

# The Tripod

SEPTEMBER 2023



Iditarod Historic Trail Alliance, PO Box 2323, Seward AK 99664  
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The Iditarod Historic Trail Alliance is an equal  
opportunity program provider and employer.

The Iditarod Historic Trail Alliance promotes awareness of the Iditarod Trail, and its gold rush and Alaska Native heritage by encouraging education programs and historical research, assisting in the protection, improvement, maintenance and marking of the Trail and developing partnerships that foster stewardship, commitment and support.

Dear Friends,

We are saddened with the passing of a dear friend, Lee Poleske. A longtime member of the Board of Directors, Lee produced the monthly newsletter *Tripod* for IHTA. This month, Lee is the story. He will be greatly missed.

## Lee E. Poleske 1937-2023

Even a casual observer noticed the walker with a flowing white beard, camera in hand, or a tote full of groceries as he strolled downtown, along the historic Iditarod trail aka Waterfront bike path, through the harbor, to Safeway, or even beyond to Mile 7, always refusing a ride no matter what the weather or season.



*Lee Poleske 1937-2023*

Nicknamed Father Time or Santa Claus, this friendly, rosy- cheeked man with sparkling blue eyes was frequently stopped by strangers who wanted to take his picture. When asked, he could provide answers to the location of the nearest restroom or a wealth of information about the history of Seward. Little did they know that they had just encountered the town treasure and historian, Lee Poleske.

Born in Manilla, Iowa on July 17, 1937, he graduated from Manilla High School and then attended the University of Dubuque, earning a BA in media technology in 1959. After graduation, he taught social studies and English at Dallas Center Junior and High School, Iowa for a year.

Rather than be drafted, in 1960 at age 23, he enlisted in the Army. After basic and advanced training at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, he shipped overseas. Stationed in Heidelberg, Germany, he served as a Specialist with Technical Skills in the Intelligence Division, earning a Good Conduct Medal for rifle marksmanship along the way. He received an honorable discharge in November of 1963 after serving for three years. He returned home to Iowa. In January he applied for one of two posted teaching positions and as months passed, he forgot about it.

In July, 1964, the phone rang. From Seward, Alaska. The principal asked if he still wanted a job teaching at the high school? And by the way, we've had some problems up here. (The town was still reeling from the disastrous March 27 Great Alaskan Earthquake.) Lee said yes, and the rest is history. He taught social studies, photography, Spanish, and history for the next 26 years, retiring in 1990. Since his arrival at age 27, Lee became an integral part of the community. In 1966, he joined the fledgling Resurrection Bay Historical Society and within a few years was elected the president of the society.

By 1971, he had a volunteer job as the director of the Seward Museum, then located in a former post office on Third at Jefferson where the Boys and Girls Club is now. For the next 41 years, "Mr. Seward Museum" curated the collection, created interesting displays, manned the front desk, developed programs for school groups, answered endless questions from visitors and researchers all over the world in person and by mail. He retired as director only when the museum was moved to the new Seward Community Library and Museum in 2012.

In the late 1970s, fellow teacher Dan Seavey collared Lee, Bill Hightower, and several other teachers to create the

Seward Iditarod Trail Blazers, a non-profit organization formalized in 1982 to promote the history of the original gold rush era Iditarod Trail (Seward is Mile Zero) and reclaim and maintain the route from Seward to Girdwood.

Thanks to this dedicated and persistent group, visitors and locals alike enjoy the Iditarod National Historic Trail bike path, built in 1991, from Mile 0 to the boat harbor, anchored by three bronze statues: The Prospector, Jujiro Wada, and Alfred Lowell. Lee assisted with editing and ensured historical accuracy for the statues and interpretive signs and spoke at each dedication, including the final June 24, 2023, Alfred Lowell statue dedication. Lee also created the popular “Walk the First Mile” brochure to highlight history along the trail, and he collected informal data on the trail’s use and users.

He and Dan Seavey gave countless public educational programs about the historic Iditarod Trail to teachers, schools, and organizations, inspiring generations of youngsters and their adults.

Lee wrote, printed, and mailed interesting newsletters with historic newspaper articles and current news tidbits for the Trail Blazers, the Iditarod Historic Trail Alliance, and the Resurrection Bay Historical Society, always with carefully chosen real stamps.

The Alaska Historical Society recognized his many years of research about Seward and Resurrection Bay. He served on the Alaska Gold Rush Centennial Commission and was awarded the Seward Historic Preservation Award in 1998 and 2008. In 2007, the Alaska Historical Society and Museums presented him with the Volunteer of the Year Award for the State of Alaska. He also served on the Seward Hospital and Seward Library Boards.

In 2012, the Alaska State Historical Records Advisory Board awarded Lee Poleske and Amy Carney archival Certificates of Excellence for their "Bits of History" series of historical videos covering all aspects of Seward, Alaska's past.

In 2019, Lee received the Historic Preservation Award for Lifetime Achievement from Preservation Alaska.

Aside from a few trips Outside to earn his master’s degree in the field of media, curriculum, and evaluation, Lee rarely left Alaska. Yet he made friends across the USA through his stamp, coin, historic postcard, and token collections. He was a valued long-time member of the Anchorage Philatelic Society, a stamp collectors club.

Lee could be found every Thursday afternoon at the new library, endlessly gleaning nuggets of information from Seward’s past newspapers, researching archives and microfiche files. He organized and compiled the Seward area obituary index and created fascinating “Bits of History” videos.

His interest in Seward obituaries led to the tradition of the famous Summer Solstice Cemetery Tours, starting in 2006. “It starts at 10:30 pm,” Poleske said, “so we try to keep it at one hour, before the ghosts and goblins come out.”

His last theme on June 21, 2023 was “People Who Should Be Remembered.”

“They’re not all world- famous, but they were good citizens, and they were good people, and they should be remembered,” he said. “Some that most people have forgotten, but I always remembered them. Some are just people I remembered and liked.”

Lee Ernest Poleske, 86, died at home in Seward on August 12, 2023. The family is planning a celebration of his life on Summer Solstice, 2024. The family wrote, “A friend of Lee’s pointed out his quote from his high school yearbook, ‘Live and let live.’ He certainly lived a full life and was greatly loved by family and friends. He will be greatly missed. We love you, Uncle Lee. Becky.”

He was preceded in death by his parents, Sears and Anna (Segebart) Poleske; sister, Ruth Rosburg; sister, Anita Hammer and niece, Barbara McKillip. He is survived by his niece, Rebecca (David) Steinbach of LaVista, Nebraska; great- nephew, Nathan Steinbach of Chicago, Illinois; great-nieces, Natalie Steinbach of Omaha, Nebraska, Emily Steinbach of LaVista, Nebraska, Lily McKillip, Binnie McKillip, and Sidnie McKillip of Iowa City, Iowa.

Memorial donations may be made in memory of Lee to the Resurrection Bay Historical Society, P.O Box 55, Seward, Alaska 99664.

*Reprinted from the Seward Journal, August 31, 2023 with edits.*



**FROM THE PAST...**

*Iditarod Pioneer September 16, 1916*

**PREPARATIONS BEING MADE TO INCREASE EFFICIENCY OF WINTER MAIL SERVICE**

The summer mail service is rapidly drawing to a close, and as the time approaches for the entire suspension of mail delivery for this district pending the going into effect of the winter contract, the local post office and the department officials are laying plans for the improvement of the service during the winter months.

There will be two more departures of mail under the summer contract, unless exceptional weather conditions should make possible the dispatch of additional consignments, and three more mails are due to be received. The last mail will leave here September 28, and the last consignment will be received here about October 1.

Respecting the winter trail service between this district and Seward, which goes into effect November 1, Postmaster William Ansley has received two interesting communications, which show that there is at least a disposition on the part of the postal authorities to improve on the former somewhat indifferent service furnished. The first of these is from Alvah Eames chief clerk of the railway mail service, with headquarters at Cordova, and is as follows:

“Cordova, Aug. 12, 1910.

“Postmaster, Iditarod: “Please furnish me with a list of the patrons of your office who will remain ‘Inside’ the coming winter, so that the Seward postmaster may exclude mail addressed to persons who are not in Iditarod, thus increasing the mail for those who stay there.” The winter mail contract provides for the carrying of 475 pounds of mail from Seward to Susitna, and from Susitna to Iditarod the weight limit is 400 pounds. As this includes all classes of mail matter, for a population of probably twelve or fifteen hundred persons, it can be seen that it is desirable that no unnecessary mail be carried in order to provide the best possible service. The task set by the chief cleric for Postmaster Ansley is, however, impossible of fulfillment. He has no means of telling how many of the hundreds of persons who receive their mail at



the Iditarod office will remain "Inside,' but he will endeavor to furnish a list of the residents of this city and vicinity who are leaving for the "Outside," and whose mail should not be sent here during the winter months.

For this purpose he has opened up a list at the post office, and those leaving for the Outside should register there, designating the address to which they desire their mail forwarded from Seward. In this manner the facilities for carrying mail for those who remain here will be correspondingly increased.

**Flat Will Be the Terminal**

Heretofore Iditarod has been the terminal of the Seward-Iditarod mail route, but this year, according to a communication just I received, the mail will depart from Hat, and the incoming mail will be consigned to that office The order is from Otto l'raeger, second assistant postmaster general, and is as follows:

“Washington, Aug. 11, 1916.

“Postmaster, Iditarod: “An order has been issued today changing service on star route No. 7S149, Seward to Iditarod, Alaska, so as to end at Flat, and to supply Ophir and Iditarod between Tokotna and Flat, without chance in distance or pay; effective November 1. 1916. Service will be required accordingly.

“The contractor has been advised of the issuance of the order and you will please advise this office if it is not complied with.”

The original Seward-Iditarod mail route was via Tokotna, Moore creek and Flat to Iditarod, but last year the contractor secured permission to deviate from this route, taking in Ophir. which, however, was not included



in the service under that contract. The change is instituted to conform to the route followed by the carrier. Aside from the weekly service between Flat and Iditarod, a contract will be entered into for an extra weekly mail between the two towns.

### From the Past...

*The Kusko Times, April 1921*

## DOINGS OVER AT IDITAROD

Reindeer Herd in Fine Shape—Dredges Soon Busy-Baker Gains.

Iditarod, April 2.—During the latter part of March, Dr. Hadwin, V. S., and F. A. Johnston, forester and botanist, both connected with the U.S. Biological Survey, with headquarters at Unalakleet, made a thorough examination of the Twitchell reindeer herd, which is now near Fritz's roadhouse.



While these gentlemen were at their work a dozen head of reindeer were slaughtered, all of which were closely examined, and much time was spent in sizing up the feeding ground, and they stated to Mr. Twitchell that the 1,500 head which are in his herd were in exceptionally fine condition, and that they had seen but one herd its equal. They left with the intention of going to the Yukon river by the way of the Diskaket trail.

Fawning will begin about April 10th, and when this period is through with Mr. Twitchell expects to move his herd to summer headquarters, in the Moore I creek neighborhood. Mr., Twitchell is highly gratified that his work, much of which was his own notions, is unqualifiedly endorsed by these Government experts.

Preparatory work about the two dredges, the Beaton & Donnelly and the J. E. Riley Investment Company, is going on. and both will be under full payrolls before the end of April.

Claude Baker is now able to dress and to sit up occasionally, is gaining in strength and rapidly taking on flesh, and while it is not expected that he will do any manual labor this season it is sure that his counsel will be available to his co-workers.

### From the Past...

*Seward Daily Gateway January 14, 1914*

Few people seem to grasp the meaning of what the Seward-Iditarod mail contract means to Seward. The contract covers a period of four years and calls for twenty-four trips a year. Col. Revelle, who is at present carrying the Hope-Sunrise mail from here, was the successful bidder and is a worthy citizen of Seward. He will begin in a short time to prepare for the big undertaking, and will see to it that the trail is put in first class condition. He will make a trip to Iditarod and arrange all details at that end of the line and will prepare relay stations along the trail between the interior city and Seward. It will probably require as many as twenty dog teams to convey this "mail. The Colonel has completed his bond and will attend to all further details without delay. It will entail an outlay of at least \$10,0(k) before he will be ready to start out with the first mail in November, and the greater portion of this money will be spent in Seward. Besides, when

**TAKE THE SEWARD ROUTE!**

**TRAIL TRAVEL SOON BEGINS**

Mushers from all the interior parts of Alaska should remember that the Seward Route to and from the outside is the shortest and the best. The trail between Seward and Iditarod was repaired and made perfect this year.

**HOTEL SEWARD**

W. A. M'NEILEY, PROPR.

MODERN CONVENIENCES

RATES \$1.00 TO \$2.50 PER DAY

HOT AND GOLD WATER      BATHS      ELECTRIC LIGHTS

it becomes known that the interior mail is going in via Seward, it will be a great advertisement for Seward, and Col. Revelle should be given every support necessary in this undertaking.