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The Great Serum Run:

It was January 1925, and the children of Nome, Alaska, were dying. Infected with diphtheria, they wheezed and gasped for air. Every day brought a new case of the deadly disease.

Dr. Curtis Welch was Nome's only doctor and his supply of antitoxin serum (the medicine needed to stop the disease) had run out. Dr. Welch knew that unless he could get more serum, the entire village of 1,400 was at risk.

The nearest batch of serum was more than 1,000 miles away in Anchorage. But Nome's icebound (frozen) harbor made transportation by sea impossible, and open-cockpit airplanes could not fly in Alaska's subzero (below zero) temperatures.

This left the railroad. But Alaska's rail line ended in Nenana, 600 miles from Nome. This meant that only way to get the serum to Dr. Welch was to bring it by train to Nenana, and from there run it the 600 miles to Nome by dog sled.

For the run, Alaska's governor recruited the very best mushers and dog teams he could find for a round-the-clock relay race to Nome. The mushers would travel to a roadhouse along the trail to Nome and wait their turn to carry the serum. Twenty mushers and over 150 dogs took part in the run.

The relay began shortly before midnight on January 27, 1925 when the train from Anchorage arrived at the Nenana station with a 20-pound package of serum wrapped in protective fur. The fur wrapping helped keep the serum from getting too cold between relay stations. But at each station, the serum had to be taken into the roadhouse and warmed by the fire before the next relay-runner could take off.

The mushers (and dogs) traveled through whiteouts, horrible winds, icy waterways, and temperatures of 50 to 80 degrees *below* zero. The mushers didn't ride on their sleds; they ran beside them to keep warm. Even so, many mushers developed frostbite or hypothermia.

Although they wanted to get the life-saving serum to Nome as quickly as possible, the mushers had to control their speed. If the dogs ran too fast and

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breathed too deeply in such frigid conditions, they could frost their lungs and die. (And four dogs did die in the race.)

The longest and most difficult leg of the run was done by Leonhard Seppala and his dog team, led by 12-year old lead-dog Togo. They traveled 91 miles across the frozen waters of Norton Sound (an inlet of the Bering Sea) through 50 mph winds causing a wind chill of -85° F.

The dogs struggled to keep from slipping and falling on the ice. They finally made it to shore only hours before the ice cracked. Togo was so worn out after the trip that he could never run again.

Gunnar Kaasen set off on the last leg of the run head-on into a blizzard. With the snow blowing into his eyes, Kaasen could not see the trail ahead and had to rely on the scent (smell) of his lead dog, Balto.

At one point, a strong gust of wind flipped over Kaasen's sled and knocked over several of his dogs. After helping up his dogs and righting the sled, Kaasen noticed that the package of serum was missing.

Taking off his mittens, Kaasen frantically searched for the serum in the snow. He was afraid it might have fallen off the sled somewhere farther back along the trail. But finally his frost-bitten hands touched the fur-wrapped package. Relieved, he pulled the package of serum out of the snow and tied it back onto his sled.

Kaasen and his team arrived in Nome at 5:30 AM on February 2. Kaasen quickly went to the home of Dr. Welch to deliver the serum. Not a single vial had been broken. By noon, the antitoxin was completely thawed and ready to use. The people of Nome were safe.

The entire relay had taken less than $5\frac{1}{2}$ days in terrible weather—subzero temperatures, blinding blizzards and hurricane force winds. It was truly an amazing accomplishment.

The mushers and their dogs became national heroes. A bronze statue of Balto, Gunnar Kaasen's lead dog, was placed in New York City's Central Park. And the Iditarod Dog Sled Race continues to serve as a tribute to the brave men and dogs of the Great Serum Run.