

A Race for Life: Balto and the Hero Dogs of Alaska



Nome, Alaska, appeared on the map during one of the world's greatest gold rushes over 100-years ago. Located on the Seward Peninsula, by 1900 the town's population had swelled to 20,000 after gold was discovered on beaches along the Bering Sea. By 1925, however, much of the gold was gone and scarcely 1,400 people were left in the remote northern outpost.

Since Nome was icebound seven months of the year and the nearest railroad was more than 650 miles away, in the town of Nenana, Nome communicated with the rest of the world via the radiotelegraph, a relatively new invention in those days. Relays of dog teams carried the mail from anchorage to Nome. A one-way trip along this route took about a month and the mushers that traversed the trail were considered the best in all Alaska.

A Race for Life

In January 1925 diphtheria an extremely contagious disease affecting the throat and lungs, was raging through the town of Nome. The Inuit, Native Eskimo, population was particularly vulnerable. Whole villages had been wiped out by earlier epidemics of measles and flu. The situation was quickly becoming critical for the 1,400 inhabitants of Nome as the supply of anti-diphtheria serum began to dwindle. To make matters worse, the small amount that was on hand in Nome was outdated and of questionable value. Furthermore, there was only one doctor in town to give medical attention to those who needed it. There was little that Dr. Welch could do without a fresh supply of serum.

On January 20, 1925 an urgent call went out from Nome, via radio signal:

***Nome calling...Nome calling...
We have an outbreak of diphtheria...
No Serum...Urgently need help...
Nome calling... Nome calling...***

The frantic search for anti-diphtheria serum began:

***Seattle calling... Seattle calling...
Fresh serum available here...
Airplane standing by to fly to Nome...***

By January 25th the long twilight of the Arctic winter had settle over Nome. Heavy snow had fallen and temperatures dropped far below zero. These winter conditions proved to be beyond the technical capabilities of early airplanes with open cockpits. Therefore, the following message was sent out from Anchorage to Nome:

***Anchorage calling...Anchorage calling...
300,000 units of serum located in railway hospital here...
Package can be shipped by train to Nenana...
Package weighs 20 pounds...***

Could serum be carried to Nome on Iditarod Trail by mail drivers and dog teams?

Even though it was the 20th century, machines could not solve some problems. For years the settlers of Alaska had trusted in courageous men and strong dogs and they trust in them again.

Alaska Governor Bone sent an official dispatch to all Northern Commercial Company mail drivers to prepare for a relay between the Fairbanks railroad station of Nenana and Nome. When dog teams and drivers were counted it was found that there were enough for a speed run, so additional drivers and dog teams were recruited to fill in the wide gaps.

A total of 20 dog teams and drivers participated in the journey, which began when the fresh serum was packed aboard steam locomotive "66" in Anchorage on January 26. The mercy train carried its precious cargo over the icy cold ribbons of steel 298 miles to Nenana. However, despite this quick response, three children in Nome died in the epidemic and more cases of diphtheria were being diagnosed daily. Time would be a matter of life and death.

The relay of dog teams along the Iditarod Trail was quickly organized and consisted of Eskimo, Alaskan Indian and Caucasian mushers. By the night of January 27th the first driver and his dogs set out to deliver the life saving serum to Nome.

The temperature was dropping fast. It was -30 degrees Fahrenheit when the run started. The temperatures fluctuated during each driver's run, dropping a slow as 64 degrees below zero. This kind of cold is extremely hard on both humans and dogs, but the emergency called for heroic efforts from all concerned. From frozen hand to frozen hand the serum was passed. The relay teams were challenging the limits of endurance.

On January 31st Leonhard Seppala, known as the greatest musher in the territory, and Togo, one of the territory's greatest dogs, was handed the serum. As the storm grew more vicious, Seppala was faced with the decision of whether to take a shortcut across the frozen and dangerous Norton Sound or to go around it. Gale-force winds hurled seawater over the ice, which threatened to break up at any moment. But Seppala was confident of his team, and Togo unerringly led them across the jagged, groaning ice floes to the safety of land. Just three hours later, the ice broke in Norton Sound. On February 1st through blinding snow and hurricane force winds, the desperately needed serum was passed from Seppala to Charlie Olson. Seppala and Togo covered the longest and hardest part of the race.

Olson then passed the serum to Gunnar Kaasen. Had Kaasen any inkling of how wild the storm would rage he would not have chosen Balto to lead his team out of Bluff. Each dog on a team has an important position, but it is the leader who must guide them



through safely. In addition to having courage and endurance, a lead dog must be obedient and have an uncanny instinct to find the trail and sense danger.

Although Balto was one of Seppala's dogs, he simply was not thought of as a very good leader. Balto had served rather insignificantly as a freighter dog for the Hammon Consolidated Gold Fields. But Balto proved his mettle when he plunged into the roaring blizzard, and at one point halted to save driver and team from instant death in the Topkok River.

Due to a breakdown in communication, Kaasen and his dog team would become the anchor team of the serum run. A message was sent from Nome to Solomon to advise Kaasen to wait until conditions calmed before continuing to Pt. Safety, where another driver was to meet him. However, Kaasen passed Solomon without stopping and never received the message. When Kaasen arrived at the Safety Shelter, 21 miles from Nome, he decided to forge ahead since his team was running well and the driver was asleep. However, their endurance was quickly tested when a sudden, fierce blast of wind lifted both sled and dogs into the air. While fighting to right the sled and untangle the team, Kaasen's heart sank—the serum was gone! Only after frantically searching the snow with his bare hands did he miraculously find it.

Balto led Gunnar Kaasen's team into Nome just before daybreak on February 2, 1925. They were exhausted and nearly frozen after the 53-mile run. The 674-mile trip was made in 127 ½ hours. Many mushers considered this to be a world record.

By February 21 the epidemic was over. The quarantine ended and life in Nome returned to normal again. The publicity of this event brought national attention to the seriousness of diphtheria. Future inoculation campaigns were so successful that diphtheria soon became a relatively unknown disease.

Balto, his teammates, and Gunnar Kaasen became international heroes overnight. The public demanded an U. S. for the acclaimed anchor team of dogs and driver. Hollywood movie producer Sol Lesser brought the dogs to Los Angeles and created a 30-minute film, "Balto's Race to Nome." However, the glory showered on the dogs was short lived. Balto and the rest of the dog team were eventually sold to an unknown vaudeville promoter

Two years later, Balto and his famous companions had become lost in the world of sideshows and the whirl of the roaring twenties. It seemed the world had forgotten the "Heroes of Alaska." Then, on a visit to Los Angeles, Cleveland businessman George Kimble discovered the dogs displayed in a "dime" museum and noticed that they were ill and being mistreated. He knew the famous story of Balto and was outraged at seeing this degradation. A deal was struck to buy the dogs for \$2,000 and move them to Cleveland—but Kimble had only two weeks to raise the sum. The race to save Balto was on!



A Balto Fund was established. Across the nation, radio broadcasts appealed for donations. Headlines in *The Cleveland Plain Dealer* told of the push to rescue the heroes. Cleveland's response was explosive. School children collected coins in buckets; factory workers "passed the hat"; and hotels, stores and visitors donated to the Balto fund. The Western Reserve Kennel Club gave a needed financial boost. In just ten days the headlines read, "City Smashes Over The Top With Balto Fund! Huskies To Be Shipped From The Coast At Once!"

The seven remaining dogs of the original thirteen were brought to Cleveland. Balto, Sye, Billie, Fox, Moctoc, Tillie, and Slim were given to the City of Cleveland in an official presentation ceremony under the Rotunda of Cleveland City Hall. Balto and his companions were given heroes' welcome in a triumphant parade through Public Square. The dogs were taken to the Cleveland Metroparks Zoo where they were given the care and honor befitting their heroic efforts. An estimated 15,000 people visited the zoo on the day of their arrival.

In 1925 a committee was formed in New York to raise funds to have a sculpture made of Balto. The monument was to be located in Central Park. The Balto committee raised \$7,000 and commissioned Frederick G. R. Roth to sculpt the bronze statue. The inscription that appears on the slate table on the pedestal of the rock reads:

*Dedicated to the indomitable spirit of the sled dogs that relayed anti
toxin six hundred miles over rough ice across treacherous waters
through the arctic blizzards from Nenana to the relief of stricken
Nome in the winter of 1925.*

ENDURANCE – FIDELITY – INTELLIGENCE

Given to the City in 1925 by the Balto Monument Committee

By 1933, most of the team had died leaving only Balto and Sye. Balto died on March 14, 1933. Old Sye followed within a year, closing the saga of the dog team that helped to save a town. Balto's body was mounted and to this day is kept at the Cleveland Museum of Natural History. Every few years, he is put on display as part of a commemorative program to pay tribute to this gallant race against death.



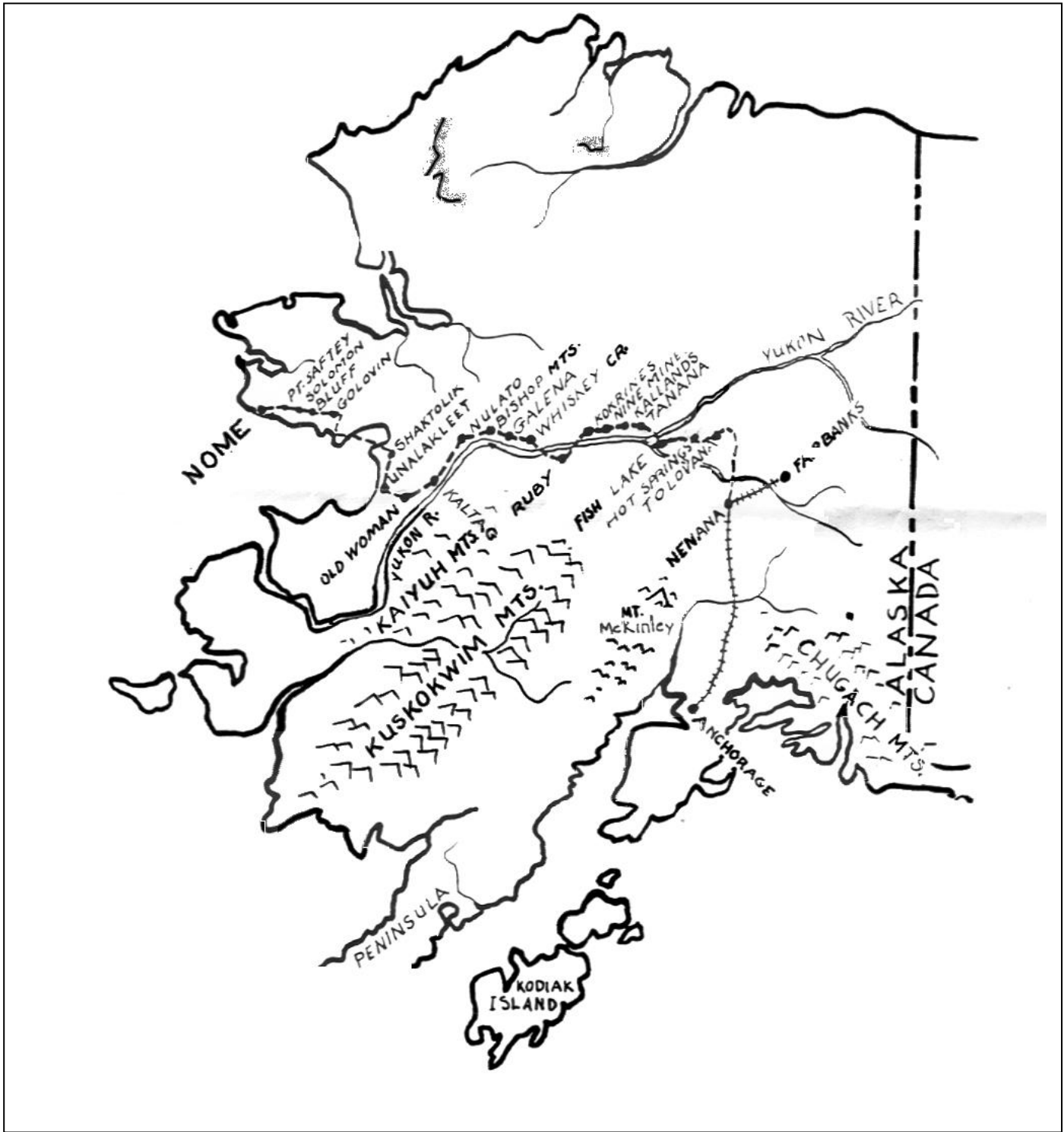
The Iditarod Today

During the years following the race, Alaska underwent many changes. The territory became the 49th state and modern conveniences reached the great northern wilderness. Telephones and televisions provided instant communication and the snowmobile replace dog teams as the primary mode of winter transportation.

There were some people who believed dog sledding was an important part of Alaskan history and machines would never surpass the achievements of men and dogs working together. Among those people were Dorothy Page and Joe Redington Sr. In 1973 they rallied together with other volunteers to reopen the mail route from Anchorage to Nome, part of which was used in the historic serum run. The route is now used for the Iditarod Sled Dog Race stretching 1,049 miles across two mountain ranges, through the frozen wilderness and along the Yukon valley.

The race always begins in Anchorage on the first Saturday in March. The first musher usually crosses the finish line in Nome approximately nine to eleven days later, with the others arriving day and night for the next week. Other events scheduled during the Month of Iditarod (March)

are: Native arts/crafts sales, dog sled rides, reindeer potluck and the largest basketball tournament in the nation. For more information request an Iditarod visitor packet from:



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