

Yukon Quest Hits Dawson City – Edmonton Journal and several other Canadian dailies March 2003

DAWSON CITY, YUKON – This historic Klondike city hibernates for most of the winter.

But for a few memorable days each February, it awakens to kick up its heels in grand northern style.

The winter population of 1,850 swells by several hundred, Canada's oldest casino and dance hall reopens and Yukon Gold beer and other libations flow like water when the Yukon Quest International sled dog race hits town.

Mushers, handlers, their families, media, fans and various other hangers-on converge on Dawson City for a mandatory 36-hour layover at the halfway mark of the 1,600 kilometre race between Whitehorse and Fairbanks, Alaska.

It's a time for exhausted mushers and huskies to rest after several days on the rugged trail and regroup for the next several.

But for almost everyone else, it's time to party hearty – and hardy, for that matter. The atmosphere is of frigid festivity - sort of like a sub-Arctic Mardi gras - with fur-trimmed parkas and toques the most common costume of choice.

“The layover is a great source of excitement and energy,” says Bill Holmes, assistant manager of Diamond Tooth Gerties, a gambling and dance hall that dates back to 1899.

It is mid-evening on Valentine's Day, February 14th, and Holmes is standing on Gerties' second floor, scanning the action below him as gamblers try their luck at slots, blackjack, poker and roulette on the main floor.

On the stage at the front of the hall, a band of middle-aged local firefighters - appropriately named Cabin Fever because that's what they seem bent on curing among the winter-weary crowd - belts out marginally-recognizable old rock and roll tunes. Beside the stage hangs a heavy set of dusty moose horns, a tribute to the fact the Yukon has more moose than people.

A couple dances half-heartedly, but most people seem content to gamble, drink and talk.

Participants in an old-timers' hockey tournament and a major curling bonspiel bolster the Quest crowd.

“This weekend is a true indicator of the coming spring,” notes Holmes, a Hamilton native lured to Dawson in 1989 by Jack London's stirring accounts of northern life.

With the temperature outside approaching minus 30 and a numbing north wind howling down the ice and snow-covered Yukon River valley into Dawson, spring still seems a distant hope.

Quest revelers hunker down in the Sluice Box lounge and Bonanza dining room in the Eldorado Hotel, in a smoke-clogged and hardened bar known as “The Pit” – “Where the locals go to drink to get away from the tourists,” a local described it - and in the Jack London Grill and Sourdough Saloon in the Downtown Hotel.

In the Sourdough, brave but wayward souls chug potent drinks called the SourToe cocktail, featuring a very real – and well preserved and health department certified –

amputated human toe. To qualify for a certificate authenticating the event – and it truly *is* an event - you must actually allow the toe to touch your lips. Gagging isn't encouraged; swallowing the toe is a definite no-no.

New Sourtoes – as those that have tasted “The Toe” are known – sign the register with corny comments such as “Toe-tally awesome” and “Toe-riffic!”

People walk the streets lined with Gold Rush-era buildings more than a century old. Visitors frequently drop into the visitor reception building-turned-Quest checkpoint on Front Street facing the Yukon River. They want to know when certain mushers are due to arrive or leave, who's in the lead and by how much.

Although some stores remain closed all winter, the gift shops and other stores that open especially for the Quest layover do a brisk business. “The Quest brings us a quick financial shot in the arm at a time we most need it,” said one merchant. “February isn't exactly high tourism season around here.”

The hustle and bustle in downtown Dawson, however, contrasts sharply with the scene on the west side of town, in a government campground accessible only via ice bridge spanning the Yukon River.

The campground is home to the mushers' dog camp, their official headquarters during the 36-hour layover.

Tired dogs curl up on straw beds under blue plastic tarpaulins, rousing only to eat, drink, deliver the occasional howl, be taken for a walk or examined by a member of the Quest veterinary team. Wood smoke curls from stove pipes protruding from the tops of white canvas wall tents where some mushers – most sleep in warm hotel rooms - and their handlers sleep.

Dawson is the only Quest checkpoint at which handlers are allowed to help the mushers.

“The layover is an incredibly important time,” says Frank Turner, a Whitehorse musher and the only competitor who'd raced in all 20 Quests.

“You must take care of a million and one things for yourself, your sled and particularly the dogs.”

Turner, the 1995 Quest winner, had recruited several volunteer helpers.

One repaired a broken plastic runner on his sled, and others busied themselves feeding, walking, massaging and otherwise tending to his dogs. Turner focused on taking care of himself, ensuring he was physically and mentally ready for the rest of the trip, which included two grueling mountain passes between Dawson and Fairbanks.

(The strategy worked; Turner finished in sixth place, completing the race in 11 days, 20 hours and four minutes)

The Quest started early on the afternoon of February 9th, when 23 mushers and teams of 14 Alaskan and Siberian huskies, pulling sleds weighing of up to 700 pounds, left the starting line in downtown Whitehorse, the capital city of this northern territory of just 32,000 people.

Four mushers scratched before reaching Dawson because of problems with dogs or equipment. A fifth scratched between Dawson and Fairbanks.

In the freezing dark at 49 minutes after midnight on February 13th, Austrian-born Hans Gatt, of Atlin, British Columbia, was the first musher to arrive in Dawson City. True to tradition in this famous Klondike Gold Rush city, he won \$5,000 in gold for being the first into Dawson.

Gatt maintained the lead for the rest of the race, and collected \$30,000 US for winning his second straight Quest. He and his team were on the trail for 10 days, 18 hours and 36 minutes.

The last musher to reach Dawson was Paul Geoffrion, who cruised into the checkpoint late in the afternoon of February 15th, which happened to be his 48th birthday. Well-wishers greeted the Whitehorse dentist with a cake and balloon-festooned sign. Man and dogs alike appeared exhausted yet relieved.

Reporters, family and fans crowded around Geoffrion, whose bushy mustache and fur-trimmed hood were caked with frost in the minus 30-degree air. One reporter asked how he planned to celebrate his birthday.

“I’m going to sleep,” Geoffrion glumly responded.

And, with that, he hopped back on his sled and drove his team across the frozen Yukon River to set up camp. The clock was ticking on Geoffrion’s layover but he’d already lost too much time to make it up between Dawson and Fairbanks.

One week after leaving Dawson, Geoffrion finally arrived in Fairbanks to win the not-so-coveted Red Lantern Award for finishing last in the race. He missed the final mushers’ banquet, held the night before.

The 20th annual Quest had officially ended. Plans are already underway to start next year’s event in Fairbanks on February 14th.

And Dawson City?

It slips quietly back into hibernation to resume the long wait for spring - and the start of a tourism season that lasts longer than a few days.