

The Cruellest Miles (1925 Nome epidemic) by Gay Salisbury (2003)

Within weeks after arriving most miners went bust & camped on the beach until they could figure how to get home. Then a storm blew in & washed many out to sea. Most of Nome's supplies were brought in by ship each summer, but dog sleds did the work the rest of the time. Storms would get so bad the town built an 8' electric cross on the church steeple to serve as a beacon.

In the summer of '24 Dr. Welch ordered new diphtheria antitoxin, but it didn't come in. In the 20's throughout the US 150,000/yr people were infected & 10% died. Nome went into quarantine & within a week it was on the cover of every newspaper in the US. Young kids are more at risk, but ironically a newborn is 90% immune due to breastfeeding.

The antitoxin would have to travel by ship to Seward [7 days from Seattle], 420 miles by rail to Nenana (near Fairbanks) [1 day] & then 674 miles via dog sled to Nome [6 days]. Flight was possible, but too dangerous. Anti-freeze was not invented yet & open-cockpits were not good.

Sled dogs were given 1-lb of dried Salmon, 1/3-lb of seal blubber & 1 gal of water each day. If they couldn't cut through ice to get water, it would take 4x the amount needed in snow. 1st survival rule was not to get wet [including sweat], 2nd was to hang on to the team, 3rd learn the Eskimo ways. Siberian Huskies were 2x as fast & could travel 2x as far as malamutes. Horses & reindeers did not replace dogs on the trails [the holes they created were a risk to man & dog]. A dog can smell a trail even in the dark or buried in snow [600x more powerful than man].

Roadhouses were placed about every 40 miles along the trail & the antitoxin would be warmed up at each. Mail drivers were paid well, but they earned every dollar. After a snowstorm, men would have to go out along the trail and stomp down the drifts. A worker came upon a man froze to death after falling through the ice [with match in hand trying to start a fire]. His lead dog by his side with his paws froze to the ground. If a man is found frozen stretch out his arm; if it recoils, he is still alive [only live muscles contract].

Rule of 40 = sled dogs run well between 40 below & 40 above. The nights that week were 50 & 60 below. Drivers must check dog's feet every hour. The dogs will push themselves to death [pulmonary hemorrhage]. Winds can reach 70 mph on Norton Sound & drag wind chill factor to -100 degrees. Dark ice meant it was thin & dangerous. Seppala had to trust Togo while crossing the Norton Bay in the dangerous storm. It was whiteout conditions near Unalakleet.

The two main lead dogs from all of the relay teams were Togo & Balto. They had "adaptive intelligence" [ability to find solutions] & a 6th sense. Kaasen missed the roadhouse that would have told him to wait out the blizzard, but he didn't see it in whiteout conditions. At one point they had to take a detour & Balto found his way around & back to the trail. Once a gust blew the sled into a drift & the serum fell out, but he found it. The next roadhouse was dark because they were expecting him to wait it out.

Dogs place their back feet in the paw print of their front feet & run in rhythm. Dogs can pull a sled at 3.2-minute miles for 24 hrs. The 20 drivers of the first relay team were given a gold

medal. It took 5 weeks to deliver a photo of the dog run to reach Seattle. Kaasen & Balto were given a movie deal & went on tour. A statue of him is in NYC central park. Seppala & Togo went on tour & they opened a kennel in Maine.

1741 Russian ship landed on Alaskan coast
1867 US bought Alaska from Russia
1892 whalers & trappers were depleting native's food & govt sent reindeer
1893 stock market crash caused 20% unemployment
1896 gold found near Klondike River & 100,000 set out for it (30% arrived in Dawson)
1898 gold discovered near Nome by the 3 lucky Swedes
1900 summer 50 ships (20,000 miners) arrived, only to leave 2 months later
1902 gold discovered near Fairbanks
1908 first sled dog race brought a lot of outside attention
1915 Scott Allan helped French with supplies via sled dogs
1918-19 flu pandemic took many lives everywhere (50% of Nome's natives died from it)
1922 radios were in 60,000 homes, but 3.5 million by 1924
1924 most mining companies were out of business & Nome was down to 1400 people
1925 Jan 3 native kids died of sore throats, and then a mom brought in her son to see the doc
1925 Jan 22 a telegram was sent to Washington DC to send antitoxin
1925 Jan 26 some antitoxin was found in Anchorage, wrapped it up & sent north
1925 Jan 26 the governor sent relay teams to meet Seppala midway [to take it to Nome]
1925 Jan 27 at 9pm Wild Bill & his team start the 1st leg [52 miles in 62 below & 3 dogs died]
1925 Jan 28 Seppala headed east with Togo & 19 dogs to meet the relay teams
1925 Jan 29 Governor added more teams to speed up the delivery
1925 Jan 30 at 3am dog teams had covered 325 miles [6 mph] – 2 more dogs died
1925 Jan 31 Ivanoff almost missed Seppala in the blizzard to pass off the package
1925 Feb 1 Blizzard was so bad they asked them to stop the relay until it cleared
1925 Feb 2 at 5:30 am Kaasen & Balto lead his team into Nome
1925 Feb 7 the 2nd pkg of serum arrived in Seward
1925 Feb 15 the 2nd pkg of serum arrived in Nome
1940's DPT [diphtheria-pertussis-tetanus] shots req'd for school
1963 last sled dog mail delivery made [planes & snowmobiles took over]
1973 first Iditarod dog sled race [Anchorage to Nome]

Quotes: "Together with 19 others, you traveled across some of the world's cruelest miles to accomplish the impossible – and you did it in the name of humanity." (Pres Reagan)

Books: The Friendly Arctic (Vilhjalmur Stefansson)