<https://youtu.be/-MOJI_nH4v0> = Beginning of the race

The History of the Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race®

Since 1973, mushers have challenged themselves in a race nicknamed The Last Great Race on Earth®, racing each March from Anchorage to Nome, Alaska. Nearly a thousand miles in length, mushers and teams travel over mountain ranges, through monotonous, flat tundra, to the western Alaskan coast and finally to the town of Nome, established when gold was discovered there in 1898. By 1899, Nome's population numbered 10,000. The route that most of the race follows is a trail that was created long before the race became a race. Used by Native Alaskans for hunting and travel to various villages, the Iditarod Trail was cleared in 1908 by government employees, but it wasn't until the 1910 gold discoveries in Iditarod which is a ghost town now, Ruby, Ophir, Flat, Nome, Elim, and other villages, that it became regularly used as a means of supplying miners and settlements with mail and supplies, delivered by dog team.

It also provided the route for gold to be sent out of Alaska when the Bering Sea was frozen, preventing ships from reaching Nome for months at a time. Dog sled teams carried gold to the ice-free bay at Seward to be loaded on ships there. Before the time of airplanes delivering mail and supplies to remote Alaskan areas, dog teams did the job. Alaskan Natives had been using dog teams in their way of life, a subsistence lifestyle which depended upon hunting, fishing, and gathering to provide food. Dog teams helped them travel, carry game they hunted, and carry food and water. People who lived in and who explored Alaska used dog teams to survive and explore. By 1973, dog teams in the small Alaskan Native villages were becoming replaced by snowmachines nicknamed iron dogs. Joe Redington, Sr lived in Alaska and spent much time using dog teams himself in his work, and thought it important to preserve the culture of sled dogs and their use in Alaska.

The snow machines were not reliable and could leave one stranded, whereas dogs were always reliable and could save lives. He also thought it was important for the Iditarod Trail to be recognized as a National Historic Trail. These two factors led Joe to work to establish The Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race®, contrary to information stating that the Iditarod commemorates the delivery of diphtheria antitoxin to Nome in 1925. That event of 1925 is honored by a different sled dog race, the Serum Run, a race Joe helped establish. Joe's perseverance and ability to work with people and get them to volunteer resulted in the first race of 1973, won by Dick Wilmarth in 20 days, 0 hours, 49 minutes and 41 seconds.

written by Martha Dobson, 2011 Iditarod Teacher on the Trail updated 2.27.2016 May Not Be Sold Sources: Champion of Alaskan Huskies, the Story of Joe Redington, Sr; http://www.blm.gov/ak/st/en/prog/cultural/ak\_history/iditarod\_nht\_historic\_overview.print.html accessed 2.16.2016; http://www.blm.gov/ak/st/en/prog/cultural/ak\_history/iditarod\_nht\_historic\_overview.print.html accessed 2.16.2016; http://iditarod.com/race/1973/ accessed 2.16.2016

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# **Diphtheria and the Alaskan Iditarod**

[](http://api.addthis.com/oexchange/0.8/forward/twitter/offer?url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.cdc.gov%2Ffeatures%2FDiphtheria%2Findex.html&title=CDC%20Features%20-%20Diphtheria&description=Learn%20about%20the%20famous%20Alaskan%20Iditarod%20and%20its%20place%20in%20Public%20Health&via=CDCgov&ct=0&media=http://www.cdc.gov/Features/Diphtheria/Diphtheria_456px.jpg)

**Learn about the famous Alaskan Iditarod and its place in Public Health**

### **Alaskan Iditarod: Celebrating the Great Race**

Years ago, [diphtheria](http://www.cdc.gov/diphtheria/index.html) wiped out entire communities, sometimes killing all the children in a family. This is the story of a famous event that galvanized people in the United States to begin to use diphtheria vaccine—which has virtually wiped out the once dreaded disease in this country.

### **A Deadly Outbreak**

****In the winter of 1925, a lone physician and four nurses in Nome, Alaska faced a crisis too terrible to imagine—an outbreak of diphtheria that could kill most of the region's population of about 10,000 people.

Diphtheria is a highly contagious upper respiratory tract illness caused by the toxin-producing bacterium Corynebacterium diphtheriae. The disease can be treated with an antitoxin or prevented by vaccines. However, before these medicines were available, diphtheria was commonly known as the “strangling angel of children.” Diphtheria causes the throat to become blocked with a thick, leathery coating that makes breathing very difficult. Without treatment, death by suffocation is very likely, especially for young children.

In December 1924, Nome doctor Curtis Welch watched as an outbreak started—with cases first thought to be simple sore throats or tonsillitis. In January 1925, when 2 children died of diphtheria, the impending crisis became clear. Dr. Welch ordered a quarantine, but diphtheria is so contagious that many people were likely already exposed and he knew more cases would appear.

### **Help from Miles Away**

Normally, Dr. Welch would have treated infected people with diphtheria antitoxin to fight off the effects of the poison that diphtheria releases into the body. But the town’s supply of antitoxin was not enough and it had expired. Not knowing if the expired antitoxin would work or if it might actually cause harm, Dr. Welch hesitated to use it. To save lives, fresh diphtheria antitoxin was the only hope. On January 22, 1925, Dr. Welch sent dozens of telegrams pleading for help to find and deliver antitoxin. National leaders in Washington, D.C., helped to locate the closest large supply of diphtheria antitoxin—it was in Anchorage, hundreds of miles away.

The next problem was figuring out the fastest way get the antitoxin to Nome. There were no roads or railways to Nome, air service was unavailable, and ships could not reach the town because of sea ice around Nome. The only way in was overland via the Iditarod Trail, also known as the Seward-to-Nome Mail Trail. This crisis made newspaper and radio headlines across America.

### **To the Rescue**

****Norwegian immigrant Gunnar Kaasen was the musher on the dog team that successfully delivered diphtheria antitoxin to Nome, Alaska in 1925.

After weighing all possible solutions, Alaska’s Territorial Governor Scott Bone approved a relay of the 20 best mail carrier mushers (sled dog drivers) and 150 dogs along the 674-mile Nenana-to-Nome Trail, a trip that usually took 15 to 20 days.

On January 27, one of the story’s heroes, “Wild” Bill Shannon, picked up the package of antitoxin at the nearest station that could be reached by train and began the journey. Teams of mushers traveled day and night, enduring blizzards and temperatures of 50 degrees below zero, handing off the package to fresh teams. Leonhard Seppala’s team with lead dog, Togo, covered 91 miles —the most dangerous part of the relay — and Gunner Kaasen’s team and lead dog, Balto, finished the lifesaving race, reaching Nome on February 2.

This Great Race of Mercy was completed in a record 5 days and 7 hours.

Just two weeks later, after the diphtheria antitoxin was given to the infected children, the quarantine was lifted. At least five children died during the outbreak. However, the collective efforts of hundreds of people to deliver the diphtheria antitoxin prevented the deaths of many other children in Nome and the surrounding area.

The solution to the crisis also became the founding of an event well known today—the Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race.

**The Iditarod Today**

The original “Great Race of Mercy” in 1925 occurred when dog mushers from around Alaska joined forces to carry life-saving diphtheria serum to Nome. Since 1973, the Iditarod Trail Race has been run annually in memory of this original sled dog relay. As part of the current race format, the Alaska Immunization Program, the Iditarod Trail Committee, and other partners in the ["I Did It By Two!"](http://www.epi.hss.state.ak.us/id/iz/iditarod/ididitby2.htm) campaign use the “Race to Vaccinate" to heighten awareness of the critical need for timely immunizations for children before they are two years old.

The serum run of 1925 and the modern Iditarod race are very important events here in Alaska,” says Arctic Investigations Program (AIP) Director Dr. Thomas Hennessy. “The State of Alaska uses the Iditarod race to promote immunization and other local public health activities.”

### **CDC's Arctic Investigations Program**

The mission of [AIP](http://www.cdc.gov/ncezid/dpei/aip/) in the National Center for Emerging and Zoonotic Infectious Diseases is the prevention of infectious diseases in people of the Arctic and sub-Arctic. AIP places a special emphasis on diseases of high incidence and concern among the Alaska Native and other northern indigenous peoples. The program conducts infectious disease surveillance, evaluates prevention services, and conducts applied research in collaboration with its partners.

Approximately 35 staff members are based at the AIP facility on the Alaska Native Medical Center Campus. Staff members include epidemiologists, laboratory scientists, research nurses, statisticians, and support staff. AIP provides support for research studies on the control and prevention of infectious disease, with particular emphasis on vaccine-preventable infections. Research areas include medical care, applied epidemiology, laboratory diagnosis, and biostatistical sciences.

Information came from <http://www.cdc.gov/features/Diphtheria/index.html>