

Comprehension

Genre

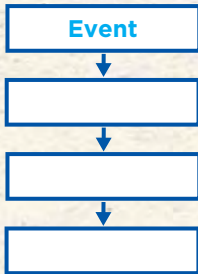
Nonfiction is a detailed account of real people or situations using verifiable facts.



Summarize

Sequence

As you read, use your Sequence Chart.



Read to Find Out

What role did the sled dogs play in the sequence of events?

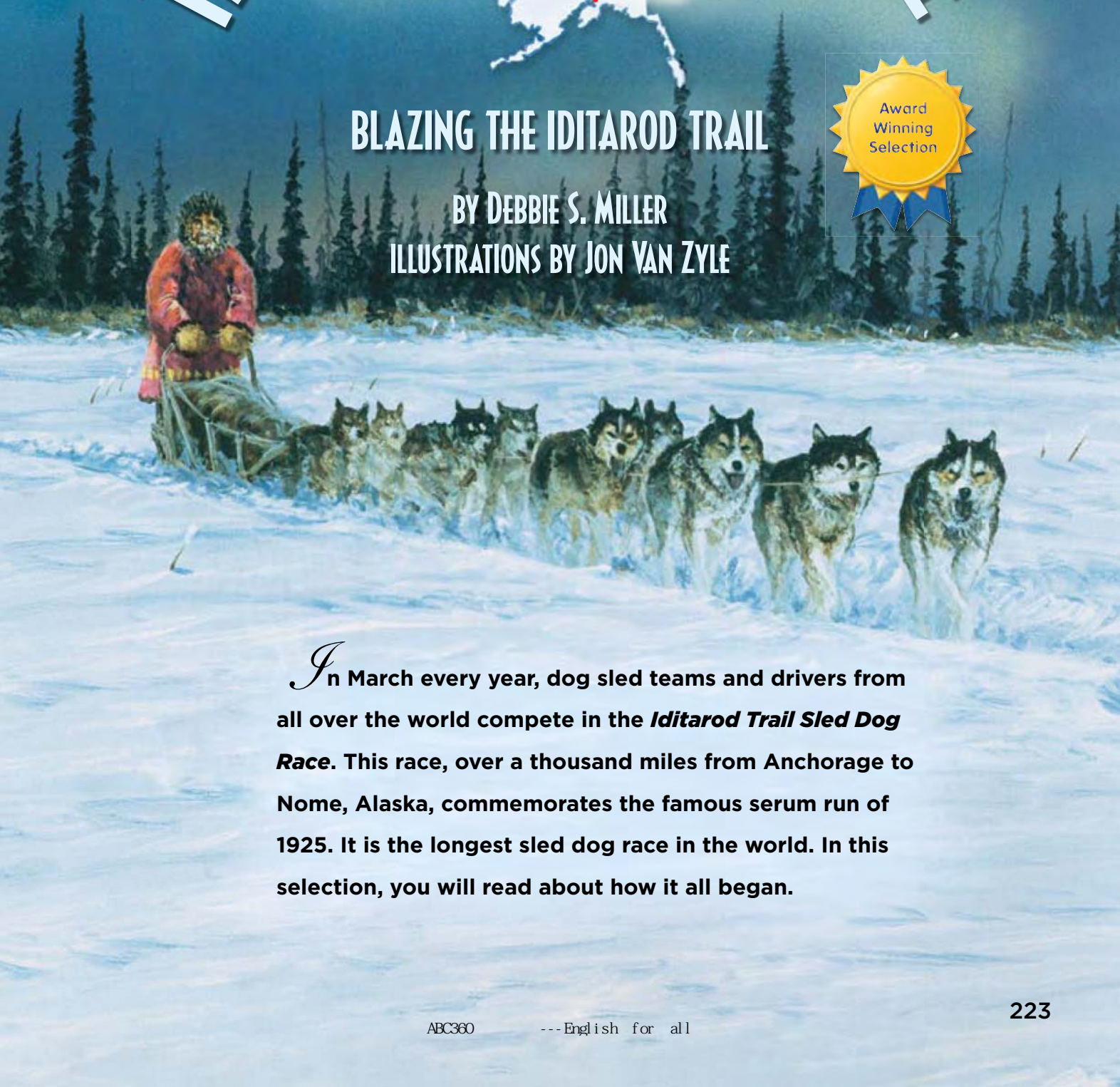
THE GREAT SERUM RACE



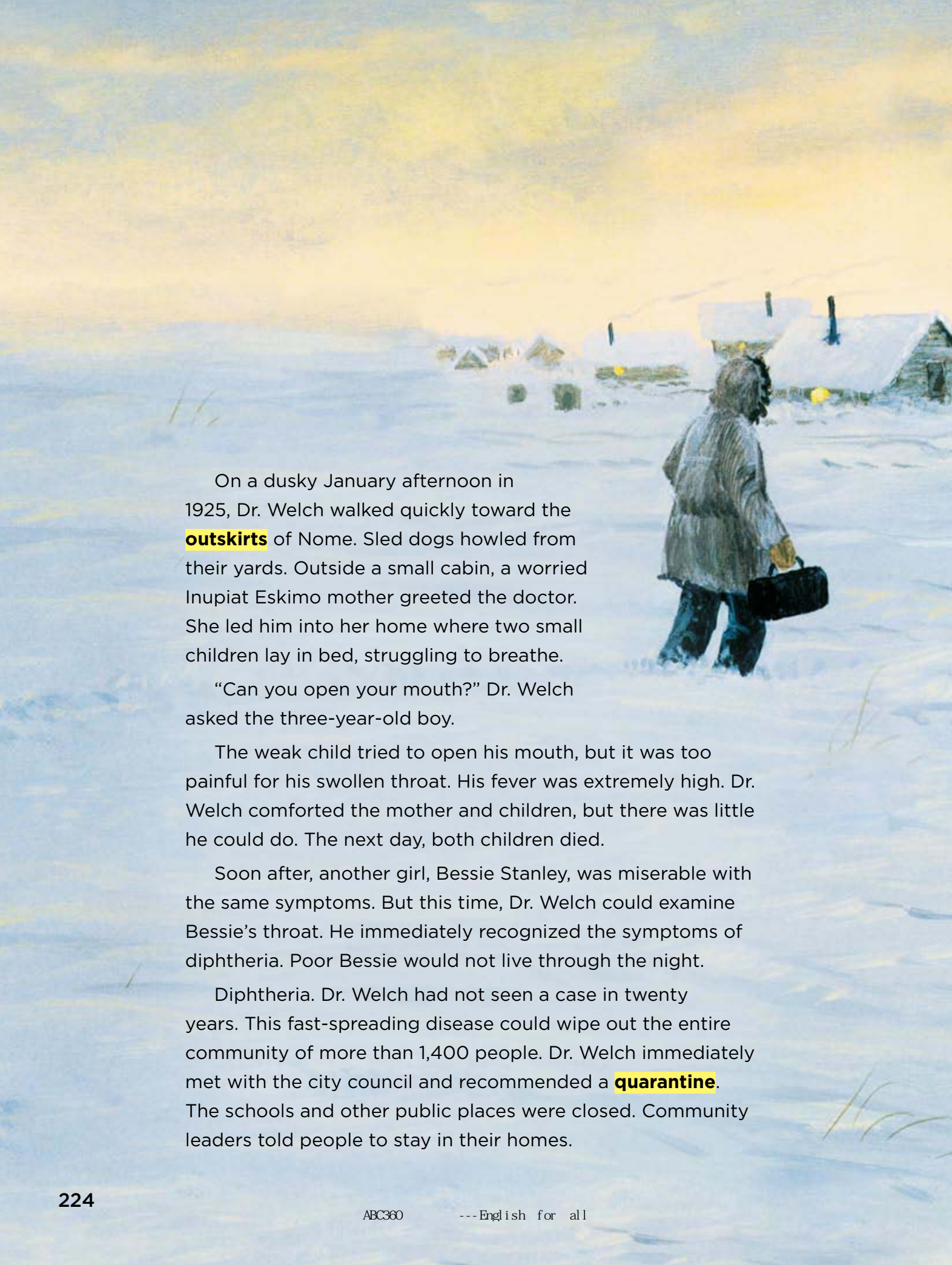
Nome
Anchorage

BLAZING THE IDITAROD TRAIL

BY DEBBIE S. MILLER
ILLUSTRATIONS BY JON VAN ZYLE



*I*n March every year, dog sled teams and drivers from all over the world compete in the *Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race*. This race, over a thousand miles from Anchorage to Nome, Alaska, commemorates the famous serum run of 1925. It is the longest sled dog race in the world. In this selection, you will read about how it all began.

A painting of a snowy landscape. In the foreground, a person wearing a heavy, light-colored winter coat and dark pants is walking away from the viewer towards the right. They are carrying a dark suitcase or bag. The ground is covered in snow, with some sparse grass visible. In the background, there are several small, snow-covered buildings or huts, some with yellow lights glowing from their windows. The sky is a pale, hazy yellow, suggesting a dusky or dawn atmosphere.

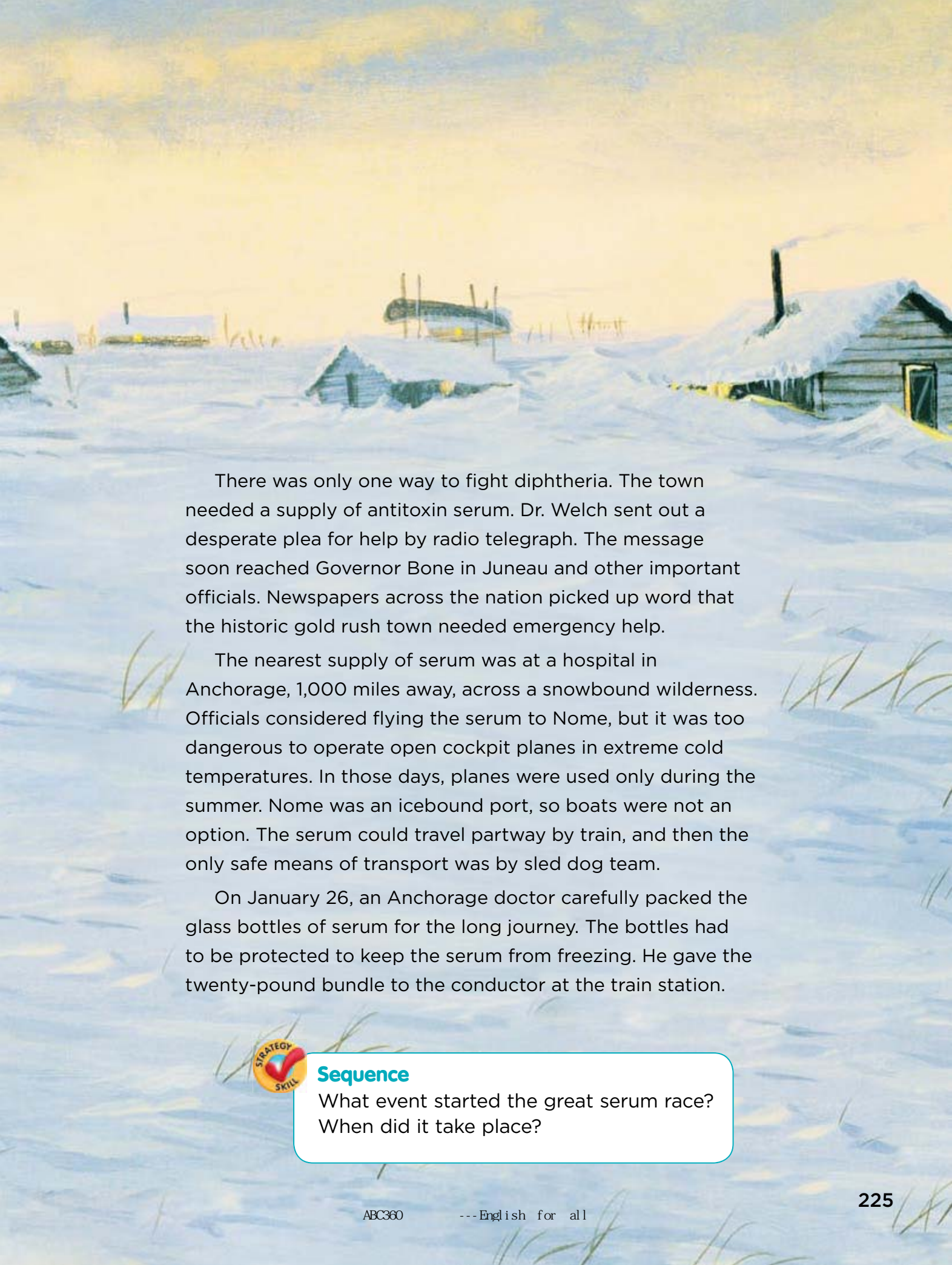
On a dusky January afternoon in 1925, Dr. Welch walked quickly toward the **outskirts** of Nome. Sled dogs howled from their yards. Outside a small cabin, a worried Inupiat Eskimo mother greeted the doctor. She led him into her home where two small children lay in bed, struggling to breathe.

“Can you open your mouth?” Dr. Welch asked the three-year-old boy.

The weak child tried to open his mouth, but it was too painful for his swollen throat. His fever was extremely high. Dr. Welch comforted the mother and children, but there was little he could do. The next day, both children died.

Soon after, another girl, Bessie Stanley, was miserable with the same symptoms. But this time, Dr. Welch could examine Bessie’s throat. He immediately recognized the symptoms of diphtheria. Poor Bessie would not live through the night.

Diphtheria. Dr. Welch had not seen a case in twenty years. This fast-spreading disease could wipe out the entire community of more than 1,400 people. Dr. Welch immediately met with the city council and recommended a **quarantine**. The schools and other public places were closed. Community leaders told people to stay in their homes.



There was only one way to fight diphtheria. The town needed a supply of antitoxin serum. Dr. Welch sent out a desperate plea for help by radio telegraph. The message soon reached Governor Bone in Juneau and other important officials. Newspapers across the nation picked up word that the historic gold rush town needed emergency help.

The nearest supply of serum was at a hospital in Anchorage, 1,000 miles away, across a snowbound wilderness. Officials considered flying the serum to Nome, but it was too dangerous to operate open cockpit planes in extreme cold temperatures. In those days, planes were used only during the summer. Nome was an icebound port, so boats were not an option. The serum could travel partway by train, and then the only safe means of transport was by sled dog team.

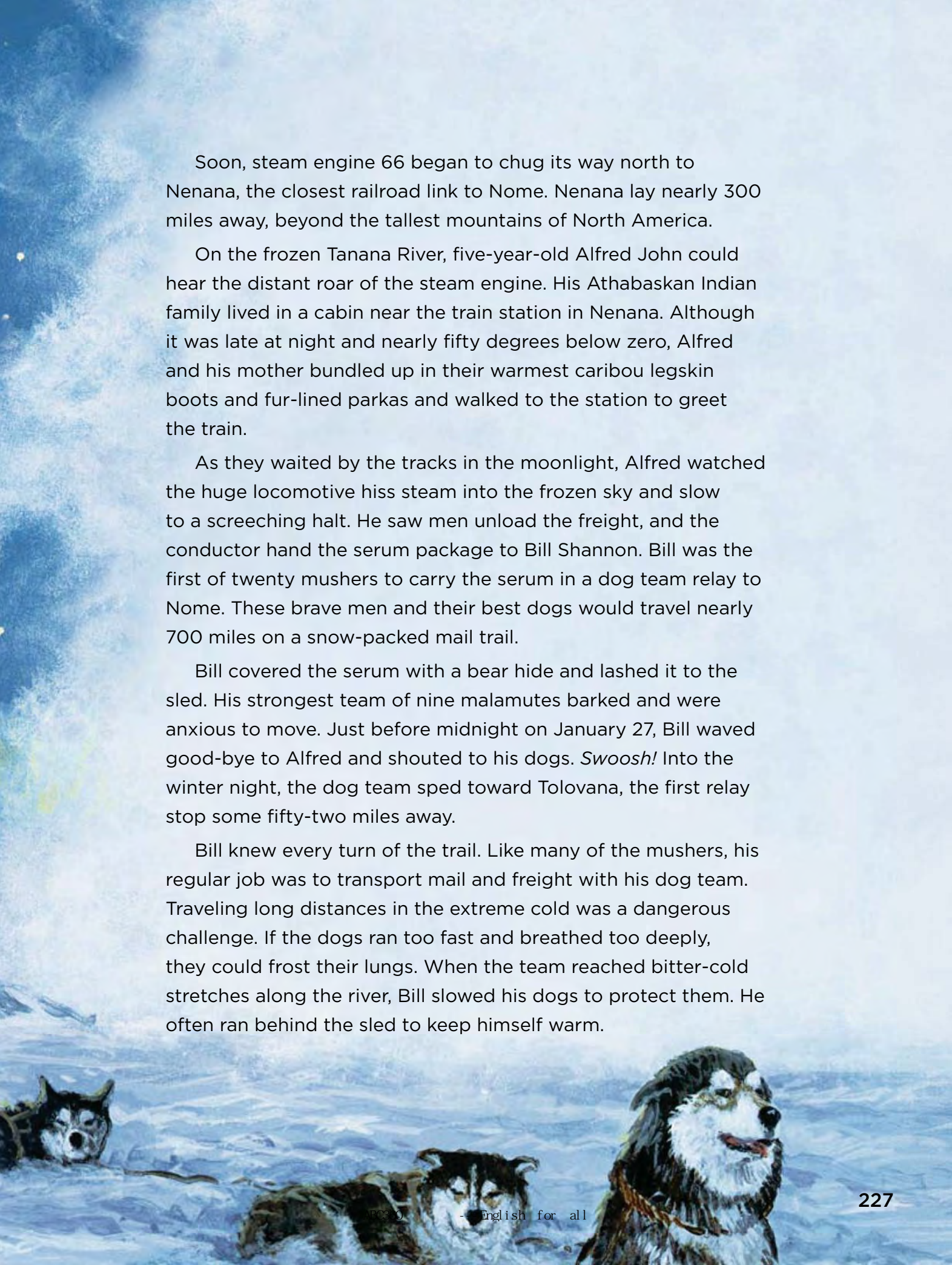
On January 26, an Anchorage doctor carefully packed the glass bottles of serum for the long journey. The bottles had to be protected to keep the serum from freezing. He gave the twenty-pound bundle to the conductor at the train station.



Sequence

What event started the great serum race?
When did it take place?





Soon, steam engine 66 began to chug its way north to Nenana, the closest railroad link to Nome. Nenana lay nearly 300 miles away, beyond the tallest mountains of North America.

On the frozen Tanana River, five-year-old Alfred John could hear the distant roar of the steam engine. His Athabaskan Indian family lived in a cabin near the train station in Nenana. Although it was late at night and nearly fifty degrees below zero, Alfred and his mother bundled up in their warmest caribou legskin boots and fur-lined parkas and walked to the station to greet the train.

As they waited by the tracks in the moonlight, Alfred watched the huge locomotive hiss steam into the frozen sky and slow to a screeching halt. He saw men unload the freight, and the conductor hand the serum package to Bill Shannon. Bill was the first of twenty mushers to carry the serum in a dog team relay to Nome. These brave men and their best dogs would travel nearly 700 miles on a snow-packed mail trail.

Bill covered the serum with a bear hide and lashed it to the sled. His strongest team of nine malamutes barked and were anxious to move. Just before midnight on January 27, Bill waved good-bye to Alfred and shouted to his dogs. *Swoosh!* Into the winter night, the dog team sped toward Tolovana, the first relay stop some fifty-two miles away.

Bill knew every turn of the trail. Like many of the mushers, his regular job was to transport mail and freight with his dog team. Traveling long distances in the extreme cold was a dangerous challenge. If the dogs ran too fast and breathed too deeply, they could frost their lungs. When the team reached bitter-cold stretches along the river, Bill slowed his dogs to protect them. He often ran behind the sled to keep himself warm.



Hundreds of miles away, Togo leaned into his harness and waited patiently for Leonhard Seppala to position Scotty and the other huskies. Togo, now twelve years old, was a proven leader for one of the strongest dog teams in the world. Leonhard, dressed in his warmest squirrel parka, sealskin pants, and reindeer mukluks, had carefully chosen twenty of his best dogs. Officials had asked the famed Norwegian musher to **intercept** the serum at Nulato, a village located halfway between Nome and Nenana.

Jingle, jangle—the bells on Leonhard’s sled rang as the team rounded the corner. There were so many dog teams in Nome that mushers were required to carry bells to warn **pedestrians**. Togo led the team down Front Street while friends wished them good luck.



In Tolovana, Edgar Kalland, the twenty-year-old Athabaskan Indian mail driver, ate breakfast and waited anxiously for Bill Shannon. The Tolovana Roadhouse was a favorite rest stop for Edgar. Outside the roadhouse, Edgar's dogs pricked up their ears, and some began to howl. Bill's team drew closer.

The team looked exhausted when their frosted faces came into view. Two of the dogs would later die from frozen lungs. Following the doctor's instructions, Bill carefully removed the serum. He hurried into the roadhouse to warm the container and prevent the serum from freezing. As the two men talked about the weather, Edgar put on three pairs of socks and his boots.

Once the serum warmed, Edgar took off for Manley Hot Springs with his team of seven dogs. The thirty-one-mile trip to the next relay point was brutally cold. Temperatures fell to fifty-six degrees below zero. At one point the dogs had to wade through slushy overflow, a place where the river seeped through a crack in the ice. When the team reached Manley Hot Springs, the dogs could barely lift their ice-crusting legs. Edgar's mitts were frozen stiff to the sled handle. A roadhouse worker poured a kettle of hot water over the mitts to melt the ice and free Edgar's hands.



The relay continued from musher to musher, roadhouse to roadhouse, with teams pushing west through the biting cold. At each relay point, the mushers warmed the serum over wood-fired stoves. Following the winding rivers, the teams covered an average of thirty miles each, at a speed of six or seven miles per hour. The mushers traveled around the clock, usually by moonlight or twilight. In the middle of Alaska's winter, only a few hours of sunshine fell on the teams each day.

When the twelfth dog team headed for the village of Nulato, waves of northern lights flowed across the sky. Musher Charlie Evans faced the coldest temperatures at sixty-four degrees below zero. He wrapped the serum in a rabbit skin robe for extra protection. Charlie's nine-dog team moved slowly. Near open stretches of water on the Yukon River, a layer of eerie ice fog blanketed the valley. The ice fog, a mist of ice particles, was so dense that Charlie could barely see his wheel dogs, the ones closest to the sled. The experienced dogs followed the trail by scent rather than sight.

Nearing Nulato, two of the dogs moved stiffly and dragged their paws. The skin was beginning to freeze. Charlie stopped the team and gently loaded the poor dogs into the sled. In their struggle to save the lives of Nome's residents, these two dogs would fall victim to the deadly weather.

When the team reached the halfway point, conditions in Nome had grown worse. Five people had died from the disease, and more than twenty cases had been diagnosed. Another thirty people were suspected of having diphtheria. Newspapers across the country reported Nome's **plight** and the progress of the serum run.

The relay teams pressed onward. Togo and team worked their way east to intercept the serum. When Leonhard passed villages, he told residents about the **epidemic** and advised them to stay away from Nome. As the team approached the village of Shaktoolik, Togo picked up the scent of another dog team and sprinted forward. Leonhard could see a musher in the distance trying to untangle his string of dogs.

"On by!" Leonhard shouted to Togo.

Togo followed the familiar directions and steered the team away from the confusion.

"Serum—turn back!" shouted Henry Ivanoff, one of the relay mushers.

In the howling wind Leonhard barely heard the words. Luckily, he looked over his shoulder to see the musher waving frantically at him. Leonhard was surprised to see the relay team. After he set out for Nulato, twenty more mushers were chosen to travel short relays to speed up the serum run. Out in the wilderness, Leonhard had no idea that his **rendezvous** point was now 130 miles closer.

"Gee!" Leonhard yelled to Togo.

Togo gradually turned right and the swing dogs helped pull the sled toward the waiting team. The two men greeted each other briefly, shouting in the gale. Within minutes Leonhard had secured the serum package to his sled and instructed Togo to head home.

Togo and his teammate had traveled more than forty miles that day with the wind at their backs. Now the fierce gale blew in their faces with thirty below zero temperatures. Blowing snow plastered the team as they approached Norton Bay. Leonhard considered the risks. If they crossed the frozen bay, the sea ice might break up in the powerful gale. They could be stranded from shore on drifting ice. If they skirted the bay on land, the trip would take much longer. Leonhard thought of the children in Nome who were suffering from the disease. He decided to take the shorter route and cross the treacherous sea ice.

Leonhard believed that Togo could lead the team across twenty miles of frozen sea. As they pressed into the wind the dogs hit slick stretches of glare ice. They slipped, fell, and struggled to move forward. But mile after mile, Togo kept his course through the wall of wind. At day's end, Togo picked up the scent of food that drifted from the Inupiat sod house at Isaac's Point. After traveling eighty-four miles, they rested for the night. The dogs devoured their rations of salmon and seal blubber.

The following morning, Leonhard discovered that the previous day's trail had vanished. The ice had broken up and drifted out to sea. Worried about the unstable conditions, Leonhard decided to hug the shoreline for safety.

Togo led the way toward Dexter's Roadhouse in Golovin, about fifty miles away. Along the coast, the wind's force became **unbearable**. Blowing snow blasted the dogs' faces like buckshot. Some of the dogs began to stiffen up. Leonhard stopped the sled and gently massaged the freezing muscles of Togo, Scotty, and the others. When they finally reached Golovin, the dogs collapsed and buried their ice-coated faces beneath their tails. Togo and team had traveled farther than any other relay team.

Now it was another dog's turn to lead a fresh team of seventeen malamutes to Bluff, the final relay point. With a shout from musher Charlie Olson, lead dog Jack charged off into the blowing snow. After struggling through four hours of whiteout conditions, the experienced leader faintly heard a dog barking through the gale. It was Balto.

At Bluff, Balto and Fox waited for Gunnar Kaasen to adjust the leather harnesses and secure the serum package. Then the pair of leaders heard their musher's shout through the raging wind. Balto and Fox led the strong team of thirteen huskies into the swirling snow. Mile after mile, they trotted steadily toward Nome. During the final leg of the run, the wind assaulted them. A violent gust flipped the sled over, and the dogs went flying.



Sequence

What happened after Gunnar Kaasen received the serum?



Gunnar struggled to his feet against the might of the wind. After he fought to untangle the dogs, he checked the sled to make sure the serum was securely fastened. Gunnar felt the bottom of the sled in disbelief. The serum package was gone!

In the dark, he crawled around the sled. Since he couldn't see his surroundings, he took off his mitts and felt through the snow with his bare hands. After more than 600 hard-won miles and twenty teams risking their lives, could it be that the serum was lost forever?

Panicked, Gunnar ran his numb hands across the windswept bumps of snow. All he could do was hope. Suddenly, he felt something hard. It was the serum! His frostbitten fingers struggled to tie the package onto the sled. Then the wind-battered team ran off.

They struggled on through the night. With less than twenty miles remaining, two of the dogs ran stiffly and appeared to be freezing. Gunnar anchored the sled and put rabbit-skin covers on the dogs to protect their undersides from frostbite.



Through the darkness, Balto and Fox smelled familiar scents. At last the exhausted team reached Nome. They drove into town as most people slept through the blizzard. When Gunnar knocked on the door, Dr. Welch greeted him with a stunned face. How could a musher and team have fought their way through such a storm?

With stiff hands, Gunnar gave the shocked but thankful doctor the life-saving serum.

Twenty brave mushers and more than 160 strong dogs traveled hundreds of miles in the worst conditions. The incredible relay took less than six days. Four dogs perished and several others grew lame because of the lethal weather. Yet their struggle saved many lives in Nome.

One month after the epidemic first began, the quarantine was lifted. The schools reopened and children hugged their old friends. The whole town celebrated by holding a dance and watching a movie at the theater. Togo, Scotty, Balto, Fox, Jack, and all the other dogs were true heroes.



ON THE TRAIL WITH



Debbie



Jon

Debbie S. Miller can look out her window and see a moose, a fox, and piles of snow. She lives in Alaska and used to teach school in an arctic village in the Brooks Mountain Range, near the Arctic Circle. Ideas for her books are all around her—the ice and snow, the polar bears, and, of course, those amazing husky dogs.

Jon Van Zyle and his wife live with twenty husky dogs and a black cat named Dickens near Eagle River, Alaska. Jon is the official artist for the Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race. He has even competed twice in the race himself—all 1,049 miles of it!

Other books by Debbie S. Miller:

Disappearing Lake and *Flight of the Golden Plover*



Author's Purpose

Debbie Miller is informing the reader about the origins of the Iditarod. The text is full of verifiable facts such as dates and distances. What are some examples?



Find out more about Debbie S. Miller and Jon Van Zyle at

www.macmillanmh.com

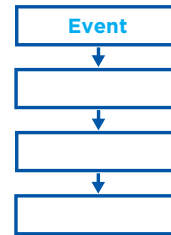


Comprehension Check



Summarize

Use your Sequence Chart to help you summarize *The Great Serum Race*. What were the series of events that led to the serum getting safely to Nome?



Think and Compare



1. When the serum traveled to Nome during the **epidemic**, what was the sequence in which the mushers handed off the serum?

Summarize: Sequence

2. In your opinion, who made the biggest contribution to the successful delivery of the serum to the people of Nome? Use specific examples from the text to support your answer.

Synthesize

3. Think about a time when you had to work with a team of people to get something important done. How was working as a team important to achieving your goal? **Analyze**
4. The mushers and dog sled teams involved in the serum race are heroes. What do you think makes a hero? Compare the heroes in *The Great Serum Race* to other heroes you know or have read about. What do they have in common? **Evaluate**

5. Read “The Last Great Race on Earth” on pages 220–221. Why is it important that the Iditarod feature the checkpoints and medical assistance described in this selection? Use specific evidence from *The Great Serum Race* to support your answer.

Reading/Writing Across Texts

