

The Tawny Giant

During its 101 years of existence, the Chinook has left indelible pawprints in American history. Here, in a story from the pages of the Chinook Club of America's Chinook Advocate, we present the life and times of a "Husky half-bred" named Chinook, a tawny gentle giant who became the father of his breed.

Chinook's destiny was tied to exploration. You won't know Chinook without knowing Arthur T. Walden. Born 1871 in Indianapolis, Walden, the son of an Episcopal minister, lived in Minnesota and later Boston. Disliking city life, Arthur move to his family's country home in Tamworth, New Hampshire, after he completed

school. There, he became the farm manager of Wonalancet, the 1,300-acre inn and farm of Kate Sleeper, the daughter of a prominent Bostonian.

At 24, restless and looking for adventure, Walden flipped a coin to decide between heading to South America or Alaska. He headed for Alaska in 1896. Walden traveled north, up the Inside Passage and over the Chilkoot Pass, down the Yukon River through the fearsome Whitehorse Rapids and downriver to Circle City.

Driven by the adventure, Walden took every job that came his way: prospector, logger, stevedore, river pilot, and the job that he most

By K.J. Krammes, Chinook Club of America

Meet Chinook, a dog of such gallant heart and noble bearing that they named a breed after him.



Arthur Walden and Chinook in 1922, the dawn of New England's sled-racing craze.

PHOTOS COURTESY CHINOOK CLUB OF AMERICA. EXCEPT WHERE NOTED

enjoyed, “dog punching” (hauling freight by dog-sled). He later wrote a book about his time in Alaska and called it *Dog Puncher in the Yukon*. His colorful descriptions of his adventures gave his book an enduring quality and it is still considered a northland classic. Walden’s favorite lead dog during this time, was a large Husky cross that he named “Chinook” after the warm winter winds.



BIRTH OF A LEGEND

Walden returned to Wonalancet six years later, and in December of 1902, he and Kate Sleeper married. He brought a variety of dogs to Wonalancet Farm and began

Walden and his racing team at a 1920s winter carnival. Walden’s sled was sponsored by Stevens & Co., “Makers of Great Axes.”



Old Chinook, around the time of Byrd's Antarctic expedition.

breeding for dogs that possessed his ideal combination of strength, endurance, speed, and good nature. He put together a team of four half-bred Saint Bernards in 1910; they were reportedly the first sled-dog team to work in New England since the Deerfield (Massachusetts) Massacre in

1704. Chinook's own parentage was tied to exploration, as well. His dam, Ningo, was a Greenland Husky (now known as the Inuit Dog) and the granddaughter of Polaris, Admiral Robert Peary's lead sled dog on his 1909 trip to the North Pole. His sire, Kim, was a large Mastiff-mix Walden

had picked up as a stray.

The breeding produced three pups born on January 17, 1917. Walden called them Rikki, Tikki, and Tavi after the characters in Rudyard Kipling's popular *Jungle Book*. Walden soon realized the intelligence of these pups, and finding the names Rikki



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*Commander
Richard E. Byrd*

and Tikki unworkable when calling them, renamed them Chinook and Hootchinoo after two outstanding lead dogs he had owned in Alaska.

Walden first used Hootchinoo as his lead dog but it was a full year later before Walden tried Chinook in lead position, and the unassuming Chinook astounded everyone with his intelligence, understanding, and trail sense. Walden was so taken with this dog that Chinook became Walden's most trusted leader, foundation sire of his continued kennel lines, and his constant companion. With Chinook's offspring, Walden was finally getting the quality of dogs that he was seeking. In 1920 his new line of "Husky half-breds" (as he called them), made their debut at the Gorham, New Hampshire, winter carnival, and he started seriously promoting dog sled-dog for draft, recreation, and sport, as well as for freighting supplies to logging camps.

Racing in New England began a year later, at the 1921 Gorham carnival. There were few entries (two teams of three dogs each, over a six-mile course) and Walden lost! But interest was building. He convinced the Brown Paper Company of Berlin,

New Hampshire, to sponsor the first Eastern International Dog Derby in 1922.

Four teams competed in this 123-mile race; Walden, with Chinook in lead, won hands down. Competition was keen, however; and Walden realized that Chinook, weighing just over 100 pounds in fit working condition, was too massive an animal to continue leading winning race teams. He started breeding Chinook with an eye for lighter-boned, faster offspring, who still carried Chinook's intelligence and trademark coloration.

TRAGEDY AND TRIUMPH

Disaster struck in 1923, when a distemper outbreak in the Chinook Kennel killed Walden's entire racing team, except Chinook. Walden took two years off from serious competition to concentrate on breeding another competitive team, but he never stopped supporting the sport. In 1924, the New England Sled Dog Club (NESDC) held its organizational meeting in the Waldenses' home and elected Arthur its first president.

The NESDC is still actively promoting sled dog racing today, and

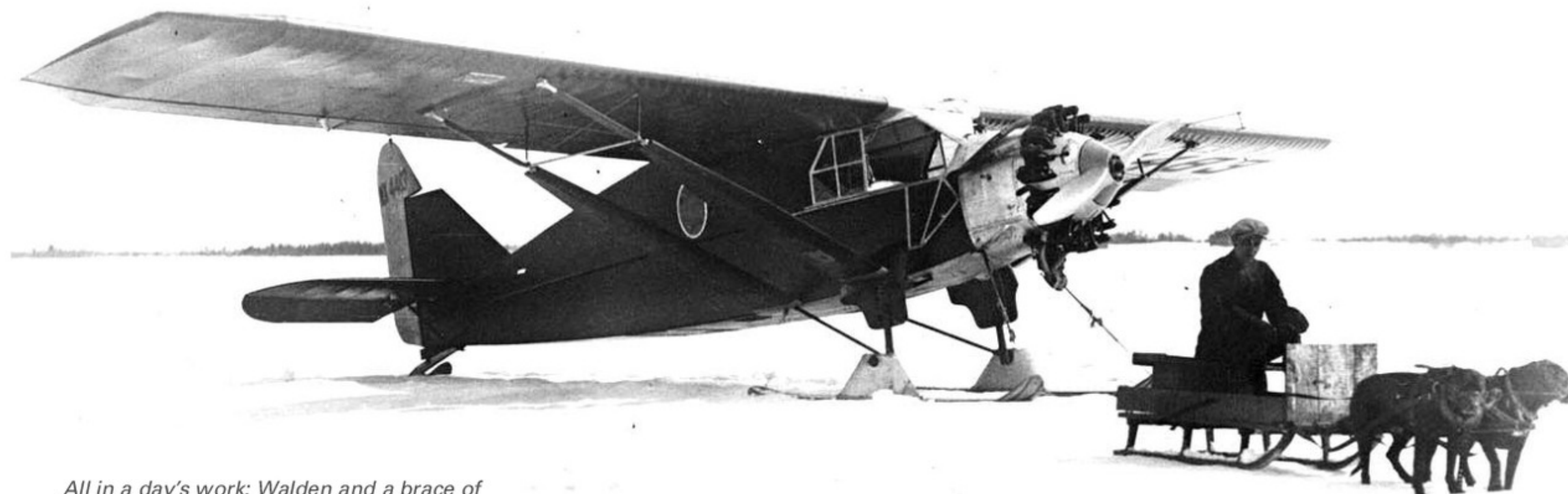
Walden is credited for bringing the sport of sled-dog racing to New England. In 1925, Walden returned to racing with a young but promising team of Chinook's sons, proclaiming his Chinook-shepherd crosses as his ideal for strength and stamina.

The popularity of Walden's "Chinook dogs" was growing, boosted by his January 1926 win in the race at Poland Spring, Maine. Interest was such that Walden was beginning to sell a few matched teams of his dogs to other racers.

In March of 1926, Walden and his team set out on an adventure that he had been considering for years but most people considered impossible: the first ascent of Mount Washington, the highest peak in the eastern United States, by dog team. While turned back by a blizzard on the first attempt, Walden and his team, with an aging Chinook in lead, successfully made the eight miles to the summit in eight hours' time!

THE NEXT ADVENTURE

The Chinook dogs' popularity among the racing community was short lived. Siberian Huskies took



All in a day's work: Walden and a brace of Chinook dogs hauling heavy freight at the Pole.

center stage after their part in the 1925 Nome Serum Run, delivering diphtheria vaccine during an outbreak.

At the Poland Spring race of January 1927, Siberians proved themselves much faster than anything the New Englanders had to offer and

gained instant popularity. A breeding kennel in Maine was established to supply Siberian Huskies to the racers in New England, and interest in Walden's dogs waned.

Walden didn't dwell on the loss but instead went seeking the next adventure. Hearing that Commander

Richard E. Byrd was planning a two-year expedition to Antarctica (BAE I), Walden volunteered. Even though at 58 he was well over the maximum age limit, he was selected as lead dog driver and trainer for the expedition. During the winter of 1927–28, dogs and drivers were assembled at the

Waldenses' Wonalancet Farm, and training began. Winter survival gear was also evaluated here in the harsh conditions of New Hampshire's White Mountains.

When not in training, Walden and Chinook joined Byrd on the lecture circuit to raise funds. Walden's success

promoting sled-dog racing had brought him fame, but it was Chinook's gentle temperament and beautiful looks that made him the crowd favorite. The Stieff company, manufacturers of high-end stuffed animals, made a replica of Chinook, one of the few stuffed animals made by them of a living animal from America—it is the equivalent today of an action figure and just as popular!

TOP DOG AT THE BOTTOM OF THE WORLD

Byrd's expedition departed in the summer of 1928. Chinook was now 11 years old, and 15 of his sons were included among the nearly 100 dogs selected to provide surface transportation on the Antarctic ice. Conditions were severe when they arrived in Antarctica, and there was little time to unload the 500 tons of supplies and build their new "city," Little America, before the four-month-long "night" set in. Walden's own team of 13 dogs was the largest team that first summer and amazed everyone.

Of Walden, Byrd wrote: "Seeing him rush his heavy loads along the trail, outstripping the younger men,



It was said that Walden aged 10 years the day he lost his old friend Chinook.

it was difficult to believe he was an old man. He was 58 years old, but he had the determination and strength of youth.” Of Chinook,

Byrd wrote: “... there was no doubting the fact that he was a great dog. ...Walden used him as kind of a ‘shock troop,’ throwing him into

harness when the going turned very hard. Then the gallant heart of the old dog would rise above the years and pull with the glorious strength

of a three-year-old.” And of their team, Byrd wrote: “On January 17th [1929], Walden’s single team of thirteen dogs moved 3,500 pounds of supplies from ship to base, a distance of 16 miles each trip, in two journeys. Walden’s team was the backbone of our transport.”

The night after this record was set, Chinook woke Walden several times by putting his paw on Walden’s shoulder. Each time, Walden gave Chinook a pat on the head and told him to lie back down. The next day, as Walden and his team left Little America, Chinook wandered away and was never found. Walden was devastated by the loss of his companion of so many years, and the

disappointment was deepened by the fact that Walden was unable to honor his desire to bury Chinook in harness. BAE team members said that Walden aged 10 years that day, and after that he no longer ran alongside the sleds.

Reports of Chinook’s death made international news and dog lovers, sledding enthusiasts and all those following the Byrd expedition mourned the loss of one of the greatest lead sled dogs in history. At Walden’s request, Route 113A from Tamworth to Wonalancet, New Hampshire, now bears the name “Chinook Trail” to honor his famous lead dog. In 1931, Arthur Walden received the Congressional Medal for his part in Admiral Richard Byrd’s Antarctic Expedition. Admiral Byrd and the rest of the team compiled a book of photos of the journey with Chinook and presented it to Walden.—**K.J.K.**

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A 1930 Chinook plush toy, by Steiff, recently sold at Christie’s for \$2,275.

PLUSH TOY: CHRISTIE’S