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BY
GUNNAR ISACHSEN

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Gunnar Isachsen

IN 1908-1909 Peary made his third and last attempt to reach the pole. On September 5, 1909, he wired from Indian Harbour, Labrador, that he had gained it. This declaration was received with doubt, which has continued ever since especially among the great public.

The National Geographic Society in Washington appointed in the autumn of 1909 a committee to examine the question: Chief Geographer Henry Gannett, Admiral Colby C. Chester, and Superintendent O. H. Tittmann—all men well qualified to judge in the matter. After careful examination of the instruments, observations, and log books belonging to Peary and all members of his expedition, the committee arrived at the decision that Peary had reached the North Pole April 6, 1909, adding that the journey was planned and executed by Peary in a manner worthy of the highest praise.

But one thing this committee was not competent to judge, and that is the length of Peary's marches. It is on just this point that doubt arose. That the doubt should continue is quite natural, as none of the few persons who understand this aspect of the matter has given an opinion, so far as I know. That is why I write these lines. And I write now because this doubt has again been raised in the press in connection with the last polar voyages of Amundsen and Byrd.

PEARY'S MARCHES

In 1908 Peary had taken his ship, the *Roosevelt*, to Cape Sheridan, in latitude $82^{\circ} 27' N$. All the members of the expedition were on the trail the entire winter, hunting or sledging to establish depots northwestwards towards Cape Columbia, $83^{\circ} 7'$. On February 28, 1909, Captain Bartlett began his sledge journey from Cape Columbia with the first group. The following day they were all out on the ice, Peary last, and on their way northwards—in all 24 men, 133 dogs, 19 sledges, with provisions and outfit for 50 days. The distance to the pole from Cape Columbia is 413 nautical miles.

The objective of each day was to reach the pioneer party's camp before the group went further. The parties bunched together the fourth march when the ice broke up in leads during a gale that lasted several days, blowing first from the east and then from the west. For six days they were forced to wait before they could again advance. "Altogether I think that more of mental wear and tear was crowded into those days than into all the rest of the fifteen months we were absent from civilization."¹

The first support party under Dr. Goodsell turned back March 14 at $84^{\circ} 29' N$.; the second party, under Borup, March 18 at $85^{\circ} 23' N$.; the third party, under Marvin, March 26 at $86^{\circ} 38' N$.; and the fourth and last support party, under Bartlett, April 1, at $87^{\circ} 47' N$.

* Major Isachsen discussed this problem on a recent visit to the American Geographical Society and prepared the following translation from his paper "Har Peary vært ved Nordpolen?" *Norsk Geogr. Tidsskrift*, Vol. 1, 1926, pp. 100-104.—EDIT. NOTE.

¹ Robert E. Peary: *The North Pole*, New York, 1910, p. 228.

From Cape Columbia to the place where Bartlett turned back the daily advance averaged about 12 miles; in the last eight days before Bartlett turned back the marches were about 17 miles. The support parties were consequently used up to the first of April, to $87^{\circ} 47' N.$, a point 133 miles from the pole. From this point Peary went to the pole with the negro Henson, 4 Eskimos, 5 sledges, 40 dogs, and provisions for 40 days. On April 6, at 10 a. m., Peary, according to his observation, reached $89^{\circ} 57' N.$ The last 133 miles (in a direct line) after he parted from Bartlett were done in five marches consequently averaging about 26 miles per day, with 10 per cent added for irregularity of the trail. During his stay of 30 hours at the pole, till April 7, 4 p. m., Peary followed a triangular course, with eight to ten miles to a side, taking at two of the angles observations of the sun in three different directions and at four different times. After these observations the pole was said to be situated at a place within the sides of this triangle. The return to Cape Columbia, where Peary arrived on April 23, was accomplished in sixteen marches, averaging about 29 miles.

Now comes the question: Is it not curious that Peary was able to sledge so rapidly after he had parted from Captain Bartlett, curious that he could do marches averaging about 29 miles from this point to the pole while his marches the last eight days up to $87^{\circ} 47'$ were only 17 miles and he had only averaged about 12 miles from Cape Columbia?

We know that the greater the party the greater the chance that something will go wrong or that the party will be hindered for one reason or another. For instance, a regiment cannot make as good marches as the best company of the regiment, and this company cannot make as good marches as some few picked men of the company. Peary's party on the final spurt for the pole—clearly the most intensive part of the whole expedition—was reduced to 5 picked men and 40 picked dogs. The party was under his personal leadership. He himself was at the head, and all of the party had a feeling that now the moment had arrived when all were to do their best to reach the goal. Therefore the final dash was quick. It had to be quick.

That the return journey from the pole could be rapid and had to be rapid is natural. It was important to reach land before the next full moon, May 3, in order to avoid the obstacles of leads and ice-crushing during the spring flood. Every day the sledges grew lighter and lighter, the snow houses built on the outward journey were of good use, and Peary could follow their old trail, a thing that is of great importance when sledging with dogs. From the moment when Peary parted from Bartlett until the journey was finished the pole party had good, quiet weather and therefore were not much hindered by open leads.

Several of the white members of the expedition had had previous Arctic experience, but the deciding factor during the whole trip to the pole was the help of the Eskimos, capable dog drivers as the Smith Sound Eskimos are. In all, Peary had taken with him from Smith Sound northwards from Cape Sheridan 22 men, 17 women, 10 children, and 246 dogs. He had the best personnel and material that could be procured, and his own experience as an Arctic explorer was second to none.

COMPARISON WITH "FRAM" EXPEDITION MARCHES

In giving my personal opinion with regard to the reasonableness of the length of Peary's marches I will compare his results with our own results during the second *Fram* expedition (1898-1902) under Sverdrup, of which I was a member.² After what I have said about Peary's technique, I have only to describe the ice as Peary encountered it and as we found it on the *Fram* expedition in our field of work west of Ellesmere Island and Grant Land.

From Cape Columbia northward to about $86^{\circ} N.$ Peary sledged over old ice

²Otto Sverdrup: *New Land: Four Years in the Arctic Regions*, 2 vols., London, 1904.

badly crushed. From this "paleocrystic" ice he entered a belt with many great leads. This belt of leads had stopped him in 1906 when the weather and ice were so unfavorable. From this disturbed belt—the "Big Lead," as Peary termed it—he reached ice of another character, young or "Atlantic" ice, which was not so crushed and piled up and therefore was easier to sledge over.³

Several explorers have observed that the ice has another character to the east of Cape Bridgman, the northernmost point of Greenland. To the north of this point the ice is easier to sledge over than that along the northwestern coast of Greenland. This "Atlantic" ice is driven to the east towards the Greenland Sea. But the ice that is pressed against the north coast of Greenland west of Cape Bridgman, against Grant Land, and the islands to the west of Grant Land cannot easily be forced southwards through the narrow sounds between. The ice often lies in these regions year after year, exposed to a heavy pressure, until it becomes paleocrystic. It was this sort of ice that Peary passed through up to 85°–86° N., and it was the same sort of ice that we had to sledge over during the *Fram* expedition and which gives a basis for comparison.

On the second *Fram* expedition we were out sledging during about half of every year for four years. We had not only to sledge but to map and do every sort of exploratory work. But the only object of Peary's journey was to push northward towards the pole. His only concern was to make the longest possible marches northwards. In other words, Peary was exclusively a record breaker.

On our sledging trips we were not content with marches under 15 miles. We often made 20 to 30 miles, and marches of over 30 miles were not rare. Several times we even made marches of over 70 miles. Such long marches show that the sledging is easy and that the distance is eaten up in the good humor of the party and dogs.

If we could make such long marches over ice which may be supposed to have been about the same kind as the ice on the most difficult part of Peary's journey, then even longer ones may be made on better ice such as that which Peary met on his journey to the pole in 1909 to the north of the "Big Lead." It is my opinion that marches of the length of Peary's on his North Pole expedition of 1909 are possible not only for parts of the trip but for the entire journey.

³ See "The Geography of the Polar Regions," *Amer. Geogr. Soc. Special Publ. No. 8*, pp. 134–135; also on Arctic ice in general in "Problems of Polar Research," *Amer. Geogr. Soc. Special Publ. No. 7*, pp. 91–141.