



THE RACE AGAINST DEATH

In 1925, children in a remote Alaskan town were being struck down by a deadly disease.


The cure was hundreds of miles away, across a frozen wilderness. **There was only one hope: dogs.**



AS YOU READ,
THINK ABOUT:

Who came together to save the people of Nome?

From his apartment window, Dr. Curtis Welch watched as the *Alameda*, the last ship of the fall season of 1924, pulled away from the dock in Nome, Alaska. In a few weeks, the freezing winter weather would almost completely cut off Nome from the world until spring. The town's only link with the rest of Alaska would be one frozen and windswept dogsled trail.



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NONFICTION**
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The *Alameda* had brought Dr. Welch his winter supplies: cotton balls, ether, tongue depressors, thermometers, and medicines. Only one item had been either misplaced or lost: his order of fresh diphtheria (dif-THEER-ee-uh) medicine. Today, most American children are vaccinated against diphtheria, a deadly disease of the nose and throat. But in 1924, the diphtheria vaccine had only been around for a few years. ➔

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The majority of Americans hadn't been immunized.

Fortunately, Dr. Welch hadn't seen a single confirmed case of diphtheria in the 18 years he'd been in Nome. Yet he knew that the disease strikes suddenly and is highly contagious. Without medicine, Nome's population would be helpless in an outbreak. Dr. Welch prayed diphtheria would stay away for another winter.

A Deadly Outbreak

Unfortunately, the people of Nome wouldn't be that lucky. Soon after the *Alameda* had steamed off, a Native Alaskan family with four children arrived in town. The youngest was ill, and the doctor guessed the child was suffering from a mild infection.

By morning, however, the child was dead.

Within weeks, two more children had died. Then, on Tuesday, January 20, 1925, Dr. Welch checked in on a 3-year-old boy named Billy Barnett, who had been admitted to the hospital two weeks earlier with a sore throat and fever. The boy had developed a thick, gray coating in his throat. Dr. Welch knew this could mean only one thing: diphtheria. In a matter of hours, the coating could

This map shows the route the mushers took to get the diphtheria medicine to Nome. The medicine's journey began in Anchorage, Alaska's largest city. Transported by train to Nenana, the medicine was then relayed by different mushers to the town of Nulato (see orange line). Seppala's route is marked in yellow.



block Billy's windpipe and kill him.

The town's situation was desperate. Through a single touch or sneeze, diphtheria can move from one warm body to the next. Dr. Welch needed 1 million units of fresh medicine to treat the town. By January 26, medicine had been located in Anchorage, a major city 1,000 miles away. It wasn't enough for the whole town, but Dr. Welch hoped it would be enough to keep the disease from spreading.

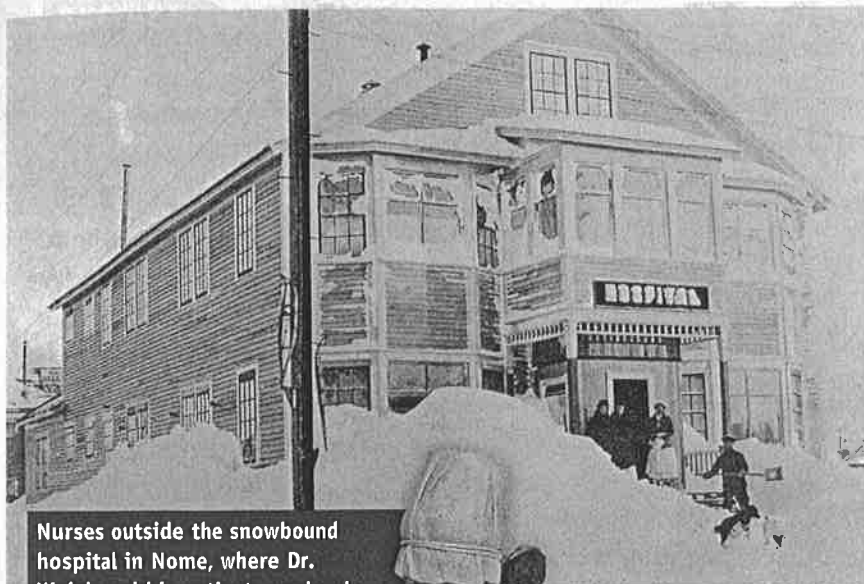
But how could the medicine get to Nome? In 1925, there were no jet airplanes, ice-cutting ships, rugged trucks, or snowmobiles. Nome is located on a peninsula that juts out into the frigid Bering Sea. The sea

was already partially frozen, making it impossible for ships to travel. The closest major railroad was 674 miles away in the town of Nenana. So Nome's town officials came up with a bold plan. They would have the medicine sent by railroad from Anchorage to Nenana. From Nenana, there was but one reliable way to get the medicine across hundreds of miles of frozen wilderness to Nome: by dogsled. **Super Mushers** Town leaders hoped to find the very fastest teams of dogs and the most brave and experienced mushers, as dogsled drivers are called. One musher would pick up the medicine at the railroad station in Nenana. Twelve others would wait with their dog teams in villages along the trail. Each musher would travel a portion of the trail and pass the medication to the next musher until the medicine reached the trail's midpoint, the village of Nulato. One particularly skilled musher, Leonhard Seppala, would set out from Nome and travel alone 300 miles to Nulato to pick up the medicine and bring it back to Nome.

Under normal circumstances, the journey from Nenana to Nome would take 25 days or more. Town

What can you tell about Nome by looking at this map?





Nurses outside the snowbound hospital in Nome, where Dr. Welch and his patients anxiously awaited serum.

leaders hoped their team of “super mushers” could make the trip in 10. It was a risky plan for both the drivers and the dogs. And there was no guarantee the medicine would even survive the freezing journey.

But hundreds of lives were at stake. There was no other choice: It was to be a race against death.

The journey began in Nome on January 27, when 47-year-old Seppala rigged up his seven dogs and set out on the 300-mile journey to Nulato. He would have to travel one of Alaska’s most hazardous trails and take a 42-mile shortcut across the frozen Norton Sound. The shortcut would be littered with ice rubble—sharp fragments of ice that could slice open a dog’s paws. With little warning, the ice might break up



The serum was an **antitoxin** that works by **neutralizing** the disease.

and carry them out to the Bering Sea.

Seppala had been chosen because he was the fastest musher in Alaska. If anyone could make it, it was Seppala.

A Single Push

As Seppala raced east, “Wild Bill” Shannon and his team of nine dogs were at the other end of the trail in Nenana, meeting the train carrying the medicine. The crate of medicine weighed 20 pounds. It contained glass vials of amber-colored **serum** packed in a padded container and wrapped in heavy quilts and canvas. Shannon loaded the crate onto his sled and set off for the village of Tolovana, where another musher was waiting. Normally, the 52-mile trip over frozen terrain took two days.

Shannon was told to make the trip in a single push, traveling through the night. As a rule, dogsled drivers avoided traveling in the dark and in temperatures lower than 40 degrees below zero.

That night, it was 50 below.

Still, Shannon made the trip in record time, pausing for just a few hours near the end to rest his dogs and warm his frozen body. Three of his dogs were too exhausted to continue, so Shannon left them to warm up at the trail **outpost**. He traveled the final four hours of the journey with only six dogs. When he arrived in Tolovana, his face was black with **frostbite**. Men rushed out from the roadhouse. They loaded the medicine onto another sled and helped Shannon into the warmth.

The first part of the relay was done. But there were still hundreds of miles to cover, and an enormous blizzard was making its way toward western Alaska. Meanwhile, the crisis in Nome was becoming graver by the hour.

“The situation is bad,” Nome’s panicked mayor announced in a telegram to leaders in Washington, D.C. “The number of diphtheria cases increases hourly.”

By now, the entire country knew of Nome’s plight. Newspapers and radios reported news of the **epidemic**. People across America prayed that the



medicine would reach Nome before it was too late.

Final Musher

At first, the mushers were lucky. Seppala made it over the dangerous Norton Sound without mishap. Meanwhile, the medicine had reached Nulato days earlier than expected, because Nome's leaders had added more mushers to the relay. There were now 20 mushers involved in the race to save Nome.

In Nulato, Seppala strapped the medicine to his sled and immediately turned around to head back across the treacherous Norton Sound. Seventy-eight miles from Nome, in the village of Golovin, the exhausted Seppala handed the cargo to another musher, Charlie Olson. Olson traveled 25 miles to the village of Bluff, where the crate was loaded onto the sled of the final musher, Gunnar Kaasen.

The lifesaving cargo was just 53 miles east of Nome. But the monster blizzard had closed in, bringing powerful winds, blinding snow, and a **windchill** of minus 70 degrees. Five miles into his run, Kaasen's path was blocked by huge snow drifts. Kaasen had no choice but to leave the trail and go



An excited crowd greets Kaasen and his dogs upon their arrival in Nome.

around the drifts, hoping that his lead dog, Balto, would be able to find it again. It was up to Balto to sniff through several feet of snow and try to pick up the scent of the trail. The minutes crawled by as the dog searched through the snow. Kaasen's heart raced. His body ached with

Today, Balto's body is preserved and on display at a museum in Cleveland, Ohio.

mercilessly at Kaasen and his dogs. The musher was losing his strength. Several times the sled flew off the trail, dragging the dogs with it.

At last, at 5:30 a.m. on Monday,

February 2, Kaasen and his team pulled onto Front Street in Nome. He staggered off the sled, stumbled up to Balto, and collapsed, muttering, "Fine dog."

Within minutes, the medicine was in Dr. Welch's hands. And by the next day, it was clear that even the most seriously ill patients would recover.

News dispatches went out over the radio and telegraph announcing the victory of men and dogs over the worst that nature could throw at them.

The dogs became heroes around the country, as did

Kaasen and Seppala. Nome had been saved. ●



Gunnar Kaasen and his lead dog, Balto. The dog would become a beloved American hero.

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