



# The Cruelest Miles: The Heroic Story of Dogs and Men in a Race Against an Epidemic

By Gay Salisbury, Laney Salisbury

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"A stirring tale of survival, thanks to man's best friend." —*Seattle Times*

When a deadly diphtheria epidemic swept through Nome, Alaska, in 1925, the local doctor knew that without a fresh batch of antitoxin, his patients would die. The lifesaving serum was a thousand miles away, the port was icebound, and planes couldn't fly in blizzard conditions—only the dogs could make it. The heroic dash of dog teams across the Alaskan wilderness to Nome inspired the annual Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race and immortalized Balto, the lead dog of the last team whose bronze statue still stands in New York City's Central Park. This is the greatest dog story, never fully told until now.

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### Editorial Review

#### From Publishers Weekly

"No one understands Alaska. [Officials in Washington] wire me to step over to Nome to look up a little matter, not realizing that it takes me 11 days to get there." That's the state's governor, Scott Bone, in 1922, three years before the distant, former Gold Rush outpost would need help combating an incipient diphtheria epidemic. As the Salisbury cousins amply demonstrate, upstate Alaska during winter was about as alien and forbidding as the moon-total isolation, endless night, bizarre acoustics, unreliably frozen rivers, and 60-below temperatures eventually causing both body and mind to shut down altogether. Under these circumstances, the 674-mile dogsled journey required to bring Nome the desperately needed serum seemed destined to fail, to put it mildly. The authors rightly frame the undertaking as the last gasp of an ancient technology before the impending arrival of air and road travel. As soon as news of the situation reached the "lower 48," it instantly became headline fodder for weeks. The book demonstrates the remarkable intimacy mushers develop with their lead dogs-only a handful of sled dogs have the character, courage, intelligence and will to be the lead dog. Especially heroic were renowned musher Leonhard Seppala and his lead dog, Balto, who undertook the treacherous and long final leg; the dog is immortalized by a statue in New York City's Central Park. The journey itself occupies the second half of the book; the authors judiciously flesh out the story with fascinating background information about Nome, the Gold Rush, dogsledding and Alaska. This is an elegantly written book, inspiring tremendous respect for the hardy mushers and their canine partners.

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#### From School Library Journal

**Adult/High School**-Many readers are familiar with the story of the dog Balto and the Nome, AK, diphtheria outbreak of 1925 and how 20 men and more than 200 dogs raced 674 miles against time and weather to save a community. The Salisburys provide a complete account of that feat-the first book in 40 years to do so-and, perhaps, introduce readers to two of the most crucial and courageous characters in this drama, Leonhard Seppala and his peerless lead dog, Togo. The authors supply a constant flow of interesting facts about Nome, the introduction of Siberian Huskies to Alaska, the beginnings of the Alaska airline industry, and why air delivery of the serum was discounted as an option. The heart of the book, however, is the run itself. Readers will be on tenterhooks as they follow the mushers and their dogs through minus-60-degree temperatures, unbroken trails, "ice fog," treacherous ice floes, gales, and blizzards, from the January day when Dr. Curtis Welsh realized that he faced an epidemic with only three nurses and an outdated supply of serum to that early morning less than five days later when Gunnar Kaasen and his Balto-led dogsled team arrived in Nome, exhausted and frostbitten, and carrying the new serum. At a time when a cost/benefit analysis is a major precursor to action, this book is a refreshing look at the lengths people and their devoted animals went to simply because, as one musher put it, "I wanted to help."-Dori DeSpain, Fairfax County Public Library, VA

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#### From [Booklist](#)

It's the winter of 1925 in Nome, Alaska, and an outbreak of diphtheria is threatening the city's icebound residents. Planes can't reach Nome because of blizzard conditions. There's only one way to transport badly needed serum, and that's by dogsled. It's a 700-mile, five-day trip across frozen rivers, mountains, and treacherous ice. After offering an early history of the city, the Salisburys chronicle the saga of the men and dog teams--Siberian huskies--that made the dangerous journey in temperatures that reached minus 62

degrees. The authors describe in detail the drivers and dogs, recounting the canines' ages, speeds, ability to lead a relay team, and trusting relationships to the drivers. They also recount the role of Curtis Welch, the only doctor for hundreds of miles, and his nurse, Emily Morgan. The two went for days with little or no sleep while working with their patients. Drawing on archives, government publications, newspapers, and interviews, the Salisburys have written an amazing story of endurance and courage. *George Cohen*  
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