

Land, Sea, Air / Dog Mushing

People of the North / Heroes & Scoundrels

Togo and Balto, Dog Heroes

By Jennifer Houdek and Tricia Brown

While many details of the great Serum Run of 1925 have faded into history, the names of two famous Alaska dogs, Togo and Balto, have spanned the decades.

Their owner, Norwegian-born Leonhard Seppala, came to Nome during the height of its gold rush on June 14, 1900. He investigated some gold claims of his own, and later worked for a mining company, employed by Jafet Lindeberg, one of the three famous “Lucky Swedes” who discovered gold on Anvil Creek on 1898. Seppala drove dogs between the camps, moving supplies and transporting miners who needed medical care in Nome. The dogs were imports from Siberia, a team of huskies that were intended for a polar expedition headed by Roald Amundsen. When the expedition was cancelled, the team was given to Seppala. Togo, named for the Japanese admiral, Togo Heihachiro (1848-1934), was born in 1913 and developed into Seppala’s favorite.

Seppala handily won Nome’s All-Alaska Sweepstakes in 1915, 1916, and 1917 with his Siberians. In the 1916 All-Alaska Sweepstakes he traveled 410 miles in 80 hours, 38 minutes, and 5 seconds. He also held the record time between Nenana and Nulato as well as many other local races in the years to follow. Seppala and Togo were celebrities. And those who lost against Seppala’s lean, smaller-frame dogs disdainfully called them “Siberian rats.”

Togo was twelve years old when he and Seppala were called to assist in the epic rescue effort in 1925. An outbreak of diphtheria had bloomed in Nome and without a delivery of antitoxin, the population of the entire region would be exposed. Thousands would die. With Seppala, nineteen other dog mushers and their teams were enlisted to carry the life-

saving diphtheria serum in a relay across 675 miles of wilderness during the dead of winter. Gunnar Kaasen, an assistant to Seppala, chose a three-year-old freight dog named Balto to lead on his portion of the relay. The heavier black husky was named after one of the first men to cross the Greenland Ice Cap, Samuel J. Balto.

Togo and Balto, both Seppala Siberians, would perform spectacularly, demonstrating their superior bloodlines and training.

Of the twenty mushers on the relay, Seppala ran the greatest distance, and through some of the most dangerous conditions on the trail. Originally Seppala and one other musher were going to carry the serum all the way, the first musher traveling from Nenana to Nulato; Seppala, from Nulato to Nome. Thinking it would be up to him and the other man, Seppala was already on the trail when territorial Governor Scott Bone amended the plan to incorporate mail-carrier mushers and make it a twenty-team relay. Unaware of the change, Seppala took a shortcut across Norton Sound in perilous conditions. Some 170 miles into the journey, just outside Shakloolik, Seppala was intercepted by another musher who shouted that he had the serum. Seppala collected it, turned and carried it to Golovin, another 91 miles. In the end, Togo and the Seppala team ran 260 miles, while other mushers ran between 25 and 40 miles each. Bursting with pride, Seppala would later say that his old Togo had never performed better.

In one account of Togo's bravery, Seppala and the team were stranded for several hours on a Norton Sound ice floe after the ice on which they were traveling broke free. At Seppala's urging, Togo jumped across a five-foot gap to shore ice and threw himself into his harness to pull the floe closer to shore. As the story goes, his harness snapped from the strain of pulling, but Togo jumped into the water after it, took the harness in his teeth and kept pulling, closing the gap so the team could get to shore.

Gunnar Kaasen was exhausted, frostbitten and snowblind when Balto led him into Nome on February 2, 1925, after treading 53 miles of rugged trail. Kaasen had relied heavily on Balto to find the way during whiteout conditions, and the young dog had performed admirably.

Balto would be celebrated in newspapers across the national as the dog who delivered the serum and saved the town. After the race, Kaasen, who by then owned Balto, took his leader and other team members on a celebrity tour of the West Coast for a year. A short film titled, *Balto's Race to Nome*, was made to honor the lead dog. And in December 1925, a statue of Balto was erected in New York City's Central Park. Seppala was stung that it was Balto, not Togo, who was the darling of the country. He commented: "It was almost more than I could bear when the 'newspaper dog' Balto received a statue for his 'glorious achievements.'"

After touring, Kaasen sold Balto and the rest of the team to a vaudeville sideshow. When a Cleveland businessman called attention to the dogs' horrible living conditions, the city's people held fundraisers to purchase them, with children donating their pennies for the cause of rescuing Balto. The dog and his companions were moved to the Cleveland Zoo, and thousands came to cheer him on his first day in retirement. Balto lived there comfortably until his death in 1933 at age eleven. He was later mounted and added to the collection of the Cleveland Museum of Natural History. Long after his death, he was toasted in children's books, television specials, and even in an animated feature film produced by Steve Spielberg.

About a year after the serum run, Seppala took Togo and forty other dogs on a cross-country tour with an Alaska Native dog handler named Kingiak. They created a stir from the West Coast through the Midwest and onward to New England. During ten days in 1929, they drew 20,000 people to New York City's Madison Square Garden.

Seppala moved to the East Coast for several years, splitting his time between Maine and Alaska, and developing another kennel of racers. He competed with his beloved sleek, lightweight Siberian huskies and enjoyed watching the aged Togo continue to beat the odds. In his book, *Early Sled Dog Racing in Maine: A Frying Pan of Hot Meat Wrecked My Chances in the First Race*, Seppala described how Togo, now in his teens, entered a weight-pull contest against another dog twice his size. His competitor was a large mixed-

breed dog named Chinook, owned by another musher and dog breeder, Arthur Walden, who had prospected in the Yukon.

“Walden had bragged that his Chinook would break out and pull a heavier load than any dog in the country,” Seppala wrote. “I had watched his dogs perform and answered with a challenge that my Togo, who weighed only 48 pounds in harness, could pull any load that Walden’s Chinook could. Although neither of us smoked, we bet two cigars on the result.

“The sled was loaded with several sacks of cement onto which Walden hooked his dog. Chinook could not even start the load until Walden had kicked the runners loose from the snow. I knew that Togo could do better but felt that here was an opportunity to inject a little comedy into the act. Kingiak, my Eskimo helper, hid one of Walden’s farm chickens under his parka and stepped out ahead of Togo a distance of 20 feet or so. On my command, Togo leaped to one side with his full weight straining against the collar, then another leap to the left and the sled runners were loosened. Just then Kingiak let the chicken clap his wings and Togo was upon him in a couple of jumps with a loaded sled following easily behind. Walden was a good sport and conceded that Togo had won the cigars for me.”

When Togo was about fourteen, Seppala gave him to his Maine kennel partner, Elizabeth Ricker, trusting that Togo would live out his life in ease. He later spoke of how difficult it was to say goodbye and hit the trail without Togo for the first time in twelve years. In 1928 Seppala made Chatanika, near Fairbanks, his Alaska home, and was warmed when the American Kennel Club accepted the Siberian Husky as a registered breed in 1930. In later years he and his wife Constance would split their time between Seattle and Fairbanks.

Togo would live out his life in Maine, and Seppala would visit him often. The little dog with the big heart died on December 5, 1929, at age sixteen, and his remains were mounted and returned to Alaska. Today he stands in a glass case at Iditarod Trail Sled

Dog Race Headquarters in Wasilla, Alaska, where admirers can view the husky who was Nome's dog hero in the Serum Run of 1925.

LINKS:

International Seppala Association:

<http://www.seppalas.org/leonhardseppala.htm>

Siberian Husky Club of America:

<http://www.shca.org/shcahp2d.htm>

Togo's "Retirement":

http://www.seppalas.org/seppala_walden.htm

Arthur Walden and Chinook:

<http://www.chinook-dogs.org/history.html>

"Balto the Wonder Dog," Roadside America:

<http://www.roadsideamerica.com/pet/balto.html>

Cleveland Museum of Natural History, Balto Fan Club:

<http://www.cmnh.org>

VISIT THE LIBRARY FOR MORE INFORMATION:

Alaska's libraries hold audio, visual, and written material about the Serum Run of 1925, Leonhard Seppala, and the famous dogs. Visit your local library or go online to see what's available in holdings all over the state. Take these simple steps:

1. Access **SLED** (State Library Electronic Doorway) at <http://sled.alaska.edu/library.html>.
2. Click on the listing for **ALNCat** (the Alaska Library Network Catalog) to view the Basic Search window. Go to the Keyword field, and type in **TOGO, BALTO** or **LEONHARD SEPPALA**.

MORE READING:

Salisbury, Gay and Laney Salisbury. *The Cruellest Miles: The Heroic Story of Dogs and Men in a Race against an Epidemic*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2005.

The Siberian Husky, Arnett and Hills, eds. Estacada, Ore.: International Siberian Husky Club, 2nd edition, 1977. Out-of-print booklet contains these articles on pages 1-15: "Norwegian from Alaska" by Linda Arnett, D. McLeod and Peggy Olsen; "A

Personal Glimpse: Notes from Leonhard Seppala and His Daughter,” by Sigrid Seppala Hanks; “Remembrances,” by Leonhard Seppala.

The Siberian Husky, Thomas, Stead, and Wolfe, eds. Elkhorn, WI: International Siberian Husky Club, Inc., 1994. History section, pages 3-32, includes these articles: “Eighty-five Years Ago,” by Louise Foley; “The Siberian Dog,” by Irving Reed; “The Serum Run of 1925—Togo and Balto,” by Bob Thomas; Seppala Arrives in New England,” by Bob Thomas; “Seppala/Ricker Kennel, 1927-1931,” by Bob Thomas.

Seppala, Leonhard and Elizabeth Miller Ricker. *Seppala, Alaskan Dog Driver*. Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1930; reprinted 1981, Arvada, CO: Hoflin Publishing, Ltd.

Seppala, Leonhard with Raymond Thompson. *Early Sled Dog Racing in Maine: A Frying Pan of Hot Meat Wrecked my Chances in the First Race*. Lynnwood, Wash.: Raymond Thompson Press, 197-.

Walden, Arthur T. *A Dog Puncher on the Yukon*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1928.

For Juvenile Readers:

Blake, Robert J. *Togo*. New York: Philomel, 2002.

Kimmel, Elizabeth Cody and Nora Koerber. *Balto and the Great Race*. Boston, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin, 2005.

Miller, Debbie S. and Jon Van Zyle. *The Great Serum Run: Blazing the Iditarod Trail*. New York: Walker & Company, 2002

Standiford, Natalie. *Bravest Dog Ever: The True Story of Balto*. New York: Random House, 1989.

ARCHIVAL MATERIAL:

Darling, Esther Birdsall. *The Great Dog Races of Nome held under the Auspices of the Nome Kennel Club, Nome, Alaska: Official Souvenir History*. Nome, Alaska: Nome Kennel Club, 1916.

Official Diary of the Sweet-Wilson Expedition into the Frozen Yundra of the Far North, Bruce A. Wilson, Merylynn A. Wilson, and Ozzie Sweet, 1946. Alaska State Library. Diary of a trip to Alaska, April 27-August 31, 1946, with Ozzie Sweet, a friend and magazine photographer from Connecticut. They sought “real Alaskan” stories and opinions on issues facing post-war Alaska; includes an interview with Leonhard Seppala. The diary’s purpose was to gather notes for later writing. Records many interviews with Alaskans met during the trip including World War II veterans. In July, the two were joined by their wives, who contributed background notes to the manuscript. Sweet’s photography notes are at the end. Handwritten index by Wilson is at the beginning.

FILM and VIDEO:

Leonhard and Constance Seppala with puppies, 1947-1952, perhaps in Chatanika, Alaska. (48 seconds/color/silent). Alaska Digital Archives:
<http://vilda.alaska.edu/cdmg11/image/2838.mov>

The Serum Race to Nome. Larry Beck and Tom Highes, 1985. VHS (30 min). Anchorage, Alaska: Alaska Heritage Review. Larry Beck narrates the story of the dog mushing relay race to Nome with serum for the diphtheria epidemic.

AUDIO:

Salisbury, Gay and Laney Salisbury. *The Cruellest Miles: The Heroic Story of Dogs and Men in a Race against an Epidemic*. Read by Barrett Whitener. 7 sound cassettes. Santa Ana, Calif.: Books on Tape, 2003.