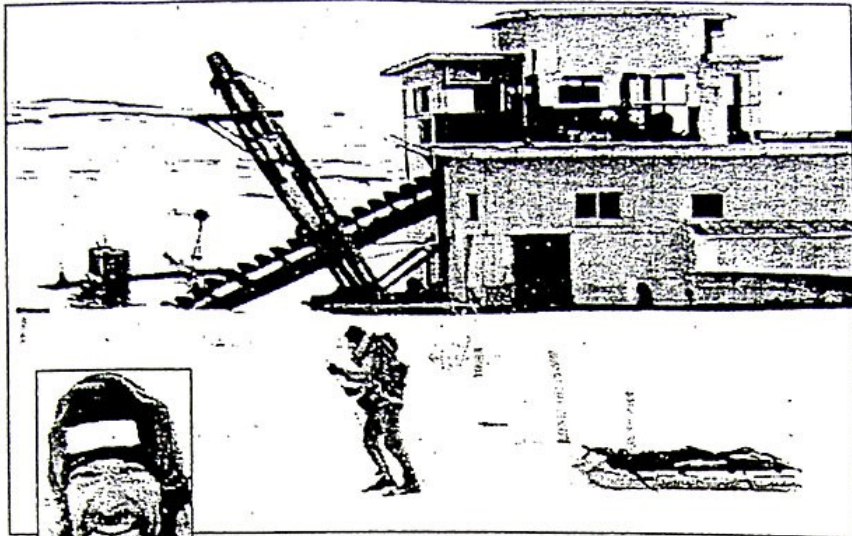


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MUSH—Maurizio Belli skis into Nome from Manley Hot Springs Friday pulling his sled full of gear. Belli will write a book about his experiences when he returns to Italy. photos by Nadja Demos

Italian skier follows in path of countrymen 100 years later

By Monica Elbert

When Maurizio Belli was a boy in Trentino Italy, his family told stories of his grandfather, Agostini Vittorio, who traveled to Alaska at the turn of the century in the hopes of finding gold. Though not sure where in Alaska his grandfather mined, Belli learned of others from his hometown in Northern Italy who also came here during the gold rush.

It was with this history in mind that Belli planned a cross-country ski trip that ended shortly after 10 p.m. on Friday evening as he skied into Nome, 47 days after he set out alone from Manley Hot Springs following a path taken by two Italian brothers nearly 100 years before him.

"I followed their route," said Belli. "People told me it was the same trip as others."

Belli started his trip on March 3 and traveled 1,100 kilometers, or about 700 miles, following portions of the Yukon River and the Iditarod Trail for the journey.

"I had many problems," said Belli, "many everyday." He said the problems he encountered were small ones, but during the course of the trip they added up.

"I found overflow in the lakes," he said. "It's not easy because you must have all the gear with you."

The wide range of temperatures he encountered during the trip meant he had to be prepared for any kind of weather. He hit below freezing temperatures and

temperatures warm enough to melt the snow. Some days, the span of temperatures occurred in one day. There were times when it would rain or snow on the trail. On other days, he would get into areas where there was no snow and he would have to walk and drag his sled for several hours.

"You must have gear for changes," he said. "Especially if you are alone. It is not easy. You must bring (your) gear and pull the gear in the sled."

Belli brought a plaque from the mayor of Trentino to present to Mayor John Handeland to commemorate the trip.

When asked why he made such a trip, Belli responded with

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a smile; "Because I like Alaska. I wanted an experience like this. When you stay many hours alone you can think. I like that."

"I had this dream to come here," he said.

Belli came to Alaska seven times in preparation for the trip. But he's no stranger to the state. He came in 1993 and mountain biked from Fairbanks to Prudhoe Bay in 72 hours time. Also he was here in 1995 on a dog mushing venture in the Brooks Range.

"After the trip I will write a book about Alaska and about the ones who came here before me," he said.

Belli will use his experiences on the trip to mirror what the Italians who came before him experienced during the gold rush. A film is also planned about the trip. The biggest problem he had was losing the trail. He said this happened one of two ways. Either a snow drift would bury the trail, or the snow would melt and he could not find the trail. Strong winds and other fierce weather conditions, including wet gear from the river overflow, slowed him on his way to Nome, but he made it here faster than his original estimate which was 50 to 60 days.

He said he saw nice places while on the trail. The things that stood out for him were the sunsets and wildlife, such as wolf, caribou and other animals he encountered along the way. And, of course, the great Alaskan people.

When Belli returns to Italy, he will spend time speaking on his adventure of traveling from Manley Hot Springs to Nome.