

# Excerpts from *Born to Go* by Charlie Berger with Erin Donahue



## Excerpt from EARLY YEARS - Brooklyn, New York: the '40s and '50s [pages 1-2]

What a time. 1946. The war was over. The Nazis defeated. Japan bombed, almost to obliteration. Hitler poisoned and shot by his own hand. Nuremburg trials. Nazis guilty on all counts. Two men became presidents, one a former haberdasher with no college background, and the other the hero of D-Day, the widely acknowledged WWII general who directed Germany's defeat. My family followed the headlines in the paper and over the radio. Eight years old and trying to piece things together, I heard the foreign sounding names and places: Dresden, Hiroshima, Bataan Death March, Iwo Jima, Nagasaki, Goebbels, Yamamoto, Hitler, Eichmann, Auschwitz, though we wouldn't know the true horrors behind these names for months and years to come.

What a time. Baseball was the national pastime. The American idols were the ball players, with names like Williams, Musial, Robinson, Mantle. Football stars were about as famous as the local grocer, and the runty 5'10" basketball players with short shorts, white skin, and no muscle were out there somewhere in oblivion. Boxing had its fans, and Joe Louis, Sugar Ray Robinson, and Willie Pep were just this side of national monuments.

We were all well aware that the world was in flux, but the changes that occurred in the mid 40s through the early 50s were an exponential increase over anything seen before. Indeed, the only parallel example lay sometime in the future, the 60s, with Moore's Law regarding technology doubling every eighteen months. Ball point pens, jet engines, antibiotics, nationwide TV, Levittown, were all being introduced to the world, but especially the American public. The GI Bill took tens of thousands of average Americans, and helped them become educated, knowledge-seeking people. The horse and buggy were long gone. Fluid drive and automatic transmissions were in the cars, and filter-tipped cigarettes were in the stores.

I almost came of age during this period. However, one really couldn't come of age as a pre-teen adolescent boy, age being more than a chronological fact. As a composite of time spent, events digested and experiences taken in, I felt too painfully confined to really expand. I was born to go. My inner, my outer, my entire self called for movement, for travel, for adventure, for 'faraway places with strange sounding names.' But I was stuck in what was almost a cell, at 353 Midwood Street, followed by 227-06 56th Avenue.

Brooklyn and Bayside bound me like iron bars. It wasn't the gulag, but it was my very own psychological prison.

Who was I? What was I to become? How could I find out? Inside my skin, I was closed, restricted, constricted, no circulation, no air, lungs compressed, brain dulled, genes trying to express themselves, but the weight of nurture buried them. Complain? I wouldn't think of it. Look at the rest of the world. Look at history.

Midwood Street in Brooklyn: a treeless line of houses stuck close together. I wondered if the last visible tree had been chopped down in the early 1800s. I floated like a bacterium on a dust particle, vibrating slightly in the air, feeling the breeze but unable to redirect. I seemed to know that childhood could be like that. With no supervised direction, I followed the rutted route. That's just the way it was. But I knew I had to get out. I lay in bed dreaming of escape. The rutted walls were very high.



**Excerpt from A Subculture of Madness:  
Endurance Sled Dog Races - The Iditarod [pages 196-200]**

These racing dogs, then, have been selectively bred over the past century or so to have endurance far beyond any other mammal, coupled with a strong desire and love of work. They are referred to as Alaskan huskies, a non-specific name for a variety of breeds and breeding, such as Siberian huskies, pointers, greyhounds, short haired pointers and some other ill-defined hounds, all mixed in various percentages together. Indeed, when one first sees these dogs, it comes as a surprise that they are not the big, hairy, lumbering powerful looking animals popularized in movies, Jack London novels and T.V. Rather, they are dogs averaging fifty pounds, with a lithe appearance comparable for their species to elite human marathon runners. In addition, the behavior has been modified and selected for non-aggression. You can't have a successful sled dog team with dogs fighting each other.

And indeed none of these dogs were fighting. Just pulling against their harnesses for their start time. Turning away from the teams, I went to collect my duffel bag and gear and head to my first few checkpoints: Skwentna, Finger Lakes, Rainey Pass. The race was a hundred miles underway. And I was no longer a rookie sled dog vet. I was ready for the toughest checkpoint, wondering if my early boxing matches in Myrna's living room prepared me for what was to come.

Billy Mayer, a volunteer bush pilot, picked me up to fly me into Nulato. It was getting late in the day as we approached the village on the bank of the three-quarter-mile wide frozen Yukon River. Billy pulled out his 357 revolver and said, "Take this, you may need it." Refusing the gun, Billy looked incredulous and put the gun away. After the river

landing, Billy taxied and took off again, needing to return to a more secure landing strip before dark, leaving me standing with my gear and supplies on the five-foot-thick frozen river. Through the dusky light, I noticed a black snow machine pulling a sled coming my way. The snow machine stopped thirty feet from me and a driver with an expression that would make Jack Palance look pleasant, pulled a little closer, and said, "Cost ya \$100 bucks," as I started to load my gear in his sled. Startled and uncertain, I reached in my pocket and said, "Tell you what, I'll give you a check for \$1000." He laughed, we shook hands, and off we went on the icy bumps to the village of Nulato.

I was dropped off at the villages' community center, and noticed the Iditarod Trail Committee had left a considerable amount of food for race volunteers and the local community. I immediately cooked up a large pot of spaghetti and opened up cans of chef boy-R-D sauce, inviting a few village elders to join me. This invitation immediately spread through the village, and before I knew it, all the elders showed up. The next day, I was invited to a village potlatch, where all manner of things are served up, most of them looking like last month's beaver tail stew. Considering my gastrointestinal tract under six layers of clothing and the outhouses at -35 below zero, I proceeded to fake my meal and not actually eat a thing, while befriending many of the elders. From then on, I loved Nulato and they loved me. I requested the checkpoint in future years, and was pleased to see that they requested me as well. I believe, with a little more time, I could have become mayor.



### Excerpt from EPILOGUE [page 391]

I am writing this not as an ending to what I consider my blessed life, but rather an acknowledgement to all that have given my existence meaning, depth and understanding. Nature has been at the forefront of all my interests, guiding my travels, lectures and pursuit of veterinary medicine. I thank, in part, my mother and father for placing me on a pony when I was five and a half years old. Something clicked. And a love for species other than my own came alive. I still mostly look at people as just another creature, a continuum of the bacteria, the fungi, the reptiles and amphibians, the birds and mammals that I have studied throughout my life.