Indian Redwood Marathon (Redwood Empire Run)

On June 14, 1927, eleven Native Americans stood in front of San Francisco's City Hall waiting for the starter's gun that would begin a grueling footrace. The finish line was 480 miles north in Grants Pass, Oregon.

The Indian Redwood Marathon was conceived and organized by Chambers of Commerce in San Francisco, Grants Pass, and other towns along the route. Their newly designated "Redwood Empire" stretched from San Francisco north on Highway 101 to Crescent City, then east on Highway 199 to Grants Pass. The purpose of the run was to attract visitors to the Redwood Highway, which had been built through the area, which was rich in natural beauty, with mountains, rivers, and redwood trees.

The organizers of the footrace believed they could gain more media coverage if entrants were limited to Native Americans. Four of the competitors were members of the Karuk Tribe on the upper Klamath River. Three were brothers—John, Gorham, and Marion Southard. Believing the names too ordinary, race organizers gave them "real Indian names." John was called Mad Bull, Gorham became Rushing Water, and Marion was Fighting Stag. Another Karuk, Henry Thomas, was dubbed Flying Cloud.

The rules were simple: Each competitor had to run or walk all the way, and they could stop and rest or sleep whenever they wished. They also had to stay on the course, which went through Santa Rosa, Willits, Garberville, Eureka, and Crescent City, California, and then east over the coastal mountains through Cave Junction and into Grants Pass. Each was allowed a support car that carried food, drink, clothes, extra shoes, and anything else the runner wanted. Hotels in towns along the route offered a room and bed to the eleven men, but few of them accepted, preferring to sleep a short time along the road.

The eleven men stayed together for the first mile of the race, a short run to San Francisco Bay, where they were ferried to Sausalito. From the fourth day on, it became apparent that it was a two-man race between John Southard (Mad Bull) and Henry Thomas (Flying Cloud). Several of the others dropped out, and the rest fell farther behind. Southard was in the lead and determined to stay there. He later remembered: "I was resting when back down the road I saw Cloud come into view. I changed my shoes and took off. He never caught me."

Southard won in a time of seven days, twelve hours, and thirty-four minutes and claimed the first prize of $1,000. Thomas, eight hours back, took second and won $500.

The race was so successful in attracting attention that it was held again in 1928. This time Henry Thomas won. A third race was being planned for 1929, but with the stock market crash and onset of the Great Depression, it was cancelled and never run again.

Sixty years later, in 1987, six alumni of Grants Pass High School ran the Redwood Empire Indian Marathon. When they crossed the finish line in Grants Pass, waiting to congratulate them was eighty-three-year-old John Wesley Southard.

Written by Wayne Morrow

Further Reading:

Barnard, Jeff. "Relay Runners Re-create SF-Grants Pass Footrace." *Oregonian*, Oct. 14, 1987, p. B-4 2M.

Sanders, Garth. "Mad Bull's Run For Glory." *San Francisco Sunday Examiner & Chronicle*, April 8, 1984, pp. 26-29.

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