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## The Story of the Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race

The Iditarod Trail was first used when the Alaskan gold rush began in the 1880s. Towns came alive as gold was discovered. One such town was called Iditarod, named for the Indian word *haiditarod*, which means "a distant place." The Iditarod Trail became a way to reach these distant places. It was full of swamps in the summer, but in the winter it was a major transportation route for the dog sled teams that most people used. It continued to be used until the mid-1920s.

In 1925, an epidemic of diphtheria (also called "the Black Death") hit the city of Nome in western Alaska. The disease could be treated with an antitoxin, which was used to fight the bacteria in diphtheria. Unfortunately, the closest antitoxin that could be found was in Anchorage, on the other side of Alaska. Airplanes were still very new, and only flew during the short summer. It was agreed that the medicine would be taken to Nenana by train, and then a relay of dog sled teams would carry it to Nome.

The trip covered almost 700 miles, about two-thirds of which followed the Iditarod Trail. Leonhard Seppala, a Norwegian who had come to Alaska looking for gold, traveled 260 of those miles. He and his lead dog, Togo, crossed the frozen Norton Bay in order to speed the journey. He had to depend on Togo's sense of direction in the blinding snow, and Togo turned out to be a dependable guide. The 260-mile leg that Seppala and his dogs traveled was nearly five times the distance covered by the other teams. The last leg of the run was done by Gunnar Kaason, who had been driving dog teams in Alaska for 21 years. His lead dog was Balto. Balto also proved to be an excellent leader. At one point he refused to go any further and saved the team from falling into icy water. He led the team through blowing snow into Nome, and the diphtheria outbreak was stopped. Balto became a hero. A statue was built in New York's Central Park to honor Balto for his life-saving contributions.

In 1967, a dog sled driver named Joe Redington, Sr. joined with Dorothy Page, an Alaskan interested in her state's history, to celebrate the history and importance of dog sleds. At that time, sleds were being replaced by snowmobiles in Alaska. Redington and Page started an annual sled dog race. In 1973, the course was extended to Nome, with part of it following the old Iditarod Trail. The trip from Anchorage to Nome was similar to the famous diphtheria run of 1925. The race was called the "The Last Great Race on Earth," and Joe Redington and Dorothy Page became known as the "father and mother of the Iditarod."

