

Dr. Jerry Vanek: Serum Run '25 – The Great Race against Death



In 1925, the spectre of a fatal, devastating diphtheria epidemic threatened Nome, Alaska, an icebound city home to hundreds of immunologically naïve Alaskan Natives. Twenty Alaskan dog mushers, mail carriers, and trappers formed a relay of volunteers to carry life-saving diphtheria antitoxin across 650 miles of Alaskan wilderness through blizzard conditions in temperatures plummeting to minus sixty degrees. Americans from coast to coast followed the 5-day “Race against Death” with breathless anticipation, and the event and its successful conclusion altered forever the United States postal system, aviation, public health delivery, and journalism.

Over 70 years later, in 1997, renowned Antarctic explorer and adventurer Colonel Norman Vaughan inaugurated the annual Serum Run '25 reenactment relay across Alaska from Nenana to Nome. Every year for more than a decade, between 15 and 30 dog mushers and snow machine support personnel assumed the identities of the original 20 Serum Runners to carry ceremonial diphtheria serum along the original route. In conditions often remarkably reminiscent of 1925, with temperatures hovering around minus fifty, the modern SR '25 reenactors crossed Alaska with somewhat different goals: To honor the memory of the original heroes of 1925; to spread modern public health messages promoting early childhood vaccinations, drug and alcohol avoidance, suicide prevention, elder care, etc.; and to celebrate indigenous Native cultures which thrive in the Alaskan bush today.

Dr. Vanek’s presentation *Serum Run '25 - The Great Race against Death* revisits the history of the original 1925 relay race against diphtheria and contrasts it with today’s modern reenactments. Since 2009, “Serum Run '25,” has been presented at numerous invited venues across America and Europe, including Harvard University and the Cleveland Museum of Natural History, the permanent home of the legendary *Balto*. This year marks the 100th anniversary of the original Great Race against Death.

Dr. Vanek was raised on his grandfather’s 1881 homestead in the Red River Valley of northwestern Minnesota, beginning his education in the 1950s in a one-room schoolhouse on the farm while acquiring his first husky. By the 1970s, he was sprint racing sled dogs throughout Minnesota and the Midwest. Following military service, he earned a Bachelor of Arts *summa cum laude* in biology and chemistry from Bemidji State University, a Master of Science in zoology and biochemistry from North Dakota State University, and a Bachelor of Science and Doctor of Veterinary Medicine from the University of Minnesota. That was followed by five years of post-doctoral research in public health, infectious disease epidemiology, parasitology, and immunology at the University of North Dakota School of Medicine and the University of Minnesota Schools of Public Health and Veterinary Medicine.

Following a near-fatal plane crash in Antarctica in 1993, 17 surgeries, and over a year of rehabilitation, Dr. Vanek altered his medical focus to his other lifelong loves—sled dogs, sports medicine, and the Arctic. He became a wilderness EMT earning certification in Advanced Wilderness Life Support as well as earning certifications in canine chiropractic medicine, and canine sports medicine physiotherapy and rehabilitation at various schools in Florida, Colorado, Tennessee, and Kansas. For over 30 years he has focused exclusively on sled dog medicine in North America and northern Europe.

It was the combination of education in public health, infectious diseases, the Arctic, wilderness medicine, and sled dog medicine that blessed him with the privilege of joining the Serum Run '25 historic reenactors as a veterinarian on three successive Serum Run '25 expeditions across Alaska—all summarized in *Serum Run '25 – The Great Race against Death*.