

In 1925,
children in a
remote Alaskan
city were being
struck down by a
deadly disease.
The cure was
hundreds of miles
away, across a
frozen wilderness.
There was only
one hope: **dogs.**

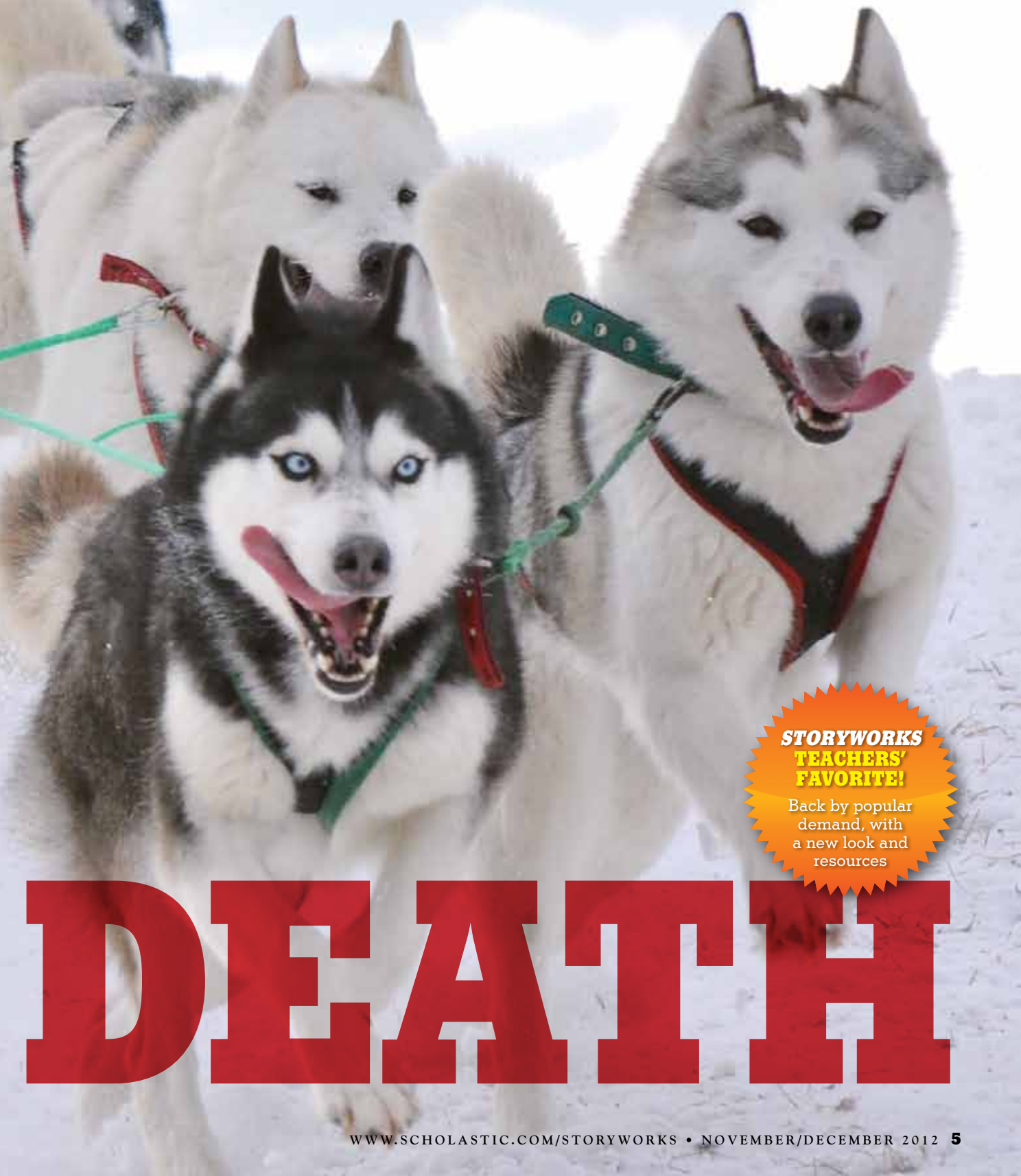
THE RACE AGAINST



History and science Why were dogsled teams necessary to save a town from disease? As you read this article, look for information about medicine and transportation in 1925.



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DEATH

From his apartment window, Dr. Curtis Welch watched as the last ship of the fall season of 1924, the *Alameda*, pulled away from the dock in Nome, Alaska. In a few weeks, the freezing winter weather would almost completely cut off the town of Nome from the rest of the world until spring. The town's only link with the rest of Alaska would be one frozen and windswept dogsled trail.

The *Alameda* had brought the doctor his winter supplies: cotton balls, **ether**, tongue depressors, thermometers, and medicines. Only one item had been either misplaced or lost: his order of fresh diphtheria (dip-THEER-ee-uh) medicine. Today, most children are **vaccinated** against diphtheria, a deadly disease that causes fever and sores in the throat. But in 1924, there were no vaccinations against it. Still, Dr. Welch hadn't seen a single confirmed case of diphtheria in the 18 years he'd been in Nome. Yet he knew that the disease strikes suddenly and is highly **contagious**. Without fresh medicine, Nome's population would be helpless in an outbreak. Dr. Welch prayed diphtheria would stay away for another winter.

A Deadly Outbreak

Unfortunately, the people of Nome wouldn't be that lucky.

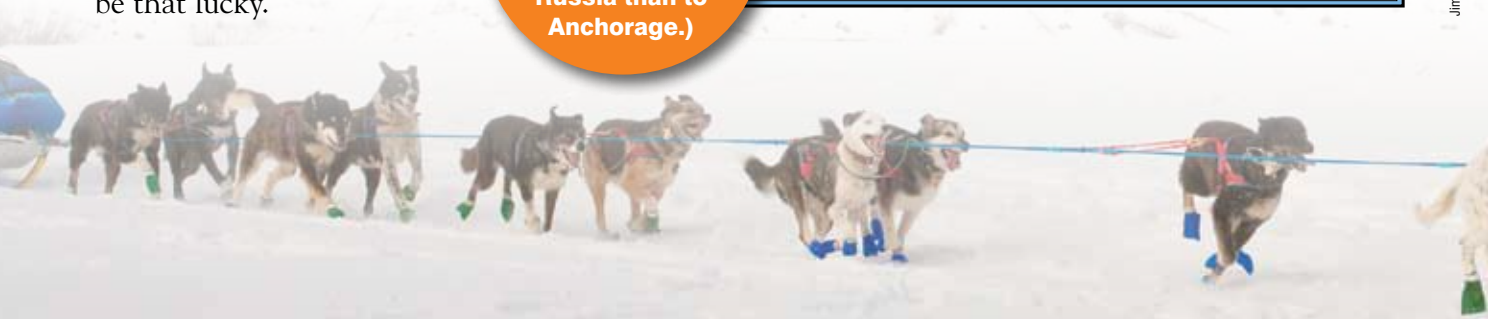
Soon after the *Alameda* had steamed off, an Native Alaskan family with four children arrived in Nome. The youngest was ill, and the doctor guessed the child was suffering from a mild infection. By morning, the child was dead.

Within weeks, three other children in Nome died. Then, on Tuesday, January 20, 1925, Dr. Welch checked in on a 3-year-old boy named Billy Barnett, who had been admitted to the hospital two weeks earlier with a sore throat and fever. The boy had developed thick,

This map shows the route the mushers took as they rushed to get the medicine to Nome. The medicine's journey began in Anchorage, Alaska's biggest city, and was transported by train to Nenana. It was then relayed by different mushers past the town of Nulato (see orange line). Seppala's original route, from Nome to Nulato, is marked in yellow.



What can you tell about Nome by looking at this map? (Notice that it is closer to Russia than to Anchorage.)



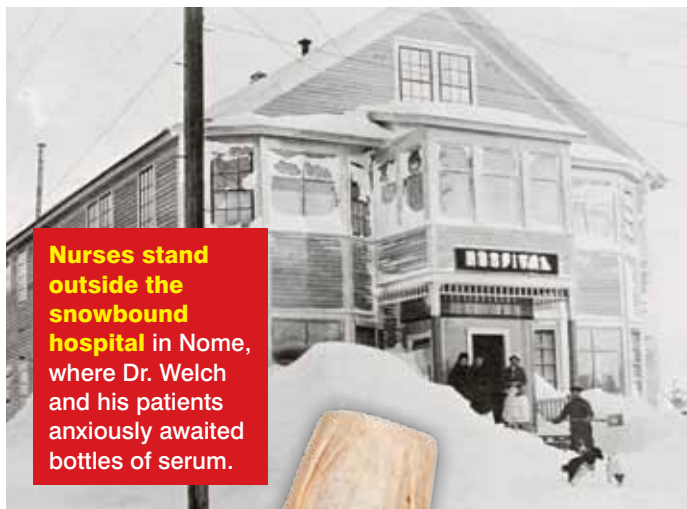
Jim McManor/Magnum

gray sores in his throat. Dr. Welch knew this could mean only one thing: diphtheria. In a matter of hours, the sores would block Billy's windpipe and kill him.

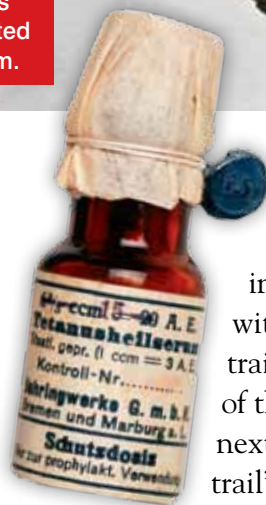
The town's situation was desperate. With a single touch or sneeze, diphtheria could move from one warm body to the next. Dr. Welch needed one million units of fresh medicine to treat the town. By January 25, a small quantity had been located in Anchorage, a major city 1,000 miles away from Nome. It wasn't enough for the whole town, but Dr. Welch hoped it would be enough to keep the disease from spreading.

But how could they get the medicine all the way to Nome? In 1925, there were no jet airplanes, rugged trucks, snowmobiles, or ice-cutting ships. Nome is located on a peninsula that juts out into the freezing Bering Sea. The sea was already partially frozen, making it impossible for ships to travel. The closest the one major railroad in Alaska came to Nome was the town of Nenana, 674 miles away.

Nome's town officials came up with a bold plan. They would have the medicine sent by railroad from Anchorage to Nenana. From Nenana, there was but one reliable way



Nurses stand outside the snowbound hospital in Nome, where Dr. Welch and his patients anxiously awaited bottles of serum.



to transport the medication the hundreds of miles to Nome: dogsled.

Super Mushers

Town leaders hoped to find the very fastest teams of dogs and the most experienced and courageous mushers, as dogsled drivers

are called. One musher would pick up the medicine at the railroad station in Nenana. Twelve others would wait with their dog teams in villages along the trail. Each musher would travel a portion of the trail and pass the medication to the next musher until the medicine reached the trail's midpoint, the village of Nulato. One particularly skilled musher, Leonhard Seppala, would set out from Nome and travel alone 300 miles to Nulato to pick up the medicine and bring it back to Nome.

Under normal circumstances, the journey from Nenana to Nome would take 30 days or more. Town leaders hoped their team of "super mushers" could make the trip in 10 days. It was a risky plan for both the drivers and the dogs. And there was no guarantee that the medicine would survive the journey. If the medicine were lost or frozen on the icy trail, hundreds—even thousands—of children and adults in Nome would likely die.

But there was no other choice. It was to be a





An excited crowd greets Gunnar Kaasen and his team of dogs upon their arrival in Nome with the diphtheria medicine.

race against death.

The journey began in Nome on January 27, when 47-year-old Seppala rigged up his seven dogs and set out on the 300-mile journey to Nulato. He would have to travel one of Alaska's most hazardous trails and take a 42-mile shortcut across the frozen Norton Sound. The shortcut would be littered with ice rubble—frozen spears that could shred a dog's paws. With little warning, the ice might break up and carry a team out to the Bering Sea. Seppala had been chosen because he was the fastest musher in Alaska. If anyone could make it, it was Seppala.

A Single Push

As Seppala raced west, “Wild Bill” Shannon and his team of nine dogs were at the other end of the trail in Nenana, meeting the train carrying the medicine. The crate of medicine weighed 20 pounds. It contained glass **vials** of amber-colored **serum** packed in a padded container and wrapped in heavy quilts and canvas. Shannon loaded the crate onto his sled and set off for the village of Tolovana, where another musher was waiting. Normally, the 52-mile trip over frozen terrain took two days. Shannon was told to make the trip in a single push, traveling through the night. As a rule, dogsled drivers avoided traveling in the dark and in temperatures lower than 40 degrees

below zero. That night, it was 50 below.

Still, Shannon made the trip in record time, pausing for just a few hours near the end to rest his dogs and warm his frozen body. Three of his dogs were too exhausted to finish the trip, so Shannon left them to warm up at the trail outpost. He traveled the last four hours of the journey with only six dogs. When he arrived in Tolovana, his face was black with frostbite. Men rushed out from the roadhouse. They loaded the medicine onto another sled and helped Shannon into the warmth.

The first part of the relay was done. But there were still hundreds of miles to cover, and an enormous blizzard was making its way toward western Alaska. Meanwhile, the situation in Nome was becoming graver by the hour. “The situation is bad,” Nome's panicked mayor announced in a telegram to leaders in Washington, D.C. “The number of diphtheria cases increases hourly.”

By now, the entire country knew of Nome's plight. Newspapers and radios reported news of the **epidemic**. People across America prayed that the medicine would reach Nome in time.

The Final Musher

At first, the mushers were lucky. Seppala made it over the dangerous Norton Sound without mishap. Nome's leaders added more

mushers to the relay, so the medicine reached Seppala days earlier than expected. There were now 20 men racing to save Nome.

Seppala strapped the medicine to his sled and immediately turned around to head back to the frozen Norton Sound. The trip across was even more treacherous this time, but he made it. Seventy-eight miles from Nome, in the village of Golovin, the exhausted Seppala handed the cargo to another musher, Charlie Olsen. Olsen traveled 25 miles to the village of Bluff, where the crate was loaded onto the sled of the final musher, Gunnar Kaasen.

The life-saving cargo was just 53 miles east of Nome. But the monster blizzard had closed in, bringing powerful winds, swirling snow, and a windchill of minus 70 degrees. Five miles into his run, Kaasen's path was blocked by huge drifts of snow. Kaasen had no choice but to leave the trail and go around the drifts, hoping that his lead dog, Balto, would be able to find the

trail again. It was up to Balto to sniff through several feet of snow and try to pick up the scent of the trail. The minutes crawled by as the dog searched through the snow. Kaasen's heart raced. His body ached with cold. Suddenly, Balto lifted his head and broke into a run. The team—and the medicine—were back on track.

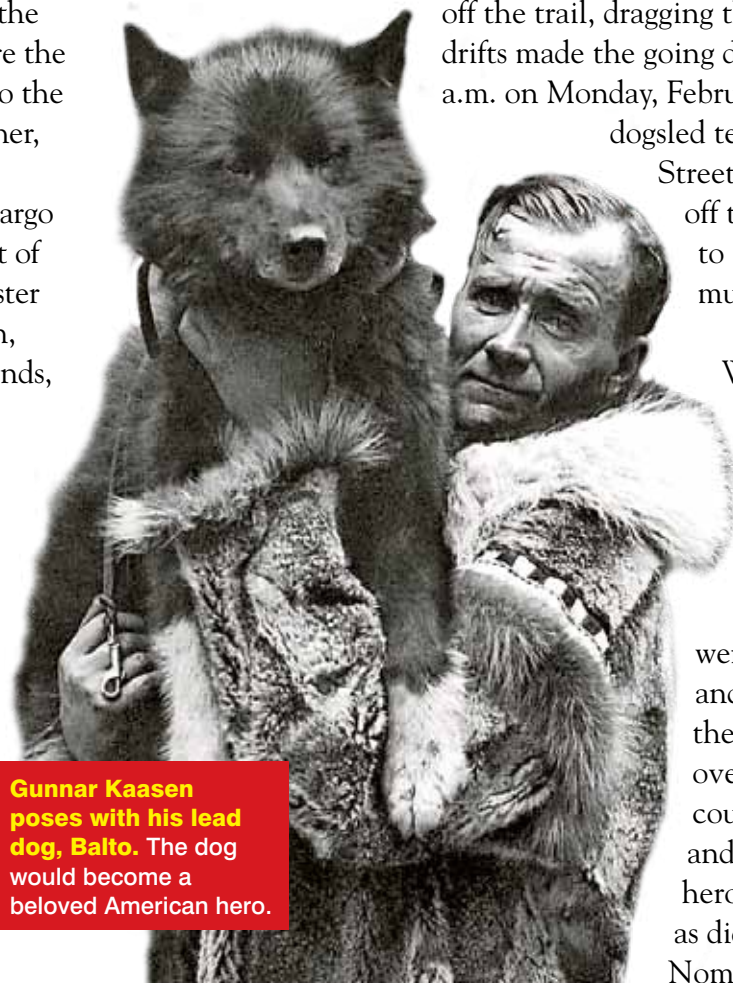
Over the next 20 miles, the winds beat at Kaasen and his dogs. The musher was losing his strength, and several times the sled flew off the trail, dragging the dogs with it. Heavy drifts made the going difficult. At last, at 5:30 a.m. on Monday, February 2, Kaasen and his dogsled team pulled onto Front

Street in Nome. He staggered off the sled, stumbled up to Balto, and collapsed, muttering, "Fine dog."

Within minutes, Dr. Welch had the medicine.

The next day, it looked as if even the most severe diphtheria cases would recover.

News dispatches went out over the radio and telegraph announcing the victory of men and dogs over the worst that nature could throw at them. Balto and his fellow dogs became heroes around the country, as did Kaasen and Seppala. Nome was saved. 🐾



Gunnar Kaasen poses with his lead dog, Balto. The dog would become a beloved American hero.

WRITE TO WIN!

Imagine you are a newspaper reporter covering Nome's crisis. Write an article about Kaasen's arrival, including details explaining the journey's importance and challenges. Send your article to "Balto Contest" by December 15, 2012. Ten winners will each receive a copy of *The Dogs of Winter* by Bobbie Pyron. See page 2 for details.

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