

# #308: LEONHARD SEPPALA



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Like many Norwegian immigrant stories, Leonhard Seppala's is one of hard work on a harsh frontier, where determination and willpower triumphed against the odds to leave a legacy that is still celebrated today.

Seppala was born on September 14, 1877, in Troms County in northern Norway. He spent his youth on the nearby island of Skjervøy, where his father was a blacksmith and fisherman. Though Seppala considered following in his father's footsteps, he eventually moved to Kristiania (known today as Oslo). In Kristiania he heard news of recent gold strikes from his friend Jafet Lindeberg, the only Norwegian in a trio of men known as the "Three Lucky Swedes" who made the discovery at Anvil Creek. Lindeberg changed the course of history and of Seppala's life for the first time, persuading Seppala to seek his fortune in Nome, Alaska.

There were many challenges to life as a gold miner in the early 1900's. The days were long and the labor was strenuous, and at times Seppala longed for the life he had left behind in Norway. But he persevered, finding love and marrying Constance, a woman from Belgium, and taking an interest in outdoor activities such as skiing and

the new sport of dog sledding. In 1913 Lindeberg asked Seppala to look after a pack of Siberian dogs intended to aid in the next arctic expedition of the famous Norwegian explorer, Roald Amundsen. When the expedition was canceled only a few weeks later, Lindeberg gave the dogs to Seppala. It was a gift that would define the rest of Seppala's life.



Togo the dog © BY-SA 3.0 [license](#). [Wikimedia Commons](#)

From the beginning, Seppala took exceptional care of his dogs, spending hours with them each day, often covering long distances. He trained his dogs throughout the summer, pulling carts instead of sleds when the snow melted. He was soon a successful dog sled racer, and he became well known alongside his lead dog, Togo.

In 1925 an outbreak of diphtheria spread through Nome. It was the coldest winter in 20 years, and the town was only accessible by dog sled. The only treatment available was diphtheria antitoxin serum, and the stock of the medicine in Nome was expired and running low. In order to treat and protect the citizens of Nome, a relay was set up to bring the serum from Nenana, Alaska. Seppala was chosen to cover the most dangerous and difficult portion of the over 600-mile distance, a shortcut across the Norton Sound.

The Norton Sound is an inlet of the Bering Sea, where winds and ice can shift in a moment, stranding travelers on ice floes. Ice can also crack and open up, threatening to send dogs, sled and man into the



Musher Gunnar Kaasen with Balto, 1925

icy water. Blizzards and severe winds threatened all members of the relay team. With Togo in the lead, Seppala pushed forward toward the Sound. The night Seppala crossed was dark and temperatures dipped to -85F but he trusted Togo to lead the way and was able to cross with the life-saving serum.

The final leg of the journey, which was also called the "Great Race of Mercy," was completed by Gunnar Kaasen, another Norwegian who drove a team led by Balto, a Siberian husky with lineage from Seppala's dogs. Although it was Kaasen and Balto who emerged as celebrities immediately following the success of the serum run, Seppala would also go on to tour the lower forty-eight states with his team. The tour culminated with a ceremony in Madison Square Garden and Togo was awarded a medal of honor by Roald Amundsen. Each year the serum run is commemorated in Alaska with the famous Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race.

In the years afterward Seppala continued to devote himself to his dogs. He established a breeding program and participated in championship races. He later moved to Fairbanks where he worked as a ranger for the U.S. Mining and Melting Company before retiring to Seattle with his wife. His service and contributions to his adopted home are honored with memorials both in Alaska and his native Norway. Leonhard Seppala died at the age of eighty-nine. He was laid to rest in Nome, where the road connecting the city and the airport is named for the man who once crossed ice and frozen ocean to save its citizens.