

The Epidemic

Excerpts from iditarod.com

In January of 1925, two Eskimo children died in Nome, Alaska. The town's doctor, Curtis Welch, diagnosed the cause of death as diphtheria. His supply of diphtheria antitoxin was 5 years old, and (if effective) only good for a few inoculations.



The nearest source of antitoxin was in Anchorage, but how to get it quickly to Nome? Some suggested an airplane, but air travel was in its infancy. All



the planes available were of open cockpit design, flown only in summer. The thought of piloting an open cockpit plane at -60 degrees was enough to give anyone pause. Even if the pilot survived, the airplane probably would not.

It was decided that the safest way to get the serum to Nome was by rail from Anchorage to Nenana and from Nenana to Nome by dogsled. Alaska's

Governor ordered that a relay team of dogsleds be organized. Musher would travel to designated mail shelter cabins and wait their turn to transport the serum.

Shortly after midnight on January 27th, 'Wild Bill' Shannon received the 20-pound container of serum from the train conductor. 'Wild Bill' drove his team of nine malamutes to Tolovana. There he met Edgar Kalland, a part-time mail carrier. The two took the package to a roadhouse to warm it. The temperature outside was -56 degrees. The race to Nome went on again. Musher transported the serum from one outpost to another, covering 465 miles in 75 hours. More than 200 miles remained and reports in Nome were that the epidemic was spreading rapidly.

The wind was howling off of the Bering Sea when Henry Ivanoff handed the serum to Leonard Seppala. Seppala, who had driven his dogs 170 miles in 3 days from Nome, decided to take a gamble. He drove his team directly across frozen Norton Bay. The team battled against gale-force winds and temperatures approaching -100 degrees, following the lead dog, Togo. Charlie Olson took the serum from Seppala at Dexter's Roadhouse, 70 miles from Nome at 3:00 pm. On January 31st.



Olson gave the serum to Gunnar Kaasen at Bluff. Balto, a husky that belonged to Leonard Seppala, led Kaasen's team. Balto was part of Seppala's 2nd-string team, which is why Balto was not with Seppala on this trip.

High winds flipped the sled over at Bonanza Flats. Kaasen looked for the serum, but it was not on the sled. In the failing light, Kaasen stripped off his gloves, and searched bare-handed through the snow, finally retrieving the package.

Kaasen's team staggered into Nome at 5:30 am. On February 2nd, delivering the serum to Dr. Welch, who quickly began to administer vaccines. No further deaths from diphtheria were reported.

The twenty teams that participated traveled 674 miles in less than 5 and ½ days, under horrific conditions. All recognized participants were given a 'donation' from the public fund, as well as a per diem paid by the Territory. Most earned between \$30 to \$40.

The Iditarod dogsled race commemorates the
“Great Race for Mercy”.