



## A Tale from the Trail

Adapted from The Cruellest Miles

*"It takes a Northman to survive the North. Not only the cold...but the terrible, silent menace of it, the soundless days without end; when the thought of being the only human in some vast stretch of its white wastes is too terrifying a thought for one companion-loving human to carry and keep his mental balance."*

*Bert Hansen, a U.S. Deputy Marshal of Alaska's Interior*

Many have heard of "Balto", the sled dog, but few have heard of "Wild Bill" Shannon and his team of courageous sled dogs. Wild Bill was the first musher in the relay to deliver the diphtheria serum to Nome in 1925. Lanky and fair-haired, Wild Bill was a jack-of all trades and, like so many other men in the territory, master of quite a few. He was a mail driver, who was known to have the fastest dog team in the area. His skills as a driver, combined with a combustible mixture of hot temper, sharp wit and willingness to take risks on the trail no doubt accounted for this nickname.

On his way to the railroad station, Shannon had sensed that the temperature was dropping well below the minus 30 to minus 40 degree mark. When it was this cold, your breath formed into ice crystals and the air pinched your nostrils as you drew it in. It was like the sting of a bee and the pain cut short every deep breath.

Wild Bill was about to break the "rule of the 40's". The rule warned against running a dog team in temperatures below minus 40 degrees and above 40 degrees. At 40 below, 2 degrees below the point at which mercury freezes, there is little room for error. Tonight, actually, it was 50 below. A cup of boiling water flung into the air, for example, would become, as if by magic, a ghostly cloud of vapor. Steam rose from every finger on a bared hand as the vapor that passes continually through the pores became more visible. Spit froze. At 50 below, one driver explained, "a lost glove means a lost hand."

The leader of Shannon's nine-dog crew was Blackie, a five-year-old husky. He could be trusted. The eight other members of the team, all two-year-olds, were a different story. They would need close monitoring.

It would have been wiser for Shannon to wait at least until morning given the falling temperatures, but "If people are dying...let's get started", Shannon told the Post Office Inspector.

Taking the precious 20 pound box of serum from the train at 9:00 p.m., Wild Bill and his team of nine dogs headed out into the cold night on the first leg of the journey.

As Wild Bill traveled, he had great difficulty in staying warm. It became harder and harder, he realized, to warm his extremities. He had to take immediate action. At times he would get off the sled and run in front of his team to keep the blood flowing to his arms and legs. He began to pedal more frequently on the runners. At 3:00 a.m. he reached Campbell's Roadhouse in Minto, Wild Bill's face was black with frostbite. Cub, Jack and Jet, three of his dogs, were injured from the cold. It was sixty-two degrees below zero.

After waiting four hours to warm up, Wild Bill headed back into the cold night. He left Cub, Jack and Jet behind. He was now traveling with only six sled dogs into the frigid, cold wilderness. Thirteen miles later, Wild Bill Shannon reached the roadhouse at Tolovana where Edgar Kalland was to continue on with the serum.

Wild Bill's journey was over. It was many weeks before his face healed enough so that he could shave. Cub, Jack and Jet died from their injuries.

Balto was immortalized for being the leader on the first team to reach Nome, but few remember those dogs that gave their all for the children of Nome.

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