

This Day in History... February 2, 1925

The Great Race of Mercy

On February 2, 1925, a sled dog team took the Iditarod Trail to deliver a much-needed diphtheria antitoxin to Nome, Alaska, following a deadly outbreak.

Settlers flocked to Alaska in the 1920s following a gold strike. They traveled to coastal towns by boat, but the forbidding winter closed roads to the goldfields. The only way to travel in the winter was in sleds pulled by dog teams. The Iditarod Trail soon became the major thoroughfare, carrying people, supplies, and mail much like the Pony Express once did.

In 1925, sled dog teams and the Iditarod Trail were center stage. Isolated from the outside world, Nome experienced a diphtheria outbreak. Diphtheria is a contagious upper respiratory illness that can only be treated with an antitoxin or prevented with a vaccine. At the time, Nome only had one doctor and four nurses to deal with the outbreak. Dr. Welch had a small supply of diphtheria antitoxin, but it wasn't enough and it was expired. He feared using the expired medicine could cause more harm than good. The town was then placed under quarantine.

Dr. Welch was desperate to save his town, so he sent out dozens of telegrams asking people to send him the antitoxin. The closest large supply was found in Anchorage, but that was still hundreds of miles away. There were no roads or railroads between the towns, and flying wasn't an option, nor was traveling by ship. The only solution was the Iditarod Trail.



Imperforate Error Pair

With no other options, Alaska's territorial governor approved a relay in which the 20 best mail carrier mushers and 150 dogs would make the 674-mile journey. That journey usually took 15 to 20 days, but they were going to try to make the trip much faster. By this time, the story was international news and people around the world would follow the progress closely.

The trip began on January 27 when the first musher picked up the antitoxin at the nearest train station. Over the next five days, these mushers rode day and night through blizzards and -50-degree temperatures. The antitoxin reached Nome at 5:30 am on February 2. The entire journey had been completed in five days, seven hours.

Dr. Welch immediately began administering the antitoxin and the quarantine was lifted within two weeks. Five children had died during the epidemic, but the delivery of the antitoxin helped prevent countless more deaths.

Everyone that participated in the relay received letters of thanks from President Calvin Coolidge as well as gold medals from the HK Mulford Company. The musher and dogs who completed the last leg of the journey became celebrities. The lead dog, Balto, then starred in a 30-minute film, *Balto's Race to Nome*. He was also honored with a statue in Central Park.

One of the results of the race was that it helped lead to the Kelly Act (signed on February 2, 1925). The act allowed private aviation companies to bid on airmail delivery contracts. Within a decade, airmail routes were established in Alaska.

In 1973, the Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race was introduced to preserve this chapter of Alaska's heritage. The 1,049-mile race features competitors from around the world and is a major social event.



1986 stamp from the Transportation Series



Alaska statehood stamp picturing a sled dog team

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