

The Serum Run: Heroic Dogs and Musers [B1]

Cento anni fa, venti uomini e centocinquanta cani percorsero più di mille chilometri attraverso la gelida Alaska per prevenire una mortale epidemia di difterite.

The winter of 1924-25 was a difficult time for Nome, a town of about 1,400 people in the Arctic region of Alaska. The town was suffering an outbreak of the bacterial disease diphtheria. The disease had already killed four children, and many more would die if they didn't receive the necessary medication, diphtheria antitoxin.

A LIFE-SAVING PLAN

The necessary quantity of antitoxin was available in the Alaskan city of Anchorage. However, it couldn't be delivered to Nome by road or air because of adverse weather conditions. So, the people of Alaska transported it as far as possible from Anchorage by rail, to the town of Nenana. They then organised for dog sled teams to transport it by relay race 675 miles [1,086 kilometres] west from there to Nome. This historic event is known as The Serum Run.

20 MEN AND 150 DOGS

In total, twenty men, or 'mushers', and about 150 dogs made up the twenty teams who participated in the relay race. Most travelled between around 18 and 40 miles [29-64 kilometres] before handing the antitoxin to the next team. The teams had to endure brutal conditions, with temperatures as low as -62°F (-52°C). Some of the dogs died and some of the mushers suffered from frostbite. They also had difficulty with visibility, which was reduced to practically zero at times because of the snow and wind.

FASTEST TIME

Until then, the fastest recorded time for travelling this route by dog sled was nine days. Incredibly, the teams on The Serum Run completed it in 127.5 hours, or just over five days. They delivered the antitoxin on 1 February, in time to prevent a diphtheria epidemic in Nome and the surrounding communities.

THE HEROES

The Serum Run was documented by the US media, both newspapers and radio, which was a new medium at the time. The lead dog in the final team was Balto, and he became very famous; there is a statue of him in Anchorage, Alaska, and in New York's Central Park. However, many people say the true heroes of the race were the musher Leonhard Seppala and his dog, Togo; they travelled the longest and most dangerous part of the route, racing a total of 261 miles [420 kilometres.]

Glossary

- **relay race** = staffetta
- **handing** = consegnare
- **surrounding** = circostanti
- **outbreak** = epidemia
- **disease** = malattia
- **dog sled** = cani da slitta
- **made up** = formare
- **to endure** = sopportare
- **frostbite** = congelamento