 6, 1943, leaving a young wife and newborn baby behind.

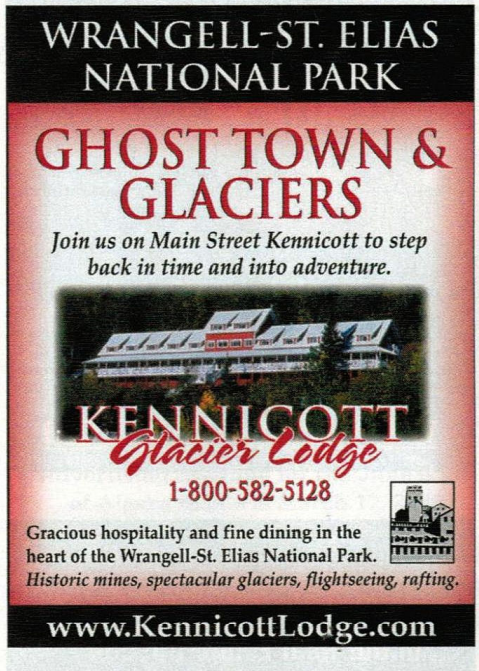
COURTESY BRYR LUDINGTON

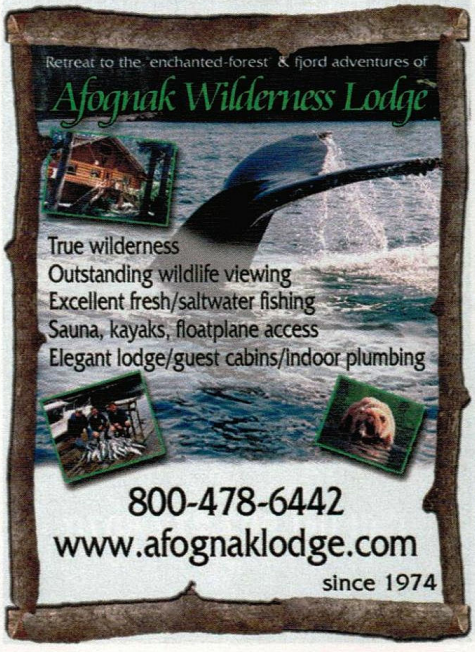
After his trip, Borders went on a lecture tour to campaign for support of the international highway project.

MacDonald's Dream Becomes a Reality

In February 1942, President Roosevelt authorized the construction of the Alaska Highway, but not along the route that Borders and MacDonald had chosen. The highway would be built by the Army Corps of Engineers along Route C from Dawson Creek, connecting the bases of the Northwest Staging Route along a path less vulnerable to attack. Construction would be held up often by unforeseen weather and difficult terrain—and many lives would be lost—but the project was







completed in late 1943. Donald MacDonald would find a place in history books as "the Father of the Alaska Highway," but after Borders' obituary appeared in papers across the nation, nothing more would be written about the young explorer.

The 45-minute film of Borders' trip is filled with the faces of friends: Babe Dickson waving in front of her cabin, Butch lurking at her feet; Paul Healy and Alec Joe harnessing dogs and checking traps; Donald MacDonald standing over maps in a Seattle office, smiling with new confidence. In the middle of the trip, however, when the faces were farther apart and the vast distances solitary and silent, and Borders had lost his way, he began turning his camera from mountain vistas and sunsets onto himself. At first, he grins and waves while cooking beans and bacon over the fire, or shows off the shelter he has constructed from evergreen boughs. He engages the camera, speaking to it and laughing. In later segments, however, he no longer acknowledges the whirring machine, but films himself alone making a fire or sitting silently drinking tea, his eyes focused away in long segments of stillness. Then he's striding across the frame, eyes ahead on the trail, as if the camera were hiding in the trees, catching only a chance glimpse of the man. In the last scene Borders filmed while lost in the southern expanses of the Yukon, unsure if he would ever see another human being, the camera looks out over a wide, white space without trees or mountains. Borders skis in from the left with his pack on his back, not looking at the camera. He continues ahead, never looking back, until he disappears, a pinpoint in the distance. ■

Bryr Ludington is a graduate student in creative nonfiction at the University of Alaska in Fairbanks. She is writing a book about Borders.

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