

"Your husband is dead and the disease is transmittable," the men called to my mother from across the river. "It's the diphtheria. We can't send help, but we'll leave you some groceries and in about two months we'll have someone come by and drop reindeer meat from your own herd."

This was at Iron Creek, up in the hills.

"Don't come across the river now," one man said. "Don't let anybody in the house and don't keep anything over night. Don't let anybody talk to your kids and don't let anybody come close to you or touch you."

At that time they didn't know how diphtheria was passed.

"If you last 'til summer, it will probably be over," he said. "Then you can come to Nome."

As they left he shouted back, "Don't let any mail carriers come by. If they come across the river, shoot 'em."

Our home was a United States Road House, a mail carrier station, and we were committed to take care of anybody who came through. The Road House (U.S.R.H.) was recognized like a United States Post Office (U.S.P.O.) but wasn't commissioned. Alaska was a territory and the Road House was like a customs office. My dad was the Road House agent, from 1899 'til 1932 when he died. We leased sled dogs to the government for carrying mail. Our dogs were government employees, but we weren't. My brother and father and whoever could run our dogs, were paid by the number of dogs we ran and how many miles they traveled¹.

Then one day my father went to Nome for a steam bath. He never came back. He caught this disease and died. People in town sent word out to us about my father. They dropped a thousand pounds of groceries off to last us through until springtime. We had so many kids at home--we were from one to thirteen years old. My mom was there with us, but she didn't speak much English.

This was the last of the diphtheria epidemics. My grandfather saw many people die.

We moved to town that Spring.

The next year Nome burned down.

¹Distances between road houses averaged about 20-25 miles, or about one day's travel time.