

First At The Pole

by Lowell Thomas

Just thirty years ago two Americans stood at the top of the world—the first ones ever to reach the North Pole. Today one of those men is still alive...still recalls the great adventure



Graphics from the original 1939 newspaper publication

The morning of April sixth I found we were in the middle of hummock ice. I calculated about how far I had come, and I said to my self, 'If I'm not on the Pole, I've crossed it, so I don't have to go no further.' And I said to my Eskimos: 'We're going to camp here. Make an igloo.. Commander Peary was forty-five minutes behind. He came up to us as we were building the igloo and he says, 'Well, my boy, how many miles have we made today?' And I answers, 'Too many, Commander; I think we crossed the Pole.' So the Commander got out his notebook and figured a bit and he says, 'I guess you're right.'"

Six men walked north over trackless ice. It was April 6, 1909—just thirty years ago. They were farther north than men had ever been before. They were heading for the North Pole, and they were almost there: It was sub-zero cold.

Four of the six men were Eskimos. Two were Americans—Commander Robert E. Peary and Peary's assistant, Matthew A. Henson. And presently these men reached the Pole. Henson is still alive. He is 72 years old: the only sign of his age is two patches of white hair on his temples. The white hair stands out, because Henson is a Negro. I talked with Henson only the other day.

"We had been traveling eighteen to twenty hours out of every twenty-four," he said "Man, that was killing work! Forced marches all the time. But it was the only way to make it. From all our other expeditions we had found out that we couldn't carry food for more than fifty days, fifty-five at a pinch. That meant fifty days from the minute we said good-by to Cap'n Bartlett, 133 nautical miles from the Pole. And those fifty days had to bring us back, not to where we left Bartlett but to camp at Cape Columbia, 413 miles.

“We used to travel by night and sleep in the warmest part of the day. I was ahead most of the time with two of the Eskimos.” “You mean you were in advance of Peary?” I asked. “Yes, it was up to me to break trail. On some other expeditions I’d be as much as five days ahead of Commander Peary, never see him until we made camp,” he explained, and added that, though most people might think that a trail in the Arctic would soon be obliterated by wind and snow, the opposite is actually true. The hard-packed tracks of the sledges stand out plainly for weeks, and sometimes months. “Then,” I asked, “how could you tell in what direction to go?”

“I had compasses, one on the sledge, one on my wrist. But as we got nearer to the Pole they wasn’t either of them much good. So most of the time I judged direction from the ridges cut by the wind. Up there, the sastrugi, the ridges, run east and west. So the line due north would cut the sastrugi at right angles.

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“The next day we walked back a mile, then we walked a few miles in every direction. The Commander took four observations. Of course the exact location of the Pole couldn’t be



Lowell Thomas autographed this photograph to fellow Explorer’s Club member Joseph Robinson, the father of Henson’s biographer Bradley Robinson, with whom Henson wrote *Dark Companion* in 1947.

figured out to a second, unless you camped there for months, taking observations all the time. At any rate, we walked around enough to make certain one way or another we sure had hit the Pole. The Commander took the observations and I made the notes.”

“I suppose Peary was tremendously excited,” I suggested. “He didn’t show it,” said Henson. “We was all too

tired to show much. I was worrying mostly about the journey back. I knew it meant more forced marches. As soon as the north wind began to blow, the ice would begin to break up and I was scared of the open-water stretches we might have to cross.”

Commander MacMillan has related elsewhere, and told in public, that when Peary arrived at the Pole, he was too weak even to raise the American flag that he had brought with him especially for that purpose. According to MacMillan it was Henson who placed the Stars and Stripes at the top of the world, while the leader sat exhausted on the sledge and feebly waved his hand.

“After Peary finished making his observations,” said Henson, “he just about collapsed. He couldn’t walk. We had to put him on a sledge. Man, that was a march back! Again traveling eighteen to twenty hours out of every twenty-four. And was it cold! The Commander says to me, ‘Matt, don’t work the Eskimos and the dogs to death.’ I says, ‘I know, Commander, but we got to make it.’ “

Matt Henson then told me something that I had never heard before. It was an explanation of Peary’s strange retirement from the, public scene and from all further activity in exploration after he returned from the Pole. I had asked one of Peary’s assistants, the indomitable Commander MacMillan, how he accounted for it. MacMillan attributed his chief’s seclusion to his distress and bitterness over the Dr. Cook controversy. Henson, who was closer to his great leader than any other living man, has another interpretation. He told me: “The Commander was never a well man from the minute after he’d finished taking those observations at the Pole. It seemed to be an effort for him to speak. All his strength had been concentrated on getting to the Pole. Once he got there his strength gave out.

“After we returned to the United States I only saw him twice—once, here in New York. I had



E-GING-WAH - O-TAH - SEE-GLOO - O-KEE-AH
THE FOUR ESKIMO SLEDGE-DRIVERS WHO REACHED THE NORTH POLE

no money. I was broke. You know, we got no pay on those expeditions. I got a salary only while I was helping him get ready to go. I had to do something when I got back to support myself and my wife. And I was all in too—too weak, too sickly to work at a job.

“You know William A. Brady, the theatrical manager? He made me an offer to send me out lecturing. But it seems Commander Peary didn’t want me to. I didn’t know what to do, so I went to Mr. Brady. Mr. Brady cocks up the cigar in the corner of his mouth and says, ‘I’ll take care of that.’ Mr. Brady went ahead and booked me all over the country and we never heard any more from the Commander. I thought he was mad, maybe, and I was sorry, but what could I do? I had to make a living. After I’d spoken at several places I got to Chicago and wired Mr. Brady I couldn’t go no further. I was sick. Mr. Brady jumped a train and come out to Chicago and he says, ‘You sure are sick. You go right back to New York.’ So I had to rest for a while before I did any more lecturing.”

“When the tour was all over, I went to Mr. Brady’s office to get my money and I said to him: ‘You take out whatever you want and give me the rest.’ Mr. Brady said: ‘I don’t want anything.’ And I said: ‘No, that isn’t right. So Mr. Brady said: ‘Well, if you insist, give me twenty-five dollars for cigar money.’ And I said: ‘Why, after all you’ve done, that isn’t anything—you must be joking. You take what’s fair.’ And Mr. Brady said: ‘I told you what I want—twenty-five dollars for cigars.’ And that is all he took.”

Around Matt Henson centered a controversy after Peary’s return. Certain people publicly censored the North Pole’s discoverer because the man he had chosen to accompany him on his final successful dash was colored. The thought was advanced that he should have taken one of his white assistants.

This criticism, I believe, was unjust. It was disavowed categorically by at least one of those white assistants, Commander MacMillan, who has said to me and stated in public: “We had never expected to go that far. In his letter, offering ‘me the privilege of going along, Peary specifically and emphatically stated: ‘It must be understood that you are not to go to the Pole.’ The same applies to Captain Bob Bartlett.” And MacMillan continued: “The reason for this was quite simple and overwhelming. Henson was the most useful man of us all. He was the best man I’ve ever seen, then or in the thirty years since, in the handling of Eskimos. It was Henson who trained the



Above: Peary with his Huskies.
Below: Matt Henson, only American to reach the Pole with Peary

Eskimos for all Peary's expeditions. Nobody could get along with them as well as Matt Henson. They're a merry people, fond of laughter. Henson, with his flashing white teeth, always had a laugh in his dark face. The Eskimos accepted him almost as one of themselves. Besides, Henson was the best man at handling a sledge and driving a dog team. And we all noticed that whenever Peary encountered a difficulty, Matt Henson was the man he sent for."

Henson furthermore had become adept in the making of sledges. Peary himself could speak only a few words of the Eskimo language, whereas Henson could speak it fluently. MacMillan says that it was from Matt that he learned his first Eskimo words, from which beginning MacMillan has compiled a grammar and dictionary of the Eskimo language.

And here are Peary's own words on the subject of his colored lieutenant: "Henson, with his years of Arctic experience, was almost as skillful [in ice technique] as an Eskimo. He could handle dogs and sledges, and was a part of the traveling machine. Had I taken another member of the expedition also, he would have been a passenger, necessitating the carrying of extra rations."

It was some fifty years ago that Peary first worked with Matt Henson. The Negro had been a foremast hand on sailing ships, He had made perhaps a dozen trips around the world, "to almost every port where a sailing ship could stick her nose," as he puts it. In 1887, the Interoceanic Canal Commission, which was investigating the respective merits of Nicaragua and Panama for a waterway, borrowed the services of young Lieutenant Robert Edwin Peary, then an engineer officer of the United States Navy. And Peary, who knew Henson, took him along to Central America. On that surveying trip he found Henson so resourceful, so loyal and unfailingly cheerful, that he kept him in his employ.

In 1891, Peary finally obtained from Morris Jesup the means to carry out a long cherished



1909 expedition team member Donald MacMillan holds a whip made of walrus hide that was used to control a team of dogs.

ambition, a voyage of exploration to Greenland. Peary took Henson with, him and there he found the Negro just as useful as he had been in the jungles of Central America. Thereafter Matt Henson was with Robert E. Peary on every one of his Arctic expeditions and became literally, indispensable. On two occasions he saved Peary's life. And he became so wise in the difficulties and necessities of the Arctic that Peary would often defer to his judgment and experience. It was Henson who not only trained the Eskimos but broke in the dogs. His skill in driving the formidable



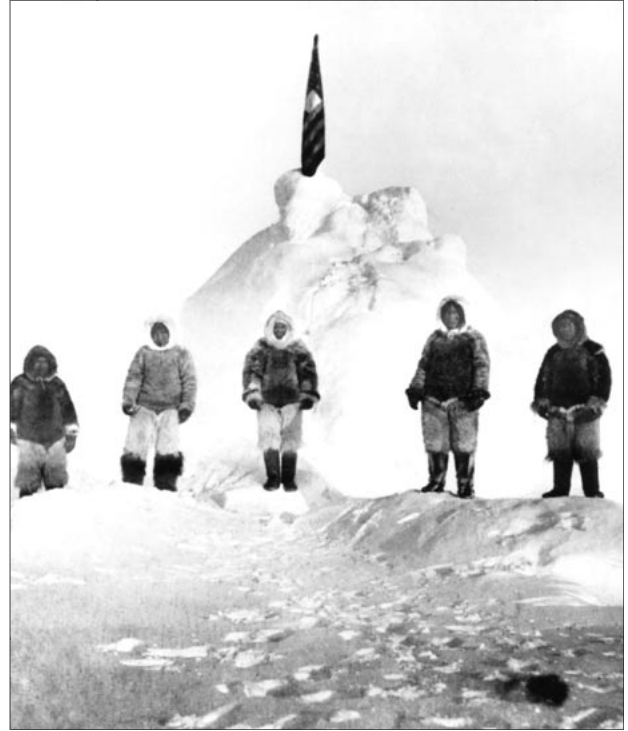
Henson and Peary about 1900 heading for another adventure.
Photo courtesy of Library of Congress

Huskies he ascribes to the fact that he quickly picked up the knack of cracking the long thirty-foot whip. "It's all in the flick of the wrist," he explained.

It was Henson, too, whom Peary assigned to breaking in white assistants who were new to the game. There was a twinkle in the Negro's eye as he told me, "The boys I liked never got their feet froze." And he added, "But it was hard to get some of them to understand that their feet were the most important part about them. Some of them would get all upset because they froze their foreheads or their noses. I says to them, 'You don't walk on your nose or your forehead: look after your feet.' Commander MacMillan never froze his feet when I was with him. And when he went out hunting I always gave him the best Eskimos and dogs."

The old Negro smiles as he contemplates the comfort and luxury of modern Polar exploration. "Ours was all starvation expeditions," he says: "By the time Commander Peary bought his ship and his equipment, we had no money left for big stores of food. About all we could take with us was tea, coffee, sugar, condensed milk, and kerosene and alcohol for fuel. For the rest, we lived mostly on what we could catch or kill. Sometimes we had to eat dogs."

Henson, the only living American who has ever set foot upon the North Pole, remains unrecognized by any geographical body or scientific institute in the land. This is a sore point with Commander MacMillan, who says: "If ever there was a man who deserves recognition, it's Henson." Henson has just one token of appreciation from a public body. A few years ago he was given a silver loving cup by the Bronx Chamber of Commerce. Until a couple of years ago, Henson was employed at the office of the Collector of Customs in New York. Pretty dull, monotonous work for a man who had put in the best years of his life as an explorer. "But it gave me a livelihood," says the Negro, "and I was certainly grateful to President Taft for giving me the appointment."



Peary took this photo at the North Pole.
Photo courtesy of the Peary Family.

As a matter of fact, if he had had his own way, Henson would still be in the service to round out his thirty years—so that he could get a full pension—but the rules and regulations compelled his retirement when he was seventy. As he completed only twenty-five years, his pension is smaller. However, Mrs. Henson works in a bank and Henson himself is still called upon from time to time for lectures. I asked how Mrs. Henson was able to work in a bank and keep their apartment so immaculate. His reply was, "Oh, I do that. Cleaning an apartment is no difficulty to an old seafaring man."

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