

The Serum Run to Nome

By Michael A. Signal

A Deadly Disease Spreads

Even in most modern cities in the 1920s, diphtheria was a very dangerous and **contagious** disease. So when diphtheria broke out in the **remote** Alaskan town of Nome in 1925, it could have been devastating. Doctors knew how to treat diphtheria, and their patients would usually make full recoveries if the disease was treated in time. But the doctors needed a special **serum** for the treatment. When they **administered** the diphtheria serum to infected people quickly, it wouldn't take long for them to get better. But even the best doctors could only treat diphtheria with the right serum. If the serum wasn't available, the disease would worsen. It would start to damage important organs and become **fatal**. It could also spread quickly between people and kill many people.

When diphtheria hit Nome in January, there was no serum on hand. Nome's only doctor made a frantic call for serum. Other cities had serum to spare, but no way to get it to Nome. No motor vehicle of the time was a match for the frigid winter of north Alaska. Deep snow and temperatures well below zero made airplanes and automobiles useless. Ships could not pass through the frozen water, and the nearest train station was almost 700 miles away! The situation looked **bleak**.

Out of Options

With air, automobile, boat, and train travel out of the question, there had to be another option to get the serum to Nome. There was one other way to travel over long distances in the cold snow of harsh Alaskan winters. The governor of Alaska authorized a dog sled relay to Nome. During a relay race, teams of runners work together to run the full distance, each runner taking his or her own turn. When one runner stops, another takes over. During the relay to Nome, teams of **mushers** and their sled dogs would take turns travelling across the harsh Alaskan frontier towards Nome.

The relay's first musher, a man named "Wild" Bill Shannon bundled himself and the 20-pound package of diphtheria serum to protect them both from the bitter cold. The temperature was 50 degrees below zero when Bill's team left the Nenana train station just before midnight on January 27, but the temperature continued to drop as Bill and his dogs raced through the night towards the next team. The relay would continue like this, day and night. Each musher would carry the **precious** bundle for nearly 100 frozen miles and then pass it to the next musher.

The mushers would not be stopped by frostbite, blinding snowstorms, or bone-chilling temperatures. A few patients had already died in Nome, and more people had been **diagnosed** with diphtheria. That medicine had to get to Nome—fast!

What is diphtheria?

It's no surprise that you may have never heard of the disease diphtheria. Today, thanks to the invention of an **immunization**, diphtheria is extremely rare. However, not long ago it was a dangerous illness. Diphtheria infects the throat and nose. People can spread it to one another by coughing, sneezing, or by touching the same objects.

Four-Legged Heroes

Norton Sound is a 70-mile body of water to the west of Alaska. Ships can only access Nome through Norton Sound for about half of the year. In the winter, the water becomes too icy for boats. Leonhard Seppala took a shortcut over a frozen part of the sound, even though he did not know if the ice would break.

From “Wild” Bill to Leonhard Seppala, who raced across the unstable, frozen surface of Norton Sound, every musher knew he was risking his life to deliver the life-saving serum across 674 dangerous miles to Nome. A fracture in the ice could have sent Seppala and his team into water so cold that they would have died in minutes. But the mushers weren’t the only heroes. Each dog also faced the same dangerous, blizzard conditions. The dog teams ran at blistering paces and reached Nome in seven days. It may sound like a long time, but with winds as strong as 80 miles per hour, and temperature that averaged 50 degrees below zero, it was amazingly fast!

In the early morning hours of February 2nd, Gunnar Kaasen reached Nome and delivered the serum to Dr. Welsh. Kaasen’s lead dog, Balto, would be known as a hero for running the last leg of the most important dog sled race. Balto became especially famous because, before the serum run, he wasn’t considered a very good racing dog or a strong leader. But he proved that he was both. Some people believed that Balto got too much credit. Seppala’s lead dog, Togo, guided his team for 90 miles over the **perilous** sheet of ice that covered Norton Sound. Seppala thought that Togo was the real hero of the relay. But Dr. Welsh and the people of Nome knew the real truth. They were all heroes.

Why Dog Sleds?

The same climate and conditions that **isolated** Nome from automobiles and airplanes created the **necessity** for other ways to travel. **Native** Alaskans had used dogs to haul people and cargo long before the car was invented. By the 1920s, Alaskan sled dogs weren’t just used for work. People had begun racing teams of fast, strong, hearty dogs. Dogsledding became a popular sport.

Before the serum run, there was already a trail for sled dogs from Nenana to Nome that was used to bring mail to the distant town. The



This picture, taken just after the serum run, shows Gunnar Kaasen and his lead dog, Balto. Balto quickly became famous as a hero dog. Just ten months after Balto helped save the lives of the people in Nome, the artist Frank Roth unveiled a statue in honor of Balto in New York City’s Central Park.

Image courtesy of Wikimedia Commons and the National Institutes of Health.
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Gunnar_Kaasen_with_Balto.jpg

mushers and their dogs knew the trail and were experienced at racing through it in bad weather. Even so, only the best mushers and sled dog teams could be trusted to attempt the journey.

Commemorating the Serum Run

Today, dog sled teams in Alaska continue to race across the frozen landscape. But now, dog sled races are just for fun. Improvements in roads, automobiles and airplanes mean that even towns as isolated as Nome are reachable without the help of dogs. The most famous dog sled race is called the Iditarod. The Iditarod is a 1,049-mile dog sled race from the city of Anchorage, Alaska all the way to Nome.

Dog sled racing isn't a sport for everyone. You need special equipment, well-conditioned dogs, and lots of snow. Alaska is a perfect place. Dogsledding is a sport that mushers and dogs seem to enjoy. Every year, adventurous mushers and dog teams make the journey to Nome looking for victory. They race to win, but they also commemorate the fearless teams that raced against death in 1925.

Glossary

Administer (<i>v</i>)	To give a dose of medicine
Bleak (<i>adj</i>)	hopeless or helpless, unsolvable
Contagious (<i>adj</i>)	Able to spread from person to person
Diagnose (<i>v</i>)	To identify an illness in a patient
Fatal (<i>adj</i>)	Deadly
Immunization (<i>n</i>)	A powerful medicine, usually administered as a shot, which protects the body from a certain disease
Isolated (<i>adj</i>)	Separated from other people or locations by a great distance
Musher (<i>n</i>)	The person that commands or directs a team of sled dogs
Necessity (<i>n</i>)	Something that is needed for survival
Native (<i>n</i>)	A person that lives in the same area in which he was born
Perilous (<i>adj</i>)	Dangerous or life threatening
Remote (<i>adj</i>)	Far away from other people or locations, separated from others by a great distance
Serum (<i>n</i>)	Medicine used to treat or cure an illness or disease