

Balto

and the Hero
Dogs
of
Alaska



Cleveland Museum of
NATURAL HISTORY

Nome, Alaska, appeared on the map during one of the world's great gold rushes at the end of the 19th century. Located on the Seward Peninsula, the town's population had swelled to 20,000 by 1900 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. Nome was icebound seven months of the year and the nearest railroad was more than 650 miles away, in the town of Nenana.

The radio telegraph was the most reliable means by which Nome could communicate with the rest of the world during the winter. Since Alaska was a U.S. territory, the government also maintained a route over which relays of dog teams carried mail from Anchorage to Nome. A one-way trip along this path, called the Iditarod Trail, took about a month. The "mushers" who traversed the trail were the best in Alaska.

A Race for Life

On January 20, 1925, a radio signal went out, carried for miles across the frozen tundra:

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

Nome's only doctor had diagnosed cases of diphtheria, an extremely contagious disease affecting the throat and lungs. The native Inuits were particularly vulnerable to this illness, as they had been to measles and the flu, both of which had wiped out entire villages. The frantic search for antitoxin began.

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

January 25

The long twilight of the arctic winter had settled over Nome. Heavy snow had fallen and temperatures dropped far below freezing. These weather conditions were beyond what the airplanes of the time, with their open cockpits, could handle.

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?

Yes! There were still some problems the technology of the early 20th century couldn't solve. As they had for years, the settlers of Alaska put their trust in courageous men and strong dogs.

By the next day, three children in Nome had died of diphtheria and more cases had been diagnosed. Time would make the difference between life and



Forgetting their own safety, 20 toughened drivers and sled-dog teams faced the peril of the trail, each racing six to nine miles per hour.

death for those who were ill. A relay of dog teams along the Iditarod Trail was quickly organized.

January 27

The serum arrived in Nenana by train, and the relay to the stricken city began. "Wild Bill" Shannon lashed the life-saving cargo to his sled and set off westward. Except for the dogs' panting and the swooshing of runners on the snow, there were no other sounds on the trail. The temperature was dropping fast. It was 30 degrees below zero when Shannon started. Then it fell to minus 35 degrees...40 degrees...45 degrees... and finally minus 50 degrees in the arctic darkness. Shannon rushed on, mindless of the cold, until he handed the serum over to Edgar Kalland in Tolovana, 52 miles from Nenana.

January 28

Kalland, in turn, traveled 31 miles before passing the serum to Dan Green at Manley Hot Springs. Green took it to Fish Lake (28 miles), averaging an astonishing nine miles an hour. From Green it passed to Johnny Folger (26 miles). He passed it on to Sam Joseph (34 miles), then to Titus Nikolai (24 miles) and Dave Corning (30 miles).

New snow fell and the wind picked up, creating whiteouts, but on and on the mushers went: Harry Pitka (30 miles), Bill McCarty (28 miles) and Edgar Nollner (24 miles). Eskimo, Indian and white mushers carried serum in the "Great Race of Mercy."

The relay teams were challenging the limits of endurance. The serum that passed from frozen hands to frozen hands was itself frozen, despite protective wrappings. Though thawed in one of the shelters along the way, it froze solid again on the trail.



Dog teams such as these huskies worked year-round and are credited with helping conquer the vast Alaskan Territory in the early 20th century. In work or sport, the driver commanded the team, but ultimately he depended upon the lead dog's ability to find the safest route.

January 30

At Galena, Edgar Nollner gave the serum to his newly married brother, George. The young Indian chanted Athabascan love songs through the wilderness to keep warm in the minus 50 degree weather. On the 30-mile stretch he ran, Charlie Evans harnessed himself to the sled after two dogs froze on their feet.

The serum was passed to Tommy Patsy (36 miles); Jackscrew, the Koyukuk Indian (40 miles); Victor Anagick (34 miles); and Myles Gonangnan (40 miles). Both men and dogs used their bodies to break trail through four-foot snowdrifts.

January 31

At Shaktoolik, Henry Ivanoff had traveled a half-mile along the trail when his team darted after a reindeer. While untangling the dogs, the Russian Eskimo spotted Leonhard Seppala, the greatest musher in the territory, and Togo, one of the territory's greatest dogs, rushing down the trail.

Due to a breakdown in communications, Seppala and his famous Siberian huskies had set out from Nome, 150 miles away, to meet the relay and return with the serum. The serum was handed off to Seppala, who set off on the 91-mile journey to the next relay point.

As the storm grew more vicious, Seppala was faced with the decision of whether to take a shortcut across the frozen, dangerous Norton Sound or to go around it. Gale-force winds hurled seawater over the ice, which threatened to break up at any moment.

Togo was a consummate lead sled-dog: courageous and strong, obedient and possessing an exceptional ability to find the trail and sense danger. Each dog on a team has an important position, but it is the leader that must guide them onto the safest route. Seppala was confident of his team and headed onto the ice. Togo unerringly led them across the jagged, groaning floes to the safety of land. Just three hours later, the ice broke in Norton Sound.



Nome's only physician, Dr. Welch, used the hospital as a command post during the diphtheria epidemic. Patients were kept isolated at home.

February 1

Through blinding snow and hurricane-force winds, the vital serum was passed from Seppala to Charlie Olson (25 miles) and then to Gunnar Kaasen. Had Kaasen had any inkling of how wildly the storm would rage, he would not have chosen Balto to lead his team. Although Balto was one of Seppala's dogs, he was not thought of as a very good leader. But Balto proved his mettle when he plunged into the roaring blizzard, at one point halting to save driver and team from instant death in the Topkok River.

No one believed Kaasen would make it through the storm, so when he arrived at the Safety Shelter, 21 miles from Nome, he found the next driver asleep. The team was running well, so they forged ahead. Their endurance was tested even further 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 had disappeared! He frantically searched the snow with his bare hands. Miraculously, he found the serum.

February 2

Before daybreak on February 2, 1925, Balto led Gunnar Kaasen's team into Nome. The town was saved! Exhausted and nearly frozen after the 53-mile run, Kaasen, Balto and the rest of the mushing team became instant heroes across the United States. The 674-mile trip was made in 127½ hours, considered by mushers to be a world's record.



Forgotten Heroes

News accounts with glorified depictions of the "Serum Race" impressed people across the United States. Only weeks after this feat, Hollywood producer Sol Lesser contacted Leonhard Seppala and asked to lease Balto and the rest of the team. Seppala welcomed the chance to rid himself of the "newspaper dog," as he called Balto. Lesser also hired Kaasen to work with the dogs in Los Angeles for 10 weeks.

Lesser took Kaasen and the team to Mt. Rainier in Washington state, where they starred in the short-subject film "Balto's Race To Nome." The two-reel film was released in June 1925. (Except for a few studio stills, no print of the film is known to exist today.)

During a dispute between Kaasen and Lesser over unpaid wages, it was revealed that Lesser had purchased the dogs from Seppala and sold them again. To make a living, Kaasen was forced to tour the country's vaudeville circuit with the dogs for two years. But by 1927, the whirl of the Roaring '20s and the hype of Leonhard Seppala's own sled dog promotions had overshadowed the "Heroes of Alaska." This would be the last time Kaasen worked with the team.



He returned to Nome and the dogs were relegated to yet another indignity.

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 mistreated. He knew the famous story of Balto and was outraged at seeing this degradation. He struck a deal with the dogs’ owner, Sam Houston, to buy them for \$2,000 and bring them to Cleveland — but Kimble had only two weeks to raise the money. Now there was another race: to save Balto.

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. Schoolchildren collected coins in buckets; factory workers passed their hats; and hotels, stores and visitors donated what they could to the Balto Fund. The Western Reserve Kennel Club gave a much-needed financial boost. The people responded generously. In just 10 days the headlines read, “City Smashes Over Top With Balto’s Fund! Huskies To Be Shipped From Coast at Once!”

On March 19, 1927, Balto and six companions were brought to Cleveland and given a hero’s welcome in a triumphant parade through Public Square. The dogs were then taken to the Brookside Zoo (now the Cleveland Metroparks Zoo) to live out their lives in dignity. It was said that 15,000 people visited the dogs on their first day at the zoo.



Today, Balto’s mount is part of the Museum’s permanent collection.

Balto died on March 14, 1933, at the age of 14. The husky’s body was mounted and is now housed at The Cleveland Museum of Natural History.

Balto Today

Balto’s mount remains a part of the Museum’s permanent collections, carefully protected and cared for by Museum curators. Balto is known and loved around the world, and preserving his legacy is a duty the Museum takes very seriously.

Research for Balto-related articles and artifacts is ongoing. The Museum recounts the story in major exhibitions commemorating the serum run’s anniversary.

In 1996, the Museum began negotiating with the Anchorage Museum of History and Art to ship Balto and related materials to Alaska for a special exhibition in 1998 and ’99 that would coincide with the meeting of the National Association for Interpretation in Anchorage and the 26th Iditarod.

In early 1998, as plans for the Balto exhibition at the Anchorage museum were being finalized, a class of second- and third-grade students in Palmer, Alaska, petitioned The Cleveland Museum of Natural History for Balto’s



permanent return to their state. Eventually, the Alaska state legislature passed a resolution requesting that the mount of the dog be returned.

The Museum politely but firmly declined to return Balto, citing his importance as a symbol of Cleveland's philanthropic tradition. After hearing Balto's entire life story, the schoolchildren decided that Cleveland was his rightful home after all.

In October 1998, Balto's mount left Cleveland for a five-month stay at the Anchorage Museum of History and Art — his first appearance in the state where he'd made his name in more than 70 years.

Balto and his display case and pedestal were shipped via jet airplane in special protective crates. A Museum staffer accompanied them every step of the way — even into the cargo hold of a freight airliner.

The exhibition *Balto Returns to Alaska* drew more than 65,000 people to the Anchorage museum, including several thousand each weekend for special sled dog-related programs.

Balto returned home in March 1999, again accompanied by a Museum curator. Though the fanfare wasn't as grand as what the living Balto had enjoyed in 1927, many in Cleveland were glad to see their Alaskan goodwill ambassador arrive home safely.

In February 2000, the Museum celebrated the 75th anniversary of the serum run and the bravery of Balto and the hero dogs of Alaska with a special exhibition of artifacts and a video, as well as the display of Balto's mount.

The Iditarod Today

Alaska changed dramatically in the years following the serum run. The territory became the country's 49th state in 1959 and modern conveniences reached the great northern wilderness. Cold weather no longer deterred

aviation. Telephones and television provided instant communication, and the snowmobile became the standard mode of winter transportation. The great era of the sled dog gradually came to an end.

Some, however, believed dog sledding was an important part of Alaskan history, and that snowmobiles would never surpass the achievements of people and dogs working together.

Among those individuals were Dorothy Page and Joe Redington, Sr. In 1973, they and other volunteers rallied to reopen the old Iditarod Trail, the mail route from Anchorage to Nome that had been used in the historic serum run. Today, the trail serves as the route for a race stretching 1,049 miles across two mountain ranges, through miles of frozen wilderness and along 200 miles of the Yukon Valley.

Held annually in March, the Iditarod not only commemorates the 1925 serum run, it reflects the spirit of Alaska, the people who settled the territory and the dogs whose loyalty and endurance helped to conquer the Far North.



Cleveland and at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

A statue of Balto was erected in 1925 in New York City's Central Park. It bears the words:

Dedicated to the indomitable spirit of the sled dogs that relayed antitoxin 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

Discover the nature of your Universe

The Cleveland Museum of Natural History

is dedicated to fostering an understanding of and appreciation for the natural world. Its galleries include exhibits about the forces that created and shape the universe; dinosaurs and other prehistoric creatures; humanity's origins; gems and jewels; and how modern human cultures interact with nature. The Nathan and Fannye Shafran Planetarium and Reinberger Hall of Astronomy bring the wonders of astronomy down to Earth. The Ralph Perkins II Wildlife Center & Woods Garden highlights native Ohio flora and fauna, ecology and the importance of conservation. And the Smead Discovery Center offers a special touchable exhibits area for families with children. Museum curators and researchers in over 10 natural science disciplines care for collections of more than 4.5 million specimens. In addition, the Museum maintains natural areas throughout Northern Ohio that preserve rare habitats and the plants and animals within them.

Join the Museum!

Membership benefits include free admission to the Museum and Shafran Planetarium; free Natureguide audio tour rental; subscriptions to Museum publications; and discounts on classes, field trips, programs and Museum store purchases. Membership levels include: \$65-family/couple; \$45-individual; \$40-senior. Call (216) 231-4600, ext. 3309, for more information.

Hours Monday through Saturday, 10 am to 5 pm; Sunday, noon to 5 pm; Wednesday evenings until 10 pm (Ralph Mueller Observatory open weather permitting September through May). Closed major holidays.

Admission* Adults, \$9; Ages 7-18 years and seniors, \$7; Children 3-6 years, \$6; Museum members and children 2 and under, Free. Shafran Planetarium, \$4 (members free). Audio tour available.

Group Discounts available with advance reservations for 12 or more. The Museum offers groups educational classes and guided tours, including an exclusive Museum-guided behind-the-scenes tour. For school bookings, call the Education Division at (216) 231-8002. For adult group tours, call (216) 231-4600, ext. 3225.

** Prices subject to change*



**Cleveland Museum of
NATURAL HISTORY**

1 Wade Oval Drive, University Circle
Cleveland, Ohio 44106 • www.cmnh.org
(216) 231-4600 • 1-800-317-9155



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