In 1925, children in a faraway Alaskan city were sick with a deadly disease. The cure was hundreds of miles away. It was across empty, frozen land. 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.
The year was 1924. Dr. Curtis Welch watched as the Alameda left Nome, Alaska. It was the last ship of the fall season. Soon the winter weather would very nearly cut off the town of Nome from the rest of the world. It would stay that way until spring. The only way into Nome would be one dogsled trail.

The ship had brought the doctor his winter supplies. It had brought cotton balls, ether, tongue depressors, thermometers, and medicines. But one thing was missing: his order of fresh medicine for diphtheria. Today, most children are vaccinated against this deadly disease. But in 1924, there were no vaccines against it. Dr. Welch had not seen a confirmed case of the disease in all his 18 years in Nome. But he knew that it strikes quickly and is very contagious. Without fresh medicine, Nome’s people would be helpless in an outbreak. Dr. Welch prayed that the illness would stay away for another winter.

A Deadly Outbreak

Sadly, the people of Nome would not be that lucky.

Soon after the Alameda left, a Native Alaskan family came to Nome. They had four children. The youngest was ill. It looked like a mild infection. But by morning, the child was dead.

Within weeks, three other children in Nome died. Then, on January 20, 1925, Dr. Welch checked in on a 3-year-old boy named Billy Barnett. Billy had gone to the hospital two weeks earlier with a sore throat and fever. Now there were thick, gray sores in his throat. Dr. Welch knew the boy had diphtheria. In a matter of hours, the sores would block Billy’s windpipe and kill him.
The town was in danger. With one touch or sneeze, the illness could move from one person to the next. Dr. Welch needed one million units of fresh medicine to treat the town. Soon he learned that there was a small amount in Anchorage, a city 1,000 miles from Nome. It was not enough for the whole town. But it might be enough to keep the disease from spreading.

But how could he get the medicine to Nome? In 1925, there were no jet planes or rugged trucks. There were no snowmobiles or ice-cutting ships. Nome sits on a peninsula in the Bering Sea. The sea was already too frozen for ships to travel. Alaska had one major railroad. It didn’t stop in Nome. The closest stop was the town of Nenana, 674 miles away.

Nome’s town officials came up with a plan. The medicine would go by railroad from Anchorage to Nenana. From there, there was only one way to bring it the hundreds of miles to Nome. They would use dogsleds.

Super Mushers

Town leaders looked for the fastest teams of dogs and the best mushers, or dogsled drivers. 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 part of the trail and pass the cargo to the next musher until it reached the village of Nulato. One brave musher, Leonhard Seppala, would set out from Nome. He would travel 300 miles to Nulato to pick up the medicine. Then he would bring it back to Nome.

Normally, the trip from Nenana to Nome would take 30 days or more. Town leaders hoped the “super mushers” could do it in 10 days. It was a risky plan for the drivers and the dogs. And the medicine might not survive the trip. If it got lost or frozen, hundreds of people in Nome would likely die.

But there was no other choice. It was to be a race against death.

The trip began in Nome on January 27. Seppala rigged up his seven dogs. He started the 300-mile trip to Nulato. He would have to travel one of Alaska’s most dangerous trails. He would take a 42-mile shortcut across the frozen Norton Sound. The shortcut
would be littered with ice rubble, which could shred a dog’s paws. With little warning, the ice might break up and carry a team out to sea. But Seppala had been chosen with care. He was the fastest musher in Alaska. If anyone could make it, he could.

A Single Push

As Seppala raced toward Nulato, “Wild Bill” Shannon was at the other end of the trail in Nenana. He had nine dogs. Shannon met the train that carried the medicine. The crate of medicine weighed 20 pounds. It held glass vials of amber-colored serum. They were packed in a padded container and wrapped in quilts and canvas. Shannon put the crate on his sled. He set off for the village of Tolovana, where another musher was waiting. Normally, the 52-mile trip took two days. Shannon was told to get there in one push, traveling through the night. As a rule, dogsled drivers didn’t travel in the dark or in temperatures lower than 40 degrees below zero. That night, it was 50 below.

Still, Shannon made it in record time. He paused near the end to rest his dogs and warm up. Three of his dogs were too tired to go on. He left them to warm up at the trail outpost. He made the last four hours of the trip with only six dogs. When he got to Tolovana, his face was black with frostbite. Men rushed out from the roadhouse. They put the medicine on another sled and helped Shannon inside.

The first part of the relay was done. But there were still hundreds of miles to go. And a big blizzard was heading toward western Alaska. Meanwhile, things in Nome were getting worse. Nome’s mayor sent a telegram to leaders in Washington, D.C. “The situation is bad,” the mayor told them. “The number of diphtheria cases increases hourly.”

By now, the whole country knew of Nome’s plight. Newspapers and radios gave news of the epidemic. People prayed that the medicine would reach Nome in time.

The Final Musher

At first, the mushers were lucky. Seppala made it safely over the dangerous Norton Sound. Nome’s leaders added more mushers to the relay, so the medicine reached Seppala days earlier than expected. There were now two teams of mushers racing across the trail.
20 men racing to save Nome.

Seppala put the medicine on his sled. He went back to the frozen Norton Sound. Crossing it was even more dangerous this time. But he made it. He went to the village of Golovin, 78 miles from Nome. He gave the crate to another musher, Charlie Olsen. Olsen traveled 25 miles to the village of Bluff. There, the crate was handed to the final musher, Gunnar Kaasen.

The life-saving cargo was just 53 miles east of Nome. But the blizzard had closed in. It brought swirling snow and a windchill of minus 70 degrees. Five miles into his run, Kaasen’s path was blocked. Huge drifts of snow covered the trail. He had to leave the trail and go around the drifts. He hoped his lead dog, Balto, could find the trail again. Balto sniffed through deep snow, trying to pick up the scent of the trail. The minutes crawled by. Kaasen’s heart raced. His body ached with cold. Then Balto lifted his head. He began to run. The team and the medicine were back on track.

The winds beat at Kaasen. He was losing his strength. A few times, the sled flew off the trail, dragging the dogs with it. Heavy drifts made the going tough. At last, at 5:30 a.m. on February 2, Kaasen pulled onto Front Street in Nome. He staggered off the sled and stumbled up to Balto. “Fine dog,” he muttered. Then he collapsed.

Dr. Welch had the medicine. The next day, it looked as if even the sickest patients would be OK.

The good news went out over the radio and telegraph. Men and dogs had made it through the worst that nature could throw at them. Balto and his fellow dogs became heroes around the country. So did Kaasen and Seppala. Nome was saved.

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.