

Land, Sea, Air / Dog Mushing

The Serum Run of 1925

By Jennifer Houdek

Readers across the country eagerly followed the headlines that January of 1925. The “Great Race of Mercy” held their rapt attention. Children were dying in Nome, Alaska, and the diphtheria epidemic would surely kill the entire population without the necessary antitoxin to save them. The nation held its breath as twenty Alaskan mushers and their dog teams relayed the lifesaving serum across 674 miles of the vast, frozen territory. It was heroism at its best.

The only available diphtheria antitoxin was in Anchorage, more than a thousand miles away, and dogsled was the surest means of transportation to get the serum to Nome. Many of the 150 dogs lost their lives and several mushers succumbed to frostbite as the medicine traveled to Nome in a record-breaking five and a half days. The mushers, most of them Native Alaskans, were motivated by the urgency of saving lives and preventing the disease from spreading to surrounding villages. They had recently witnessed the devastation of the 1918-19 Spanish influenza pandemic that had ravaged every Native village. A detailed history of the serum run is retold by Gay Salisbury and Laney Salisbury in *The Cruellest Miles: The Heroic Story of Dogs and Men in a Race against an Epidemic*.

In the winter of 1924-25, Dr. Curtis Welch was the only doctor in Nome and the outlying communities. He had noticed the first case of diphtheria in December, although at first he dismissed it as tonsillitis, since no other symptoms of the highly contagious disease had been reported in town. However, after the deaths of two Iñupiaq children and an unusually large number of tonsillitis cases in town, Welch suspected something worse. In January, a month after the first fatality, Welch saw signs of diphtheria in three-year old Billy Barnett, who suffered from a high fever and weakness. He also noted a membrane

that, in diphtheria cases, typically grows in mucous membranes in the throat and nasal passages, making breathing difficult and then impossible.

Welch had 8,000 units of diphtheria antitoxin on hand, but it had expired the previous summer. He had ordered a new supply from the health commissioner in Juneau, however the port closed for the winter before the serum arrived. Welch, not willing to risk using expired antitoxin, refused to treat the boy. Billy Barnett died the next day, and another child fell ill. That seven-year-old died the same day she was diagnosed, even though Welch did treat her with 6,000 units of the expired serum. At an emergency town council meeting that night, leaders called for a quarantine.

Desperate, Welch sent a radio telegram to all the major Alaska towns, to territorial Governor Scott Bone in Juneau, and to the U.S. Public Health Service in Washington D.C. He wrote to the Health Service: *An epidemic of diphtheria is almost inevitable here. Stop. I am in urgent need of one million units of diphtheria antitoxin, stop, mail is only form of transportation. Stop. I have made application to Commissioner of Health of the Territories for antitoxin already. Stop. There are about 3000 (sic) white natives in the district.*

By the end of January, Welch had twenty more confirmed cases and fifty more at risk. He knew the inevitable: without the antitoxin, the disease would kill the area's entire population of about 10,000 people.

Mark Summer, superintendent of the territorial Board of Health, proposed the idea of using two of the fastest dog teams to get the antitoxin to Nome. Leonhard Seppala, a famed musher, who, with his lead dog Togo had won the All-Alaska Sweepstakes three times, was suggested as one of the teams. Many opposed the idea of using dog teams and pushed to fly the serum to Nome. Carl Ben Eielson had completed the first airmail flight in Alaska on February 21, 1924, flying from Fairbanks to McGrath, but winter flight was still viewed as experimental, and Nome was a long way from Fairbanks. The only

available aircraft were water-cooled World War I planes that were not reliable in cold weather. In the end, the dogsled relay was voted in and Seppala was contacted.

The original plan involved only two mushers: one from Nome and one from Nenana. They would rendezvous at Nulato and pass the serum. Governor Bone believed he had a better plan: a relay of mail-carrier mushers along the trail. Although Seppala was already up to the challenge of doing the lengthy run on his own, the extra mushers would allow for rest. However, Seppala would still run the most dangerous part, crossing Norton Sound twice.

The governor contacted Edward Wetzler, the U.S. Post Office inspector, and arranged the use of his best mail carriers and their teams for the relay. The Northern Commercial Company already had a network of telephones and telegraph stations in roadhouses along many trails, so the drivers would be contacted through the roadhouses. The mushers were told to wait at an assigned roadhouse for their turn in the relay.

By then, however, Seppala had already left Nome, unaware of Governor Bone's decision to add extra mushers to the relay. He drove his team toward Nulato, still following the first plan to rendezvous with a Nenana-to-Nulato musher. In another setback, his route bypassed the villages with telephone and telegraph systems, so he didn't know that he was supposed to stop at Shaktoolik and wait there. The only hope was for the driver from the north to catch Seppala on the trail.

Although a million units of the serum were located in Seattle, it would take more than a week to ship the medicine to Nome. Fortunately, chief of surgeon Dr. John Beeson found 300,000 units at the Alaska Railroad Hospital in Anchorage. To keep the serum from freezing, it was wrapped in a quilt for insulation and packed in a cylinder. The serum was given to the conductor of the train, Frank Knight, and began its first leg of the relay, from Anchorage to Nenana by train.

The first musher in the relay was William “Wild Bill” Shannon, who met the train in Nenana. Shannon and his lead dog Blackie left Nenana on January 27 at 9:00 p.m. in frigid temperatures—as low as -62° F. Although Shannon ran next to the sled to keep warm, he developed hypothermia and parts of his face were frostbitten. Shannon stopped and built a fire in Minto and, after a four-hour break, set off again for Tolovana. There he passed the serum to the next musher, Edgar Kallands, who drove it to Manley Hot Springs.

The serum continued its journey to Nome, passing from one musher to the next in intervals roughly thirty miles apart. Charlie Evans at Bishop Mountain received the serum by the third day. Evans arrived in Nulato carrying two lead dogs in his sled, dead from exposure. He passed the serum to Tommy Patsy there, and onward it went to Kaltag, where a man known as “Jackscrew” received the serum. He carried it to Victor Anagick, who took it from Old Woman Shelter to Myles Gonangnan at Unalakleet. Gonangnan, noticing a storm over the Norton Sound, decided against crossing the Sound, even though it was shorter, and instead traveled around it. It was -70° F and whiteout conditions in Shaktoolik when he arrived at 3:00 p.m. on January 31. He next passed the serum to Henry Ivanoff, who had been waiting in Shaktoolik just in case Seppala didn’t arrive.

Seppala wasn’t far off. Leaving Nome for Nulato on January 27, he had traveled 170 miles by January 31 was on the other side of the same storm that Myles Gonangnan had encountered over Norton Sound. However, unlike Gonangnan, Seppala chose to attempt the shortcut across the Sound. Racing to get across before the storm hit, Seppala didn’t see Henry Ivanoff at first. The musher had paused alongside the trail outside Shaktoolik. He was straightening out his team, which had gotten tangled after an encounter with a reindeer. Ivanoff shouted at Seppala as he was passing. “The serum! The serum! I have it here!”

With Togo in lead, Seppala grabbed the bundle and headed back across Norton Sound. They did not rest, but pressed on into the darkness. Togo was an exceptional leader

already famous throughout the region for numerous wins in the All-Alaska Sweepstakes and other Nome Kennel Club races. Togo took Seppala in a straight line across the Sound, in the dark and across ice floes, arriving at the Isaac's Point roadhouse at 8:00 p.m. Seppala and his tired dogs had traveled 84 miles in addition to the 170 they had undertaken before obtaining the serum. They took a short rest and left again at 2:00 a.m. on February 1, heading into another fierce storm. After following the shoreline and ascending the 5,000 feet of Little McKinley Mountain, Seppala arrived in Golovin. There Charlie Olson was waiting to take the package further down the trail.

Meanwhile, despite attempts to quarantine the sick, diphtheria continued to spread through Nome. The number of cases rose as the storm worsened. The need for the serum was urgent, but Dr. Welch, not willing to risk losing the serum, ordered a break from the relay.

Olson acquired frostbite while traveling in -70° F temperatures. He struggled into Bluff on February 1 at 7:00 p.m. The next musher, Gunnar Kaasan, waited three hours for the storm to subside before departing. In lead for Kaasan was a dog named Balto, who was part of the Seppala kennel and on loan to Kaasan. The storm grew steadily worse and Kaasan relied heavily on Balto to make out the trail.

In whiteout conditions and with limited visibility, Kaasan passed the next stop, Solomon, without realizing it. The winds were so powerful that his sled was blown over, and the serum was knocked out. Digging in the snow with his bare hands, Kaasan suffered frostbite to his fingers. Forging ahead, Kaasan reached Point Safety on February 3 at 3:00 a.m.

Kaasan had covered the trail in good time, and when he arrived, he found Ed Rohn asleep, as he was expecting Kaasan much later. Estimating the time it would take for Rohn to suit up and prepare his team, Kaasan decided to carry the serum onward himself for the remaining 25 miles to Nome. Snow-blind and tired, Kaasan and his team reached Front Street in Nome on February 2 at 5:30 a.m. Remarkably, after Welch thawed the

serum, it was still viable and after injecting most of the Nome residents, he lifted the quarantine on February 21.

Recognizing the bravery and tenacity of the drivers and dogs, President Calvin Coolidge rewarded each man with a gold medal, and the territory of Alaska gave them each \$25.

The serum run received national press through radio and headlines in the United States and Alaska, both during and after the run. And the diphtheria outbreak in Nome was a catalyst in spurring an inoculation campaign in the United States that reduced the further spread of diseases.

Although Seppala and Togo covered the greatest number of miles, Gunnar Kaasan and Balto was the team that actually delivered the serum into Nome, lending them much glory and prestige. Balto became the famous dog of the serum run, although many—including Leonhard Seppala, who owned both Balto and Togo—felt that Togo, who was 12 years old at the time of the run—should have received more credit.

In December 1925, a statue of Balto was erected in New York City's Central Park. At this, Seppala commented: "It was almost more than I could bear when the 'newspaper dog' Balto received a statue for his 'glorious achievements.'"

Balto spent a few years touring with sideshow entertainers, then found a permanent home in the Cleveland Zoo. After his death at 11 in 1933, he was mounted and placed on display in the Cleveland Museum of Natural History. After Togo's death in 1929, at the age of 16, his body was mounted and is currently part of the museum collection at the Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race Headquarters in Wasilla, Alaska.

Seppala spent many more years working with sled dogs, racing and breeding champions. He died at the age of ninety in 1967 and was buried in Nome, long before Balto was honored again in children's books and even in a feature-length cartoon produced by Steven Spielberg. Today, another Balto statue stands in downtown Anchorage, only a few

blocks from the Alaska Railroad Station and near the starting line of the annual Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race.

In the same year as the serum run, 1925, the Kelly Act was signed into law as well. This bill allowed private aviation companies to bid on mail delivery contracts, however a decade later, technology had improved and air mail routes were established throughout all of Alaska. With the invention of the snowmachine in the 1960s, the use of sled dogs as a sole means of transportation was obsolete. In the last half of the 20th century, dog mushing regained popularity, especially as a recreational sport.

A reenactment of the serum run was held in 1975 to mark the 50th anniversary of the “Great Race of Mercy,” and participants included descendents of many of the original mushers. A decade later, President Ronald Reagan sent a letter of recognition to each surviving musher of the 1925 serum run: Charlie Evans, Edgar Nollner and Bill McCarty. On January 18, 1999, the last survivor, Nollner, died of a heart attack.

Beginning in 1997, the great explorer and adventurer Colonel Norman Vaughan instituted an annual run from Nenana to Nome, an estimated 776 miles, calling the first one the Commemorative Norman Vaughan Serum Run of 1925 Expedition. While the modern Serum Run “25” recognizes the achievements of the serum run mushers, the “race” includes participants on snowmachines as well as dogsleds, and includes stops at villages along the way to promote childhood inoculations.

The Serum Run Mushers of 1925

| Musher | Leg of Serum Run | Miles |
|---------------------|-------------------------|--------------|
| “Wild Bill” Shannon | Nenana to Tolovana | 52 |
| Edgar Kalland | to Manley Hot Springs | 31 |
| Dan Green | to Fish Lake | 28 |
| Johnny Folger | to Tanana | 26 |

| | | |
|-------------------|-------------------------|----|
| Sam Joseph | to Kallands | 34 |
| Titus Nickoli | to Nine Mile Cabin | 24 |
| Dave Corning | to Kokrines | 30 |
| Harry Pitka | to Ruby | 30 |
| Billy McCarty | to Whiskey Creek | 28 |
| Edgar Nollner | to Galena | 24 |
| George Nollner | to Bishop Mountain | 18 |
| Charlie Evans | to Nulato | 30 |
| Tommy Patson | to Kaltag | 36 |
| Jack Screw | to Old Woman | 40 |
| Victor Anagick | to Unalakleet | 34 |
| Myles Gonangnan | to Shaktoolik | 40 |
| Henry Ivanoff | to meeting with Seppala | |
| Leonhard Seppala* | to Golovin | 91 |
| Charlie Olson | to Bluff | 25 |
| Gunnar Kaasen | to Nome | 53 |

** Seppala set out from Nome, met Ivanoff outside of Shaktoolik, turned around, and carried the serum onward to Golovin, 91 miles away. With Togo, he traveled a total of 260 miles.*

LINKS:

Norman Vaughan Serum Run “25”:

<http://www.serumrun.org>

International Seppala Association:

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

Serum Run “25” participant Don Bowers, 2000:

<http://www.arcticoutreach.org/serumrunhome.html>

Alaska Science Forum:

<http://www.gi.alaska.edu/ScienceForum/ASF15/1531.html>

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 **DIPHTHERIA ALASKA** or **LEONHARD SEPPALA**.

RECOMMENDED READING:

Coppock, Mike. "The Race to Save Nome." *American History Magazine*, Vol. 41, No. 3, Aug. 2006. Leesburg, VA: WeiderHistory Group.

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.

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.

Seppala, Leonhard and Elizabeth Miller Ricker. *Seppala, Alaskan Dog Driver*. Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1930.

Thompson, Raymond. *Seppala's Saga of the Sled Dog*. Lynnwood, Wash.: R. Thompson, 1970-1979?

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.

MOVING IMAGES:

Seppala dog yard, 1947-1952

<http://vilda.alaska.edu/cdmg11/image/2834.mov>

A 49-second film clip, in color and silent, of Leonhard Seppala's dog yard in Chatanika. The man in the clip might be Seppala himself. Leonhard Seppala Film Collection, Alaska Film Archives, University of Alaska Fairbanks.

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.

ARCHIVAL MATERIAL:

Bachelder-Williams family photograph collection, Robert P Williams; Alfred G Simmer, 1900-1925. Alaska State Library. This collection includes views of the Bachelders and their friends, mining activities in the Nome area, Nome community activities, and scenics. Other photographers represented in the collection include, Lomen Bros., A.G. Simmer, B.B. Dobbs, Goetz, and K.O. Butler. *Bio/History*: J.A. Bachelder moved from Brainerd, MN to Nome in 1907, where he worked as cashier, and later as assistant manager, for the Nome Bank and Trust Co. His wife, Dell Reilly Bachelder, and 2-3 month old daughter, Marian Agnes, joined him in January 1908. Many of their friends in Nome were those who helped to shape Alaska: Jafet Lindeberg, Leonhard Seppala, Alaska legislator, Charles D. Jones, and the Lomen family. In October 1909, the family went back to Brainerd, Minnesota. However, they returned to Nome late in 1911, and J.A. Bachelder went to work as cashier for Miners & Merchants Bank and also as assistant secretary of the Blue Goose Mining Co. In late 1921, the family left Alaska. Marion Bachelder married Robert P. Williams.

Lomen Brothers photograph collection, 1903-1920. Alaska State Library. The Lomen Brothers collection, a major source of Alaskan history, covers northern Alaskan people and activities, including sled dogs and racing, arctic explorers, Eskimo portraits, Eskimo hunters, Eskimo traditional activities, beach mining activities, Nome activities and businesses, reindeer and the reindeer industry and views of various Alaska towns.

William Allen Moore photograph collection, 1915-1919. Alaska State Library. Most of the photographs in this collection were taken by Moore while he was stationed at the Fort Davis Army Post from 1915-1919, as a private in D Co., 14th Infantry. The images record the daily life of the soldiers, including their barracks and living areas, and people from Nome, Eskimos, primitive settlements, wildlife, ships and nature. Includes 21 views taken by Lomen Brothers.

Dr. Daniel S. Neuman photograph collection, 1911-1920. Alaska State Library. The collection portrays life in Nome, Alaska, during the early 1900's, including images of the sled dog races which began there. Original photographs from the Canadian Arctic Expedition, 1913-1918, identifies Northwest Territory Inuit from Coronation Gulf, Cape Bathurst, Dolphin and Union Straits, and Bernard Harbor.