

The Race For Life

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In Central Park, in New York City, there stands a bronze statue of Balto, Gunnar Kaasen's lead dog. The statue commemorates a fascinating event in which the Public Health Service (PHS) played a significant role. On its base is the following inscription:

Dedicated to the indomitable spirit of sled dogs that relayed anti-toxin six-hundred miles over rough ice, across treacherous waters, through Arctic blizzards, from Nenana to the relief of stricken Nome in the Winter of 1925. Endurance... Fidelity... Intelligence...

In 1925 the remaining and perhaps most steadfast of Nome's citizenry numbered around 1800, down from the 1894 heyday of the Gold Rush, when the population numbered 20,000. Then, gold nuggets were to be had for the taking on the shore of the Bering Sea. Now, the tent city, the booze halls, fast ladies, and faster card games were gone with the gold on the beach. Their replacement, however, took the form of the traditionally solid, Main Street store fronts common to any American small town of that time. A church at one end of the street and a school at the other with drygoods and hardware stores, telegraph and post office, and hospital spread out between.

At the time of this story, it was business as usual and the usual, in Nome, Alaska, in January, was a study in survival. Forty degrees below zero was common and sixty below a very real possibility. The wind off the Bering Sea had an edge like a trapper's sheath knife. Not much happened for the seven months between the fall



Balto and Musher Gunnar Kaasen

freeze and the spring thaw that didn't have to do with just staying warm.

Dr. Curtis Welch was Nome's only physician. He, with his wife and a couple of assistant nurses, staffed the hospital. He administered to the community's sick, patched their occasional wounds, and splinted whatever they broke. Welch also served as an Acting Assistant Surgeon for the Public Health Service, in charge of PHS Relief Station No. 295 in Nome, the most northerly outpost of the PHS.

On January 20, 1925, Welch answered a call to look at an ailing

child. The symptoms, sore throat and high fever, could mean almost anything, but the growth of white membranes in the throat shouted "diphtheria" and made the doctor take notice. His diagnosis was cause enough to be anxious, but his anxiety was compounded by his knowledge that diphtheria antitoxin did not exist in Nome. With a two-to-five day incubation period, the disease could achieve epidemic proportions before antitoxin could be obtained. Later that day the second case turned up and still later the third.

The people of Nome did have a telegraph, and the dots and dashes of their appeal for help went out to "all points." Not surprisingly, PHS headquarters in Washington, D.C. was contacted, and the Service located 300,000 units of serum in an Anchorage hospital. Since the passage of the 1902 Biologics Act, the PHS had been responsible for the regulation of vaccines and antitoxins (see the "PHS Chronicles" article in the November/December 1995 issue of this journal). The 1925 annual report of the PHS emphasized that many lives were lost to diphtheria each year "which might be saved by the use of well-known means of prevention or by timely use of diphtheria antitoxin after the disease develops."

"Timely use" was the key problem with respect to the situation in Nome. Unfortunately, the magic of communication that had identified a supply of the antitoxin could not handle the problem of transportation. There were two open cockpit biplanes in Anchorage, both dismantled for the winter. Even assembled, they would have very little to offer against 50-below temperatures and 50 to 60 knot winds. The Alaska Railroad offered access only as far as Nenana, a railhead town 674 treacherous miles from Nome. The last resort was the Alaskan Mail Route, known as the Iditarod Trail. The traffic thereon was limited by conditions to sled dog teams and men able enough to guide them.

Dr. Welch knew, since he now had three children dead and five more cases positively diagnosed, that the usual 20-day trek from Nenana to Nome might be futile. The chance that there might not be any children left in Nome by then was very real. The normal sled dog discipline of run awhile and rest awhile would not work. The 20-pound package of serum had to keep moving. A relay was the answer. Twenty teams and drivers

responded to the plea. All of them were seasoned trail veterans: mail drivers, trappers, or freight haulers. What they were about to do would be looked upon as heroic. It would become an American legend. At the time it was the usual.

At about 10:30 on the night of January 27, the Alaska Railroad's special train arrived at the Nenana depot, its locomotive encased in frost, spewing steam and smoke into the frigid air. Thirty minutes later "Wild Bill"

Shannon bolted into the darkness, with 10 dogs out front and the 20-pound package of serum lashed to his sled. It was 30 below zero and Tolovana was 53 miles away. Wild Bill stopped at Old Minto at three in the morning to give the dogs a break and to take a breather himself and then pushed on to Tolovana. He arrived the next morning, 14 hours and 25 minutes out of Nenana.

Edgar Kallands was there to meet him. Edgar was a 21-year-old native

Diphtheria Vaccine Run

The timely coordination of 20 men and their 150 dogs across 674 miles of winter landscape, communicating only by Morse Code on telegraph machines, is an achievement we can hardly imagine today.

Date (1928)	Musher	Route	Miles
1.27	"Wild Bill" Shannon	Nenana to Tolovana	52
1.28	Dan Greene	Manley Hot Springs	31
1.28	Johnny Folger	Fish Lake	28
1.29	Sam Joseph	Tanana	26
1.29	Titus Nikoli	Kallands	35
1.29	Dave Corning	9 Mile Cabin	24
1.29	Edgar Kalland	Kokrines	30
1.29	Harry Pitka	Ruby	30
1.29	Bill McCarty	Whiskey Creek	28
1.29	Edgar Nollner	Galena	24
1.30	George Nollner	Bishop Mountain	18
1.30	Charlie Evans	Nulato	30
1.30	Tommy Patsy	Kaltag	36
1.30	Jackscrew	Old Woman Cabin	40
1.30	Victor Anagick	Unalakleet	34
1.31	Miles Gonangan	Shaktoolik	40
1.31	Henry Ivanoff	Out of Shaktoolik	
1.31	Leonhard Seppala	Golovin	90
2.1	Charlie Olson	Bluff	25
2.1	Gunnar Kaasen	Nome	53

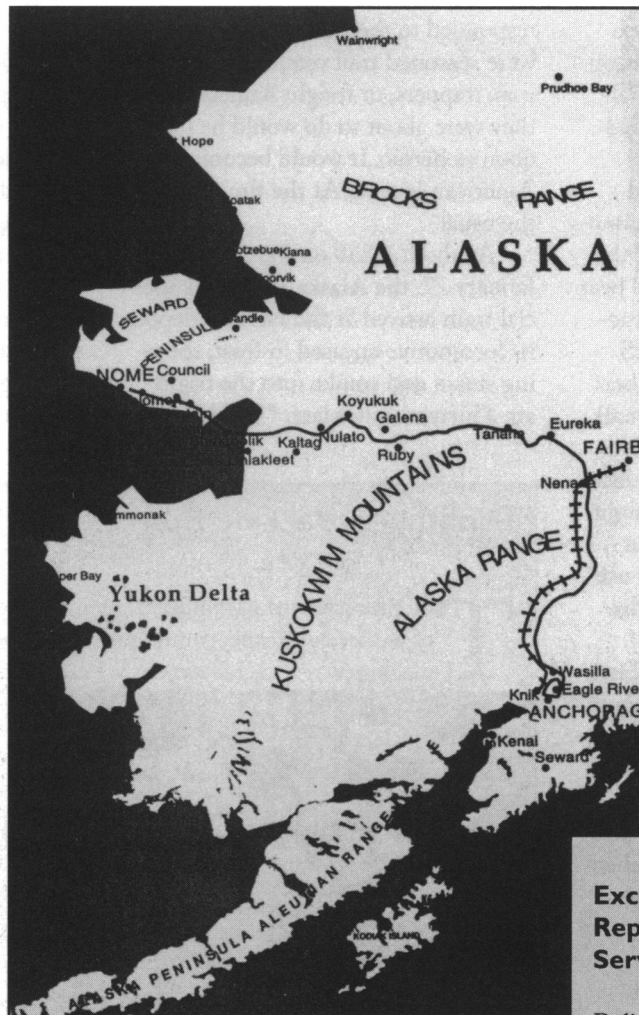
of Alaska, born somewhere along the Yukon River, and a mail carrier for the Northern Commercial Company. He and his team of nine dogs had come down the 25 miles from Minto to meet Shannon the day before. He'd had a good supper at Mrs. Martin's roadhouse and a good night's sleep. He woke up about 10 AM and waited for Shannon to show up.

I hooked up my dogs and took the package of serum, which had been brought into the roadhouse and warmed up, and headed for [Manley] Hot Springs.

Manley Hot Springs was 32 miles away, temperature minus 35 degrees, wind 20 to 25 mph. But it wasn't all that tough, he made it in five hours.

What is cold? Probably everyone north of the Mason-Dixon Line has experienced ten degrees below zero. It is something to be upset about and uncomfortable, but handleable. Twenty degrees below zero is a totally different experience. Things that normally don't freeze, begin to: like fingers and toes and indoor plumbing. Automobiles become balky and refuse to start, schools are certainly closed, and nobody goes outside without serious forethought. Thirty below is unforgiving, and at 60 degrees below zero, terror begins. A lost glove means a lost hand. Life is touch-and-go at sixty below.

Dan Green was waiting at the Manley Springs Roadhouse, and the priceless package was transferred almost on the run. It was early evening, 5 or 5:30 PM, dark, and the



singing Athabascan love songs to his dog team.

January 30 and the weather was deteriorating. Charlie Evans took the place of his two lead dogs when they froze to death in harness. Charlie finished his 30-mile stretch leading the team himself. It was 45 below zero. Tom Patsy took over for the 36 miles to Kaltag and Jackscrew, a Koyukuk Indian, was next with 40 miles to Old Woman Cabin. The weather continued to deteriorate, and the wind was rising when Victor Anagick took over and continued the brutal trek 34 miles to Unalakleet.

The 40 miles between Unalakleet and Shaktoolik hosted Myles Gonangan with 50 below and 30 miles

Excerpt from the Annual Report of the Public Health Service, 1925

Relief Station No. 295, Nome, Alaska.—Acting Asst. Surg. Curtis Welch in charge.

At this port, the most northerly relief station of the Public Health Service, a serious epidemic of diphtheria occurred during the past winter. With the cooperation of the Bureau of Education, the Alaskan Railroad administration, and the Delegate from Alaska, and by assistance from private dog-team drivers along the Yukon River and other Alaskan citizens, a sufficient quantity of antitoxin was secured and delivered in time to control the disease before serious loss of life occurred.

temperature was down to minus 40. News of Nome's problem, and its hoped-for solution, was being flashed across the United States. Newspaper headlines and front page stories detailed the adventure. Reports of the dog teams' progress were punctuated by the names of heretofore unheard of places: Fish Lake, 9 Mile Cabin, Whiskey Creek, Nulato, Shaktoolik. Johnny Folger, an Athabascan Indian, averaged nine miles per hour on his 28-mile run to Fish Lake, and passed the package on to Sam Joseph. Sam handed it to Titus Nikoli, heroes all, and each with his own story to tell. At Galena Edgar, Nollner passed the serum to his just-married younger brother, George. George kept warm

per hour winds. Shaktoolik is 169 miles east of Nome and Henry Ivanoff knew the moon was an as-easily-attained destination, but he headed west to meet Leonhard Seppala.

Because of his success racing sled dogs, Seppala was already a legend in Alaska. His recently imported Siberian huskies, with his fabled lead dog Togo, had already won everything winnable. The dauntless Norwegian was a resident of Nome. He hitched his dogs and headed east, intending to meet Gonangan and the serum somewhere on the trail and return to Nome with it. He and Gonangan were converging on Shaktoolik. Leonhard, having traveled 125 miles, bedded down in an Eskimo igloo for a rest and continued the remaining 40-some miles in the morning.

He and Ivanoff met just outside Shaktoolik, where the transfer of cargo was made and Seppala turned his team back toward Nome. He had crossed Norton Bay the day before and he knew what conditions he might expect, except the wind had increased again, which could very well move the ice out of the Bay. Not crossing the Bay, skirting it, would add another hundred miles, and time, further sapping his and his dogs' limited energy. He decided to chance the crossing again. He and the hero team had covered 86 miles when they stopped to rest on the west side of Norton Bay. Three hours after they had crossed, the ice pack blew out to sea.

Sunday morning, February 1, Seppala awoke to a howling blizzard. At

his call, Togo and Scotty and the rest of the team shook themselves out of the snow drifts and started again for Nome. Although credited with 90 miles of progress toward Nome with the serum, Seppala and Togo actually covered 268 miles in its quest, and these included two trips across Norton Sound. Charley Olson was waiting for them at Dexter's Road House in Golovin, and they were all glad to see him.

Here the serum was 78 miles from

into the drift of snow. For a few frightening moments he thought the serum was lost, but find it he did. Gunnar was to have met Ed Rohn, but in the blizzard that surrounded them they missed each other and Gunnar continued on to Nome.

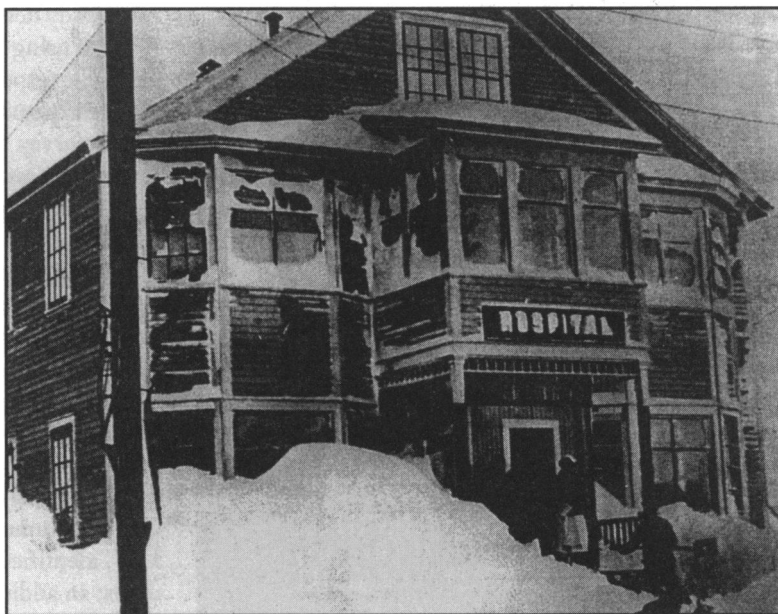
With sled dog Balto leading the team across 53 miles, Gunnar arrived, temporarily blinded and almost unable to stand, at 5:30 AM, at the door of Nome's only physician, Dr. Welch.

The 674 miles from Nenana to Nome were traversed in five days, seven and one half hours. Twenty mushers and 150 dogs had been involved. Five children were said to have died, and 29 cases of diphtheria positively diagnosed. One source claimed 11,000 people "in the region" were threatened. Another source said, "It wasn't much of an epidemic." Well, perhaps it wasn't, perhaps because of the efforts of those who helped bring the serum to Nome.

Each of the 20 drivers received a gold

medal from the manufacturer of the serum. They were each honored by the presentation of a certificate of thanks signed by President Calvin Coolidge.

When Spring came to Nome, Alaska, in 1925, there were children there, largely because of that "endurance, fidelity, intelligence."



Nome's hospital, as it looked in 1925.

Nome. February 1 *New York Times* headline: "Serum relief near for stricken Nome; May have arrived." Well, not quite yet.

Charlie Olson's 25 miles were perhaps the worst. Numerous times he and his team were picked up by wind gusts and hurtled off their trail. Charlie suffered severe frostbite of both hands, which came close to costing him his fingers. He did make it to the Bluff roadhouse to meet Gunnar Kaasen.

Gunnar too had heavy winds to contend with, once tipping his sled and pitching the package of serum out

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