HISTORY This Week EP 412: The Dogs Who Saved Nome, Alaska
EPISODE TRANSCRIPT

NOTE: This transcript may contain errors.

Sally Helm: HISTORY This Week. January 27th, 1925. I'm Sally Helm.

The temperature is hovering around minus *fifty* degrees. So cold that sharp ice crystals form as you breathe–it feels like a bee sting to the nose. So cold that exposing your bare flesh to the air would feel like a burn–like a hot iron pressed against your skin. In fact, that skin might actually start *steaming*, as the water vapor that's always flowing through your body was pulled out by the cold. Leave your hand in the air too long, and pretty soon…well, say goodbye to that hand. Lost to frostbite. Things are different at minus fifty degrees. If you have to be outside, exposed to the elements, there is simply no room for error.

In the railway station in Nenana Alaska, Wild Bill Shannon is waiting for a train. He's well acquainted with the harshness of the environment. He wears thick gloves and a knee-length bearskin coat. And he watches the tracks, anxious, waiting for a very important delivery.

Nenana is located roughly in the center of Alaska. 674 miles to the west is the town of Nome. And there are terrifying reports coming out of Nome. About children dying. The town has been struck by an outbreak of diphtheria. A disease that leaves its victims gasping for air. It's especially dangerous if you're young. If this outbreak goes unchecked, *all* of the children in Nome could die.

A lifesaving serum *does* exist…but Nome doesn't have enough. And so that is why Wild Bill Shannon is waiting at the end of the train line in Nenana. A package of that serum is about to arrive, and he's gonna help carry it out to the coast, to Nome.

Finally, Shannon hears the chugging of the train. Before it's even fully come to a stop, the conductor jumps off and runs over, holding the twenty-pound package of serum. It's wrapped in fur to keep it from freezing. Shannon takes the package and then he walks it over to his sled…and his dogs.

The only reliable way to get this serum across the frozen Alaskan wilderness is by dogsled. And Shannon will not be doing it alone. There are other mushers standing ready to pass the serum off in a relay.

Wild Bill Shannon has to complete the first leg with his dog, including his lead dog, Blackie. He'll pass the serum off to other mushers and their dogs—Togo, and Balto. The serum must reach the children as soon as possible. The stakes are life and death. So Wild Bill Shannon steps onto his sled, behind his team, and launches into the darkness.

Today: the Nome serum run. How did the survival of thousands come to depend upon a dogsled relay? And how did mushers and dogs alike risk their lives in a desperate attempt to save others?

[AD BREAK]

Sally Helm: Nome, Alaska. A former mining town on the edge of the Bering Sea. During the gold rush years at the turn of the century, Nome was home to about 15,000 people. But by the 1920s, empty storefronts dot the main road and only 10 percent of that population remains. It's tight knit. And isolated.

Pam Flowers: In 1925, there's no way to get there except by dog team or ship. In the winter of course the ocean is frozen, and so really the only way to get to Nome is by dog team.

Sally Helm: Pam Flowers is based in Talkeetna, Alaska. She's a children's book author, public speaker and a dog musher herself. As a kid growing up in Michigan, she dreamed of icy adventures with her pet dog. She'd been inspired by a radio program called Sergeant Preston of the Yukon. It starred a Canadian Mountie and his trusty dog King. She never forgot it.

Sally Helm: How did you realize you wanted to be a dog musher?

Pam Flowers: I was 35 years old, and I was at a big change in my life. Yes, there was a man involved.

Sally Helm: Flowers headed up to Alaska to fulfill her childhood dream. She went to live on a sled dog farm.

Pam Flowers: I pulled into this driveway and there were about 250 sled dogs. I thought I'd just died, gone to heaven right there.

Sally Helm: She learned about mushing and caring for sled dogs… skills she used to complete the Iditarod dog sled race, one of the world's great tests of endurance. She also ventured to the magnetic North Pole. And she completed a 2,500-mile solo trip across the Arctic, from the very top of Alaska eastward across the Canadian tundra.

Pam Flowers: That was the longest solo dog sled trip by a woman in recorded history. And it changed my life.

Sally Helm: What is it like to be with just you and the consciousnesses of eight dogs in the wilderness like that?

Pam Flowers: The thing about being in the Arctic, you know, I would stand there and just look around and I would think about all the power it took to freeze the Arctic Ocean, that it froze the land, that there's snow everywhere. And I would look at that. I would think so much power it took to do that, and it would fill me with power. And after I'm out there a few days, I think I can do anything.

Sally Helm: If Pam were in the wilderness near Nome in the winter of 1925, she would have felt that power. That year, like every year, the land and water surrounding the town had frozen. Until the thaw, Nome was essentially on its own.

On Christmas Eve, local doctor Curtis Welch sees a young patient named Margaret Solvey Eide. The 7-year-old is pale and feverish. Dr. Welch at first suspects tonsillitis. He says Margaret should rest.

Pam Flowers: And the little girl died. They could not help her.

Sally Helm: Soon, more children fall ill, in Nome and in a nearby Native community. And Dr. Welch realizes the worst: these young patients have Diphtheria. Which means, more people are going to get sick…and soon.

Pam Flowers: It's very contagious. It's transmitted by particles in the air and it, it gets into your respiratory system, and it forms in the back of your throat like a film sort of, and it slowly suffocates the person to death.

Sally Helm: By the end of January, five more children have died. Doctor Welch is the only doctor for miles. And he knows that the disease can only be stopped by a serum containing a specific antitoxin. But his serum supply is low – barely enough for six patients. It's also past its expiration date. To avoid further tragedy, Nome will need a large batch of fresh serum.

Pam Flowers: He goes to the authorities in town and tells them we've got an epidemic. Somehow, we have to get diphtheria serum here.

Sally Helm: Dr. Welch forms an emergency public health council. Its first act is to place Nome under quarantine. Residents are advised to stay inside and away from social gatherings.

Pam Flowers: And people are beginning to panic.

Sally Helm: Dr. Welch wires two urgent telegrams: one to the U.S. Public Health Service in Washington D.C., and one to towns throughout Alaska, who might have a stock of serum on hand. "I am in urgent need of one million units of diphtheria antitoxin STOP." Not because there are a million people in Nome, but that's how much serum he needs to stop an outbreak in this town of about 1500.

Pam Flowers: And a Dr. Beason down in Anchorage in his storage facility there, where he kept his medications and discovered he had 300,000 units of Diphtheria serum. It wasn't enough, but it was something.

Sally Helm: But it is also *hundreds* of miles away, to the southeast of Nome. Alaska is enormous. The distance from Anchorage to Nome would be roughly the length of an overland trip from Chicago to Washington D.C.

It's easy enough to get that serum *part* of the way.

Pam Flowers: Everybody agrees that they're gonna have to put it on a train and it's gonna have to go north out of Anchorage. But the question is, when you get it up north, what do you do then?

Sally Helm: The problem is, the train line doesn't go all the way to Nome. And Dr. Welch's council is divided over how to organize the rest of the trip. One side wants the train to stop at a town north of Anchorage called Nenana, then use dog teams to ferry the serum from there.

Pam Flowers: The other was that they would continue to Fairbanks where there were a couple of planes.

Sally Helm: Fly the serum to Nome. Alaska congressman Dan Sutherland pushes for this idea. The epidemic has begun to make headlines in the rest of the country. And Sutherland sees this as a chance to promote Alaska's aviation achievements. But some council members are like…*that is never gonna work. Dogs are a way better option.*

Pam Flowers: Uh, because they could depend on the dogs not to freeze up and fall out of the sky.

Sally Helm: That's a big advantage dogs have over planes. [laughs]

Pam Flowers: Yeah. [laughs]

Sally Helm: The decision is punted up to the territorial Governor of Alaska, Scott C. Bone. And the clock is ticking.

Pam Flowers: He just had to make a decision. He just had to make a call.

Sally Helm: Governor Bone chooses…dogs.

Here's the plan to cover the 674 miles of treacherous wilderness between the end of the train line in Nenana and the suffering townspeople in Nome:

Pam: Someone would set out from Nenana and head west across Alaska, and somebody who would start out from Nome. And they would bump into one another at a little village called Nulato, and the Nome person would take the serum and head back to Nome.

Sally Helm: This brings us back to "Wild Bill" Shannon. Who signs on to do the first leg of the trip.

Pam Flowers: He was a prospector. He was a trapper, and he was known for just, you know, "gimme the problem and I'll go solve it."

Sally Helm: Shannon has experience driving a dog team in tough conditions to deliver the mail. But remember, he's setting out under unusually harsh circumstances: it's around negative *fifty*. A blisteringly cold night, even by Alaskan standards. And horse teams have left the trail riddled with large holes.

Pam Flowers: He was very worried about his dog stepping in holes that were made by the horse's feet. And so, after a while he considered it such a hazard, he moved down onto the river.

Sally Helm: A frozen river can take him part of the way. But driving on river ice is incredibly dangerous. He has to constantly watch for places where the surface is thin or even missing. And it's even colder than driving on land.

Pam Flowers: He would get off the sled and run beside the sled trying to get warm. And then he would get so exhausted he would have to get back on the sled. He'd swing his arms like a windmill, one arm at a time, trying to fling blood out into his fingers.

Sally Helm: I just imagine that you've been colder than some of our listeners have ever been in their lives, what is it like to be that cold?

Pam Flowers: The hardest thing for a human is to keep their hands warm. And it just plain hurts. And what I always did when I got really cold was, I would just pull my fingers back and, and make fists inside my mitts and just squeeze my hands like I was squeezing a rubber ball and sort of jumping up and down a little bit on the sled, just making myself generate heat.

Sally Helm: Despite the dangers, Wild Bill Shannon's route is nothing compared to the treacherous journey in and out of Nome. But there is a man who's up for the job. His name is Leonhard Seppala.

Pam Flowers: He's considered by many to be the greatest dog musher who ever lived, he's got one of the greatest lead dogs, Togo. I'm pleased to say, was a very small man. He was five feet, four. I'm only five feet, so I really like that.

Sally Helm: Seppala had grown up in Norway and moved to Alaska as a young man. His girlfriend back in Oslo had died, and he came to the territory looking to move on from his grief, and maybe make some money panning for gold. Instead, he discovers dog mushing. And he has a knack for it. By 1925, he has won the last three all-Alaska sweepstakes, which is a major race. And he's a local celebrity.

Pam Flowers: He loved attention. He was a very gregarious fellow, very active in the community and he would go down the sidewalk doing handsprings.

Sally Helm: By 1925, Seppala had also found his greatest mushing partner: a dog named Togo. But the two hadn't always been inseparable. At first, Seppala had completely dismissed the young dog. He didn't look fast and he was too small to haul heavy freight.

Pam Flowers: Nobody paid any attention to him. He was just allowed to run free over the tundra. He became a very independent little guy.

Sally Helm: And developed a mischievous streak.

Pam Flowers: Togo was in the habit of running out ahead of Leonhard Seppala's dog team and hiding out. And when the team would go by, he'd jump out and bite the lead dogs on the ear. He was a juvenile delinquent. He wanted to cause trouble and he did.

Sally Helm: Once, when Togo was still a puppy, Seppala left him in the kennel while the team went out on an errand. But Togo had other plans.

Pam Flowers: Somewhere around like midnight, he backs up, takes a flying leap, and he jumps over the fence that surrounds the kennel, but he doesn't quite make it. And he gets his back foot hung up in the fence.

Sally Helm: Someone comes to cut him loose. And then…Togo takes off after Seppala. When he finds the team, Seppala is not happy to see him. He tends to Togo's injured paw and stashes him in the sled basket.

Pam Flowers: Togo hates that. He created such a ruckus. Leonhard says, okay, Togo, I've had it with the screaming and yelling. I'm gonna put you in the back of the team right in front of the sled and you're gonna run for a while.

Sally Helm: Seppala hooks Togo in with the team, not expecting much. But, before Seppala's eyes, Togo transforms from a delinquent puppy into a disciplined sled dog.

Pam Flowers: He can't believe this eight-month-old dog is doing great. So, they take a break, and he moves him up into the team, moves him a little bit further, a little bit further. Until Togo, on his first day in team is now in lead beside Leonhard's other lead dog called Ruski.

Sally Helm: **Wow. Tell me, what's so amazing about him being a lead dog on the first day? Like, what does it take to be a lead dog?**

Pam Flowers: You have to be willing to stay out in front of all the other dogs and you have to listen to what the musher says. It has nothing to do with dominance or strength. It has everything to do with having the self-confidence to follow what your musher is telling you to do. Leonhard finally realized that he had a dog who was intelligent, who had stamina, who had speed, who had endurance, and would follow commands. And most of us who have been dog mushers will have one dog like that in our whole life. And for Leonhard Sela, that one dog was Togo.

Sally Helm: On January 28th, the morning after Wild Bill Shannon had left Nenana, Seppala and Togo leave Nome, heading to meet Shannon. People line the streets to see him off on his journey. His community is relying on him–including his wife, and his young daughter.

Pam Flowers: He only goes like 33 miles, I think that first day, because he thinks he has 390 miles to go. He doesn't wanna exhaust his dog straight off.

Sally Helm: Seppala spends the first night at a roadhouse along his route. The next day he puts in 130 more miles.

Pam Flowers: From that point on, he's completely out of contact. He's gotten to the end of the telegraph line on his route.

Sally Helm: Seppala is…alone. No more contact with the outside world. There's no way for him to know that, back in Nome, the public health council has just changed the serum delivery plan.

[AD BREAK]

Sally Helm: January 1925. "Wild Bill" Shannon and Leonhard Seppala are racing toward one another across Alaska, knowing that any delays could mean death for the people of Nome, especially for the children. The world is watching.

Pam Flowers: This epidemic very quickly became known all over the lower 48, in fact, all over the world because I mean, this is high drama. You've got this tiny little isolated community called Nome. There are 1500 people. It's the middle of winter, it's dark.

Sally Helm: And the epidemic is getting worse. More and more people are developing symptoms of diphtheria. The health council thinks, *maybe our serum delivery plan is just not good enough*.

Pam Flowers: **The people in Nome think we gotta do something to speed this up. This could take three weeks to get it done like this. That is when they come up with the relay system.**

Sally Helm: A relay. Involving more drivers, not just Shannon and Seppala. They put out a call to mail carriers across the region. Who say, yes. We're ready to help.

Pam Flowers: **And so Wild Bill is no longer going to have to go, I think it was 319 miles to Nulato. He was just gonna go to the next village, hand it off, and a series of male carriers would take it very, very fast.**

Sally Helm: Twenty dog teams will now take part in the serum relay. They'll hurtle over frozen lakes, through forests of pine and birch, moving the serum 300 miles closer to Leonhard Seppala. Who will then turn around and bring it back to Nome.

But by this point, Seppala is in the deeply isolated tundra off the Bering Sea. He hasn't heard anything about a relay. On January 31st, three days into his trip, he reaches a place called Norton Sound.

Bob Thomas: **So, Isaac's Point is on the north side of Norton Bay. He gets there in the evening.**

Sally Helm: Amateur historian and husky expert Bob Thomas told us this part of the story. He's made it his business to visit famous mushers all over the country, including those who knew Leonhard Seppala. He said, Seppala has reached a pivotal moment. He could go the long way around Norton sound, adding an extra day to the journey. Or he could cross the frozen sound itself. But that is unpredictable and dangerous.

Bob Thomas: **The problem with Norton Sound was depending on the direction of the wind, if the wind was strong, which it was a lot, the ice could come free of the shoreline and drift out into the bay.**

Sally Helm: Seppala and his dogs could be stranded on drifting ice, at the mercy of the sea. If the wind was blowing out, they'd be moved into the ocean, further from the land…and probably perish.

On this January night in 1925, there's a storm coming in. But…Seppala gets a bit of luck.

Bob Thomas: **the wind was pretty good. It was coming from the southwest. So, it was pushing towards the land, so there was not a worry.**

Sally Helm: When you get a lucky break like that, you have to take advantage right away…before the wind shifts again. So that is what Leonard Seppala does. He sets off across the Norton Sound. Meanwhile, Wild Bill Shannon has handed off the serum to the first of the local mushers, and the relay has begun. The local teams have passed the precious package one to the next for the past three days. They've covered those 300 miles, trying to reach Seppala and Togo. Who, remember, are out of contact.

Sally Helm: Now, Seppala is mushing across the ice of the frozen bay. And he reaches the far side. He can't rest long. He thinks he still has 100 more miles to his destination, the small town of Nulato.

But then he hears something on the wind…a voice. "*Way out there? Is that a man?"*

And sure enough, he spots a dog team. They seem to be going wild–they've smelled a reindeer. And then Seppala hears something else...

"What's that guy saying? Did he just say, serum?"

Pam Flowers: And just the wind blows just right. So, he finally hears the word serum.

Sally Helm: The shouting man is sled driver Henry Ivanoff. He's calling, "*over here! I have the serum! The serum is here!"*

Seppala drives over to Ivanoff. The two men greet each other with relief. A little shift in the wind, and this meeting never would have happened.

Ivanoff tells Seppala about the relay. And passes him the package of serum.

They have saved a lot of time. Now Seppala has to turn his sled and his dogs around to face back the way they've come. They're over 200 miles from home. And…facing the Norton sound from the other side…Seppala's luck has changed.

Pam Flowers: The storm is coming in. By now the wind has shifted from the southwest. It's coming out of the northeast, and this is very, very bad.

Sally Helm: Seppala faces that same decision: short way, or long way? But now, the conditions for going the short way, across the bay, are deteriorating fast.

Pam Flowers: He takes the serum onto his sled, and he thinks to himself, this ice is gonna get swept out to sea. This is the only serum there is. Do we go across the ice again or do we go around the coast?

Sally Helm: Seppala decides…He'll trust Togo. He'll release his lead dog from the harness and let him run ahead of the team, picking his way through the ice, showing them where to go. That way, they can take the short way, and get back home faster.

Pam Flowers: Now this storm is raging, it is dark. It is now 40 mile per hour winds. It's 30 below. The ice is breaking up. It's shifting all over the place are these huge piles of ice in these big, long ridges. There are open areas of water. Leonhard can't see anything. It's dark, but he trusts Togo.

Sally Helm: Togo stays within view, leading the rest of the team over and around the dangerous patches.

Pam Flowers: He would find the narrowest places in the cracks in the ice, and they just kept going and going. And Togo led them all the way back

Bob Thomas: You need a very, very good lead dog that will go across a trackless lake or in this case, the end of a 20-mile-wide bay crossing. You need a very good lead dog that when you get to the other side, you're gonna be where you're supposed to be and you're looking at a hundred-foot-tall cliff or something, which could very easily happen.

Sally Helm: Seppala and the team arrive back at Isaac's point around 9 pm. They stop for a rest.

Bob Thomas: So, they rested till two in the morning and when he got up, the ice had broken off and was all out at sea.

Sally Helm: They could've been on that ice, had it not been for Togo.

Bob Thomas: So, at that point, the blizzard storm which had started that night before was probably at almost its peak.

Sally Helm: Seppala and the team struggle forward towards their next rest stop, 40 miles away. After twelve hours, they arrive.

Pam Flowers: and there's his friend Charlie Olson. And Charlie Olson tells him, we've got a whole other relay set up, and you can give me the serum. And Leonhard was only too happy to give it over because he was exhausted.

Sally Helm: Leonard and Togo and the team can rest. On February 1st, Charlie Olson heads out with the serum. There are only 78 miles left in the run to Nome.

Pam Flowers: The storm was still raging until Charlie Olson got to the next village. His hands were literally frozen to the handle on his dog sled.

Sally Helm: The next relay driver, Gunner Kaasen, picks up the serum and takes it all the way to Nome. He reaches the town on February second.

Pam Flowers: 5:30 in the morning. The community is still under quarantine. Nobody's out. It's dark. No one witnessed this arrival.

Sally Helm: Kaasen brings the serum straight to Dr. Welch, days earlier than expected. And after the five and a half day, 674-mile journey, every glass vial is still intact.

Pam Flowers: It is absolutely amazing. I mean, this should have taken like a couple of weeks for them to run the serum along this route.

Sally Helm: Dr. Welch and his team of nurses don't waste any time.

Pam Flowers: They put on their heavy winter gear and off they went and vaccinated the most vulnerable people and helped save the community.

Sally Helm: What could have happened if the serum hadn't made it there?

Pam Flowers: It's possible every child in the town would have died.

Sally Helm: In the coming weeks, more serum will arrive—enough to end the epidemic. And the story of the heroic sled dogs is passing far and wide. A few names in particular are becoming famous.

Sally Helm: I mean we have not mentioned a name that I think many listeners will be expecting to hear in this story, which is the name Balto. Tell me about Balto.

Pam Flowers: Well, Balto belonged to Leonhard Seppala. All the dogs that Gunnar Kaasen was driving were Leonhard Seppala's dogs that he had left behind in his kennel.

Sally Helm: When Gunnar Kaasen put his team together, he placed Balto in the lead. When they entered Nome with the life-saving serum, Balto was in the front.

Pam Flowers: And so, they telegraph out to the rest of the world that this dog team delivered the serum to Nome, and it was led by this dog named Balto. And so, everybody reads in the newspaper about this dog Balto, because they want something to hang on to. They want a concrete name.

Sally Helm: A film crew even asks Kaasen to reenact the delivery for their cameras. The tape is made into a film reel that's distributed throughout the country.

Pam Flowers: Now you can go to the theater and see Balto delivering the serum to Nome. And they don't know it's a reenactment. If they did know, they wouldn't care. They were just ecstatic.

Sally Helm: How did Seppala feel about that?

Pam Flowers: At first, he didn't really care, because he didn't know how big this was—you know, they had no idea.

Sally Helm: But Balto is a *huge* story. He tours the United States. New York immortalizes him in bronze with a statue in Central Park. One day, he'll even star in a cartoon movie.

When Seppala realizes that the story of the serum run is being reduced to Balto, he starts to feel differently about his fame.

Pam Flowers: It annoyed him really because he knew that they had done so many more miles with his team and Togo than any other musher. Balto did step up and go from being a team dog to being a lead dog. But Leonhard Seppala didn't like the fact that he got all the attention.

Sally Helm: Seppala even takes Togo on a U.S. tour to let people know about what he'd done. But it's too late. Balto is the heroic face of the story.

Pam Flowers: But I wanna say one thing about this controversy. We don't know how many dogs actually took part in the serum run, but every one of them worked hard to get that serum to Nome. Every dog was a hero. Every dog did their part. And so, I really don't worry about whether people wanna give the credit to Togo or to Balto.

Sally Helm: Pam Flowers says that Leonhard Seppala came to feel something similar.

Pam Flowers: I would actually like to read a paragraph from Leonhard Seppala's unpublished autobiography. This is after the serum run, and I always choke up at this. He says, afterwards I thought of the ice and the darkness and the terrible wind and the irony that men could build planes and ships. But when Nome needed life and little packages of serum, it took the dogs to bring it through.

He's honoring all the dogs, not just one or two dogs. He's honoring them all.

[CREDITS]

Sally Helm: Thanks for listening to History This Week. For moments throughout history that are also worth watching, check your local TV listings to find out what's on the History Channel today.

If you want to get in touch, please shoot us an email at our email address, HistoryThisWeek@History.com, or you can leave us a voicemail at 212-351-0410.

Special thanks to our guests, Bob Thomas, author of *Leonhard Seppala: The Siberian Dog and The Golden Age of Sleddog Racing 1908-1941* and Pam Flowers, author of *Togo and Leonhard* and a new memoir titled *Iditarod: One Thousand Miles Across Alaska by Dog Team*.

Pam Flowers: I always say this tells you how optimistic I am. In 1983, I did the Iditarod. I was number 51 out of 54 people, and I'm writing my memoirs.

Sally Helm: This episode was produced by Corinne Wallace. Sound designed by Brian Flood, and story edited by Jim O'Grady. Our senior producer is Ben Dickstein. HISTORY This Week is also produced by Julia Press and me, Sally Helm. Our associate producer is Emma Fredericks. Our supervising producer is McCamey Lynn, and our executive producer is Jessie Katz.

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