

Alaska State Library
Historical Collections

Guide to Collection

Holmes, John "Jack", 1880-1917

John Holmes Photographs and Letters, 1906-1916

MS 254

28 black and white prints
26 original letters

Processed By: Gayle Goedde
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ACQUISITION: This collection was transferred to the Alaska State Library Historical Collections from Alaska State Archives in May 2009. (Accession number: 2009-47). The original donor was Anita Derby McCreery.

ACCESS: The collection is available for viewing; however, the photographs may not be photocopied.

COPYRIGHT: Request for permission to publish or reproduce material from the collection must be discussed with the Librarian.

PROCESSING: Photographs were numbered by staff and housed in Mylar; letters were filed in pH-neutral folders. The collection is described at an item level.

HISTORICAL NOTE

John Holmes followed gold rushes from Nome to Candle in 1906, and then to Iditarod in 1911. With a degree in metallurgy and experience in banking, his skills were in great demand. While in the north, Holmes got into dogs. Dogs performed essential support roles for residents of the far north: hauling people, gear, and the mail across long distances. Dogs were also sources of companionship and entertainment. In the long winter months, sled dog racing became a popular sport; first, in Nome, and then in the surrounding communities of Iditarod, Candle, and Ruby. The popularity of sled dog racing in Iditarod is evident by the coverage provided in the *Iditarod Pioneer*, which started up in July of 1910, one month after the town of Iditarod was founded.

During the years John Holmes was in Iditarod, he was an active member and treasurer of the Iditarod Kennel Club, which organized a series of races with cash prizes. The first official sled dog race, the All-Alaska Sweepstakes, had been held in Nome in 1908. Describing the All-Alaska Sweepstakes race from Nome to Candle (a round-trip distance of 408 miles over all kinds of terrain), A. A. "Scotty" Allan wrote in *Gold, Men and Dogs*, "Financially, the race was as big an event in Alaska as the Kentucky Derby is to the racing world. The betting was always very heavy. Sometimes there was as much as \$130,000 on the books, with hundreds of side bets for lesser amounts."

Although the Nome race, covering hundreds of miles, became the premier event, the popularity of shorter, sprint and middle-distance races, spread across the region. In Iditarod, John Holmes put together a racing team dominated by Irish setters. The *Iditarod Pioneer* described Holmes' team as "bird dogs." Bird dogs were not uncommon in Alaska. When prospectors followed the gold rushes north, there were not enough native dogs to fill the demand. Consequently, dogs of all kinds –Irish setters, Saint Bernards, Newfoundlands, Airedales, German shepards, pointers, retrievers, collies, and mutts– were brought north; some of them were, like Buck in *Call of the Wild*, stolen, because the demand –and the price– was high. When communities formed kennel clubs and began racing, it was not known which breeds would be fastest or hardiest, but Holmes' team of Irish Setters surprised everyone when they won the 62-mile St. Patrick 's Day race.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

The following information is derived from the biographical information provided by Anita Derby McCreery, which is included in Folder 1.

John "Jack" Holmes was born in May 1880, probably in either Seattle or Tacoma, Washington. He graduated from Stanford University in 1901, with an A. B. in metallurgy. Letters written the year he graduated from Stanford suggest that he had a job waiting for him in Alaska. There were no letters for five years, until he moved to Candle; however, references in the letters from Candle suggest that he had been working as an assayer, possibly at the Miners and Merchants Bank in Nome. In 1906, John Holmes went to Candle and, by 1911, he was in Iditarod. He worked as a cashier, assayer, and then Vice-President of the bank in Iditarod.

In 1912, John Holmes writes that he bought "three Irish setters to go along with the six half-setter pups that we had." He developed his dogs into a team, and he won the 62-mile St. Patrick's

Day Iditarod race in 1912 with five of his Irish setters. These dogs were known and referred to as “The Red Devils with the Big Hearts.” In his letters, Holmes often refers to his dogs, including his lead dog, Bob; he also mentions Nora, a house dog he took hunting. He also recorded several harrowing trips by dog sled, which was the only way to get from one place to another in the winter. Although he does not write in his letters of other specific sled dog races, a search through the *Iditarod Pioneer* for the time period reveals that he entered other races and remained active in the sport.

Iditarod Pioneer, January 13, 1912: **Crack Dog Team Changes Hands**

A dog deal was consummated during the week whereby John Holmes became the possessor of four first-class dogs, originally the property of Henry Weir. Forming part of the ‘telephone’ team, these dogs have become famous in the Iditarod for their speed and spirit, and it is said that Holmes intends to work them in conjunction with the pick of Charley Worden’s pups: a combination which should develop into a crack racing team. The dogs ran in the New Year Day race and came in for a great deal of favorable comment. Rumor has it that Holmes is after the big prize in the All Alaska Sweepstakes.

Iditarod Pioneer, January 11, 1913: **Dog Race Was Huge Success**

Favored with good weather, the handicap dog race run yesterday under the auspices of the Kennel Club was a great success. In spite of the heavy trail, good time was made –Johnny Holmes, with only three dogs, covering the distance (about 22 miles) in 90 seconds over two hours.

Iditarod Pioneer, March 13, 1915: **Plenty Interest Shown in Ruby’s Dog Race**

According to reports brought to this city by Jack Holmes, the towns of Ruby and Long City are very much interested in the big dog race of St. Patrick’s Day, which will be run over the fifty-eight mile course between those places for a purse of \$550. At the time Mr. Holmes left Ruby there were at least ten possible entries for the event, several of them being teams that participated in last year’s race. Holmes says there are some splendid racing teams in that part of the country, and the sports were very anxious for him to remain until the 17th and get into the game.

Around November 1916, Holmes went to Seattle, perhaps planning only to visit, but there are two letters written from Seattle in April and May of 1917, which indicate that Holmes had been, and still was, very ill. A letter from Louis Holmes (John Holmes’ brother) says John died on July 18, 1917 of arterial sclerosis at age 37.

SCOPE AND CONTENTS NOTE

The collection contains 28 photographs, some of which are attributed to Lomen (Lomen Bros.), and 26 letters. The letters from John Holmes were saved by his mother, Alice Maude Lathrop Holmes, and by his sister, Nellie McCreery. The letters were then passed on to Nellie’s son, William. William McCreery’s wife, Anita Derby McCreery, gathered the letters and pictures into a portfolio to share with family members, sending the originals to the Alaska State Archives.

SUBJECTS

Candle, Alaska; Iditarod, Alaska; Sled dog racing; Irish setters; Gold rushes; Miners and Merchants Bank; Gold

INVENTORY

Box 1 of 1

Folder 1, Photographs: black and white postcards and prints

- 1 Imperial Apts., Seattle. O. T. Frasch, photographer, number 733.
- 2 Loughhead, passenger carrying, Hydro-Aeroplane. [Plane flying above water, military ship in background] On verso: Manufactured by Cardinell-Vincent Co., Photographers and Publishers, San Francisco, Calif., Official Photographers P. P. I. E.
- 3 Loughhead, passenger carrying, Hydro-Aeroplane. [Close-up view of plane on dock with three men in cockpit] On verso: Manufactured by Cardinell-Vincent Co., Photographers and Publishers, San Francisco, Calif., Official Photographers P. P. I. E.
- 4 Iditarod, Alaska, July 3rd, 1910. Copyright, 1910, By C. W. Felch. [Sign on canvas tent on left reads Miners & Merchants Bank; sign on large tent at right reads C. T. Suter, Miners Outfitter, Groceries, Provisions, Hay & Oats] On verso: "The rear of our tent, showing that I occasionally wash. The little tent was my assay office; we've had no pictures of the bank yet. It's where the pond is. Two stories, 60 x 100 & some front."
- 5 FOX [Small steamboat moored to shore; other boats and canvas tent buildings visible in background]
- 6 [Man sitting near woodstove, inside canvas tent] On verso: "The back of the tent where we did our cooking & where we sleep."
- 7 [Five men standing on other side of bank counter with shelves holding trays of coins and stacks of paper bills and gold bars; assay scales to left] On verso: "From the back of the counter. Ross, myself, Nestor, Daly, Lindberg. The scales, Bricks & the Roll again."
- 8 On verso: "The exterior [of the Miners & Merchants Bank], the Bankers & a couple of roughnecks."
- 9 Chas Worden's Res., Iditarod, Alaska, 1911. [John Holmes, holding a cat, standing on wooden sidewalk in front of log house, a dog at his feet] On verso: "The pup with the white nose is Jack."
- 10 [Same house as shown in #9; John Holmes, with cat, on sidewalk in front of Worden residence; three dogs at his feet] On verso: [fragment] "Mr. & Mrs. Worden"

- 11 4th? of July, 1911, Iditarod, Alaska. [People line the street in front of businesses, including Worden's, and watch three men race along the street, carrying gunny sack of grain? over their shoulders]
- 12 Refugees from the Iditarod Fire, April 4, 1911. [People carry belongings in street; Red Cross sign prominent on right]
- 13 The Iditarod Fire, April 4, 1911 [People look on as smoke billows in the background]
- 14 From top N. C., looking to Merchants' Café. The Iditarod Fire, April 4, 1911. [Photograph is torn down the middle; people in foreground; dark smoke in background]
- 15 Miners & Merchants Bank [and] Empire Commercial Co., Wines, Liquors, & Cigars. [Photograph is torn down the middle]
- 16 Winner, St. Patrick's Day Race, Iditarod, 1912. Lomen photograph. On verso: "They were all named before I got them –Bobby, Bill, Patsy, Slivers, Dick" [Approx. 9" x 5" image, torn around the edges; John Holmes, wearing a fur parka, standing on sled runners, with five mixed-breed Irish setters in harness]
- 17 Dog Dopesters, St. Patrick's Day Race, Iditarod, Alaska. Lomen photograph. Note on face of photo: "Dick Button of the bank" and "All excited" [with arrow pointing out Holmes in the crowd of men, waiting and watching]
- 18 Winner – Holmes Entry – Harry Sheppard – Driver – St. Patrick's Day Race, Iditarod, Alaska. Lomen photograph. [Spectators lined up along both sides of chute, watching handlers hold onto dog team] On face of photo: "Here, I'm one man to each dog."
- 19 Holmes, 1st Price [Prize?], St. Patrick's Day, 1912. [Driver and dog team pass low buildings; three people watch from the rooftop]
- 20 [Postcard version of same image in #18] Winner – Holmes Entry – Harry Sheppard – Driver – St. Patrick's Day Race, Iditarod, Alaska. Lomen photograph. [Spectators lined up along both sides of chute, watching handlers hold onto dog team] Note on face of photo: "One man to every dog."
- 21 Winner Third Place – Summit Entry – Joe Jean, Driver – St. Patrick's Day Race, Iditarod, Alaska. Lomen photograph. [Spectators, checking out dog team; businesses line sides of street in background, including the Coffee House Lunch Room and the Royal Café]
- 22 Start – Foster Entry of Fairbanks – St. Patrick's Day Race, Iditarod, Alaska. Lomen photograph. Note on face of photo: "Second prize."
- 23 [Three men in light-colored pants, dark blazers, and straw hats, surrounded by setter-mix sled dogs, on street in front of buildings in Iditarod, after the St. Patrick's Day Race]

Handwritten notes on front of photograph identify the dogs: “Bobby the leader, Bill the best, Dick, Sport, Patsy, Coucho, and Tommy; the rest are the black pups.”

- 24 [The three men in #23 and other spectators stand in front of the Budweiser building in Iditarod with dogs; two of the dogs are in costume -- one dog wears a ruffled garment, and the other wears a sweater, hat, and tie]
- 25 [The three men in #23 and #24 pose with four dogs; the two dogs in front are wearing costumes --one dog wears a ruffled garment, and the other wears a sweater, hat, and tie]
- 26 [Two men in light-colored pants, dark blazers, and straw hats pose with three dogs; the setter in front wears a hat and a ruffled garment that could be a woman’s blouse]
- 27 “Bob” – Leader – John Holmes Entry. Lomen photograph [Profile view of an Irish setter mix]
- 28 [Horse, harnessed to large sled; six adults and one child in fur garments]

Folder 2, Letters and envelope addressed to Mrs. C. H. Holmes, Seattle, Washington

- 1 July 7, 1907, hand-written letter from Candle, Alaska, on Nome Miners and Merchants Bank stationery. [Holmes, a month out of Seattle, traveled from Nome to Candle on the *Corwin*; included here is a description of Candle.]
- 2 July 9, 1907, hand-written letter from Candle, Alaska, on Nome Miners and Merchants Bank stationery. [Included is a description of leisure activities in Candle.]
- 3 July 19, 1907, hand-written letter from Candle, Alaska, on Nome Miners and Merchants Bank stationery.

Folder 3, Letter

September 23, 1908, hand-written letter (and note added September 28) to Alice Maude on new letterhead: Miners & Merchants Bank of Candle, Capital, \$100,000.00. J. E. Chilberg, Pres.; L. A. Sundquist, Vice-Pres.; P. H. Watt, Mgr.; John Holmes, Assayer. [Letter mentions his gold shipment from bank of 60,000]

Folder 4, Letters

- 1 October 27, 1908, typed letter to Alice Maude. [Letter notes that “production will be 30% greater than that of last year and may reach \$500,000.”]
- 2 November 6, 1908, typed letter to Alice Maude.
- 3 November 16, 1908, typed letter to Alice Maude. [Letter includes a description of Dan Murray’s funeral, as presided over by Paddy Glynn.]

Folder 5, Letter and envelope addressed to Mrs. C. H. Holmes, Tacoma, Washington

June 17, 1909, typed letter to Alice Maude on Miners & Merchants Bank of Candle letterhead; continued on July 2nd and July 7th. [Includes observations on the eagerness with which the hungry people of Candle eagerly awaited the return of the *Corwin*. Also of note: “The Noyes Ditch has been attached and unless Noyes comes in with a bunch of money he will lose out after an investment of over \$150,000; it is hard luck but the creditors could wait no longer.”]

Folder 6, Letter and envelope addressed to Mrs. Wm. B. McCreery, Tacoma, Washington

January 13, 1911, handwritten letter to Nellie and Helen Junior on letterhead as follows: Miners and Merchants Bank, Iditarod, Alaska; Capital, \$100,000; President, T.J. Nestor; Vice-President, Chas. Ross; and Cashier, John Holmes. “New Years Day, we had our first dog race, which caused much interest but will not be as good as some we’ll have later on. I only won 15 on it and that’s no business. The next one I’ll clean up.”

Folder 7, Letter

August 9, 1911, handwritten letter to Alice Maude on Miners and Merchants Bank, Iditarod, letterhead. New name on the letterhead: E. G. Lindberg, Manager.

Folder 8, Letters and envelope to Mrs. C. H. Holmes

- 1 January 12, 1912, handwritten letter to Alice Maude on Miners and Merchants Bank, Iditarod, letterhead. First mention of his Irish setters: “I’ve bought three Irish Setters and with the six half setter pups we had, I have a team that is a wonder. They can keep up a twelve mile an hour gait and I can speed them way above that!” The letter also mentions E. Coke Hill whose “team won second in the big Nome race last spring.”
- 2 Second, typed, letter in same envelope as above but undated and on plain paper. Described in the letter is a long journey by dog sled from Seward? to Nome; also, upon arrival Holmes was directed to a Turkish bath, “conducted by a negress lady.”

Folder 9, Letter

March 19, 1912, long handwritten letter to Alice Maude on Miners and Merchants Bank, Iditarod, letterhead. This letter describes the 62-mile St. Patrick's Day race, which was won by Holmes' red dogs, and which he describes as the "most enjoyable day I've had since I've been in Alaska and one of the best of my life." The driver of his team was Harry Sheppard, who dislocated his shoulder in the early stages of the race and just kept going.

Folder 10, Letter and envelope

September 10, 1912, typed letter to Alice Maude on Miners and Merchants Bank, Iditarod, letterhead.

Folder 11, Letter and envelope

August 21, 1913, handwritten letter to Alice Maude on Miners and Merchants Bank, Iditarod, letterhead.

Folder 12, Letter and envelope

September 25, 1913, typed letter to Alice Maude on Miners and Merchants Bank, Iditarod, letterhead. The letter mentions that the next day, September 26, would be the last boat to depart for all outside points. Also, he names "Dikeman" as the original discoverer of the camp.

Folder 13, Letters and envelope

- 1 July 7, 1914, typed letter to Louis on Miners and Merchants Bank, Iditarod, letterhead, in which Holmes requests some supplies, including magazines, six tubes of Pebecco, Colgate shaving soap, tooth brushes, and a sweater coat.
- 2 July 24, 1914, typed letter to Alice Maude on Miners and Merchants Bank, Iditarod, letterhead, in which Holmes describes going before a Grand Jury to "give testimony concerning a poor young fellow named Stanton (grandson of Lincoln's Sec of War) who temporarily went to the bad in 1912."
- 3 August 6, 1914, handwritten letter to Alice Maude on Miners and Merchants Bank, Iditarod, letterhead, in which Holmes mentions that he and Henry Weir have been putting all their spare time into their boat.

Folder 14, Letter and envelope

October 19, 1914, typed letter to Alice Maude on Miners and Merchants Bank, Iditarod, letterhead.

Folder 15, Letters and envelope

- 1 March 7, 1915, handwritten note to Alice Maude on plain paper from Cripple City, Alaska, described as being “a little over 100 miles from Ruby and about 170 from Iditarod.” Holmes traveled to Ruby by dog sled under freezing winter conditions, with temperatures reaching 50 below.
- 2 April 5, 1915, handwritten letter to Alice Maude on Miners and Merchants Bank, Iditarod, letterhead.
- 3 April 12, 1915, typed letter to Alice Maude on Miners and Merchants Bank, Iditarod, on new letterhead: Miners and Merchants Bank, Iditarod, Alaska; Capital and Surplus \$100,000; Charles Ross, President; John Holmes, Vice-President; and R. C. Button, Cashier.

Folder 16, Letters and envelope

- 1 July 11, 1916, handwritten letter to Alice Maude on Miners and Merchants Bank, Iditarod, John Holmes, Vice-President.
- 2 July 27, 1916, handwritten letter to Alice Maude on Miners and Merchants Bank, Iditarod, John Holmes, Vice-President.
- 3 August 6, 1916, handwritten letter to Alice Maude on Miners and Merchants Bank, Iditarod, John Holmes, Vice-President. This letter mentions “it won’t be long before this camp will dwindle down until we can’t afford to stay and then I’ll move to Seattle for keeps and advertise for a house keeper.”

Folder 17, Copy of a letter received by Mrs. H.B. Holmes from Louis Holmes

August 1, 1917. This letter describes the last days of John (Jack) Holmes who died on July 18, 1917, from what the doctor diagnosed as arterial sclerosis.

Folder 18

“The Adventures of Jack (John) Holmes in Candle and Iditarod, Alaska, 1907-1916”
This account, prepared by Anita Derby McCreery, contains biographical notes, a map of Alaska, and typed copies of Jack’s letters written while he was in Candle and Iditarod. The original letters are in Folders 2 through 17. In addition, there are copies of letters for which there are no originals in the collection. These are as follows:

February 1901, typed copy of a letter from Jack, written when he was a student at Stanford, addressed to “Dear People.”

February 5, 1901, typed copy of a letter from Jack, written at Stanford, to his parents.
February 27, 1901, typed copy of a letter from Jack, written at Stanford, to his parents.

1901, typed copy of a scrap of paper, with an invitation to a dance, possibly. In part, it reads, "I am a good dancer, good looking and have some cracked patent leathers. What more do you want"

May 23, 1901, typed copy of a letter announcing Jack's accomplishment at Stanford: John Elmer Holmes, A.B., Sigma Rho Eta.

April 20, 1917, typed copy of a letter to Nellie

May 12, 1917, typed copy of a letter to Nellie, the last one in the collection.

Folder 19

Photocopies of photographs and letters.