

The 1925 Serum Run to Nome

What might have been the most important "sled dog race" that will ever be run in Alaska ended in Nome on February 2, 1925, when Gunner Kaassen drove his tired dog team down an almost deserted First Avenue.

At stake were the lives of countless Nome children who had been exposed to the dread disease, diphtheria. Kaassen was one of the 20 drivers who took part in the record 674 mile relay race from Nenana to Nome. He delivered 300,000 units of antitoxin serum to Dr. Curtis Welch. The serum arrived in Nome just one week after leaving Anchorage and 127½ hours from Nenana.

It was on January 21 that Dr. Welch first diagnosed the diphtheria outbreak in Nome, and immediately sent telegraph messages to Fairbanks, Anchorage, Seward and Juneau, asking for help. The only serum in Alaska was found in Anchorage, where Dr. J.B. Beeson had 300,000 units at the Alaska Railroad Hospital. The problem was to get it to Nome in the shortest time possible.

The only two planes available were in Fairbanks and had been dismantled and stored for the winter. A pair of pilots offered to attempt the flight if the planes could be made ready, but it was left to Alaska's governor to decide. Many thought dog teams were the only reliable answer.

In Juneau, Governor Scott C. Bone decided on dog teams. He ordered an additional supply of antitoxin from Seattle. Then he called on the Northern Commercial Company, as the largest organization in the Yukon River area, to arrange for relay teams. Men of the Army Signal Corps, at their scattered telegraph stations, also assisted.

In Nome, Dr. Welch and the mayor, George Maynard, discussed ways to get the serum to Nome. They suggested sending the serum to Nenana by rail and then sending a team to the rail line, or asking a fast team to start the antitoxin down the Tanana and Yukon Rivers and have a team from Nome meet it about half way.

At Anchorage, Dr. Beeson packed the serum in a cylinder, which he wrapped in an insulating quilt. The whole parcel was then tied up in canvas for further protection. The parcel left Anchorage by train on Monday, January 26, in the charge of conductor Frank Knight of the Alaska Railroad. It was at 11 p.m. on Tuesday that the train reached Nenana and Knight turned over the parcel to the first driver, William "Wild Bill" Shannon.

Shannon carried the serum 52 miles to Tolovana with his nine big malemutes in weather that averaged -52°F, where he handed it over to Dave Green.

Green carried the serum 31 miles to Manley Hot Springs with his 8 dogs in temperatures of -30°F with 20 MPH winds and a wind chill of -72°F and handed it over to Johnny Folger.

Folger, an Athabaskan, went the 28 miles to Fish Lake with eight dogs, bad weather, and no serious problems.

Sam Joseph, another Athabaskan, picked the serum up there and carried it 67 miles to Tanana, with the temperatures still dropping.

Titus Nickoli wasn't a mail carrier but a trapper. With his 7 village dogs and -34°F weather he carried it 34 miles to Kallands.

Dave Corning carried it 24 miles to Nine Mile Cabin with an average of 8 MPH and -42°F weather.

Edgar Kalland and his 7 dogs picked it up at Nine Mile Cabin and went 30 miles to Kokrines in temperatures of -44°F.

Harry Pitka carried it another 30 miles to Ruby with an average of 9 MPH in temperatures of -47°F and total white-out conditions.

Billy McCarty carried it 28 miles to Whiskey Creek with his team of 7 dogs and -43°F.

Edgar Nollner, another Athabaskan, left Whiskey Creek at 7P and carried the serum to Galena in 3 hours with a team of 7 dogs and -40°F temperatures. His brother, George Nollner, with the same dog team carried it from Galena to Bishop Mountain, 18 miles. It was too dark for the dogs to lope, they could only trot.

22 year old Charlie Evans went the 30 miles to Nulato, in 5 hours and temperatures of -64°F. He had no rabbit skins to cover the groin area of his dogs, and 2 of them began to freeze as they ran.

Tommy Patsy went the next 36 miles in 3½ hours to Kaltag passing the half-way point of the race and arriving in Kaltag at noon on Friday, January 30th.

At Kaltag, an Athabascan river pilot known as Jack Screw, picked the serum up and took it away from the Yukon River and over a mountain pass, the 40 miles to Old Woman Cabin. The weather was growing worse and he had to face a blinding snowstorm.

Victor Anagick, an Eskimo, carried it 34 miles to Unalakleet.

Another Eskimo, Myles Gonangnan, carried it 40 miles to Shaktoolik. He had to break the trail the entire way and everyone said it was one of the worst snow storms in history. It took 12 hours for his team of 8 dogs to make the run. He reached Shaktoolik exhausted and frostbitten.

Henry or Harry Ivanoff, part Eskimo and part Russian, started from Shaktoolik to Golovin with the serum. Half a mile along the trail, the dog team picked up the scent of reindeer and became tangled in their harnesses. As Ivanoff was struggling to untangle his team, he was met by Leonhard Seppala from Nome.

Leonhard Seppala had left Nome intending to rest at Nulato and return with the serum. But he met Ivanoff at Shaktoolik where he took the serum and turned around, heading back for Nome. He carried the serum back over Norton Sound with the thermometer -30°F. Seppala had to face into a merciless gale and in the darkness retrace his route across the uncertain ice. When Seppala turned the serum over to Charlie Olson in Golovin, after carrying it 124 miles, he and his team, including the famous lead dog, Togo, had traveled a total of 260 miles.

Charlie Olson met Seppala in Golovin for the 25 mile run to Bluff. The snowstorm had turned the weather into a blizzard, with 50 MPH winds and a temperature of -30°F. He and his 7 dogs were knocked off of the trail several times by gusts. In 4 hours and 15 minutes he reached Bluff with frostbitten fingers to prove that he had fought the storm.

Olson turned the serum over to Gunnar Kaasen, who took it the remaining 53 miles to Nome. Gunnar Kaassen left Bluff at 10P that night to run the last stretch. Rumor has it that he bypassed Ed Rohn, who was waiting at Safety to take the serum the last segment of the relay. Kaasen had to battle 80 MPH winds and had to trust his lead dog, "Balto", to follow the trail. He made it to Nome, but not without mishaps. Once his sled tipped and he lost the serum in a snowdrift. But Kaasen and the lifesaving diphtheria serum reached Nome just in time, and a diphtheria epidemic was prevented.

Balto, Kaassen's lead dog, owned by Seppala, and was memorialized with a statue in Central Park in New York City. Seppala always felt that his lead dog, Togo, didn't get enough recognition for his 260 mile effort. After Togo died, Seppala had him custom mounted and he is now on display at Iditarod® Headquarters in Wasilla. Balto is on display in Cleveland at the Museum of Natural History.

Created from information provided by the Iditarod Website.

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