

April 9, 1976

On Top Of the World

"This scene my eyes will never see again. Plant the Stars and Stripes over there, Matt . . . At the North Pole."

—Robert E. Peary, April 6, 1909

By Joel Dreyfuss

The arctic winds howled at speeds up to 70 miles an hour over the vast expanses of ice. Within a few days the ice would begin to melt, but the six men had beaten the coming of spring and conquered one of the few remaining earthly frontiers. Sixty-seven years ago this week, Peary, the famed explorer; four eskimos and a black man, Matthew Alexander Henson, reached the top of the world on foot.

Peary reaped the benefits of his triumph. He retired as a Rear Admiral. The Eskimo guides: Ootah, Eginwah, Seegloo and Ookeah, became footnotes in history. That too might have been the fate of Henson, Peary's assistant, if not for the efforts of Herbert L. Frisby of Baltimore.

Frisby, now well into his 80s, was spurred to interest in Matthew Henson more than a half-century ago, when a teacher, noting Peary's achievement, remarked: "He was accompanied by one of your kind. Knowing you people as I do, he [Henson] will be the last."

"I raised my hand," Frisby recalls, "and said, 'You're dead wrong. I'll be the second.'"

Frisby was kept after school for his insolence but 47 years later, he flew over the Pole in a U.S. Air Force plane and dropped a memorial to the man who actually was the first to reach the North Pole, 45 minutes ahead of Peary.

Frisby has himself made 25 trips inside the Arctic Circle. His Baltimore home is a memorial to Henson. There are pictures of Henson, Peary and Frisby. There are autographed photos from two astronauts. The basement of the house is a small museum of Eskimo art and craft, animal skins, plaques, a caribou head and mementos that are carefully labeled.

One reason the school incident made such an impact on Frisby may have been the parallels he found be-

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FRISBY, From C1

tween himself and the black explorer. Henson worked in Baltimore before joining Peary. Both came from impoverished backgrounds. Frisby sold peanuts he brought wholesale in the back alleys and side streets of the city, turning a profit of \$25-30 a week that supported his family.

He went to Howard University, supplementing his income by playing the piano weekends at parties.

He never forgot his impulsive promise to the teacher and saw his first opportunity to go to the Arctic during World War II. "One Sunday I heard of the building of the A1-Can highway with 10,000 troops — 8,000 of them black."

He tried unsuccessfully to get Carl Murphy, owner of the Afro-American newspapers to send him. Murphy, who had sent black war correspondents to Europe and the South Pacific, didn't think there was much interest in that part of the world.

With the kind of persistence that would later serve him well, Frisby persuaded Murphy to approve his application for accreditation and he took off for the Canadian Arctic. Ten days after he submitted his first story, there was a letter from Murphy saying the demand had forced him to print extra copies of the paper. Murphy asked for more articles and sent him a check for \$200.

While in Alaska, Frisby made the first of several unsuccessful attempts to fly to the North Pole, but once he explained his reason to officials, they refused. Once, an Air Force commander grounded all his planes rather than carry out an order to fly Frisby over the Pole.

At the end of World War II, Henson became Frisby's cause. He found the explorer's birthplace in Charles County, Md., and learned that Henson was living in Harlem.

"He was a happy-go-lucky guy with an amiable disposition," said Frisby, who became a frequent visitor to the Henson home. "He looked at the brighter side of life. People used to pack his house: Ed Sullivan, Lowell Thomas. Those people kept Henson alive. Peary abandoned him after the Pole."

The breakup of the association between Peary and Henson has remained a mystery. Henson was working in a Baltimore clothing store when he met the young Lt. Peary.

He became Peary's assistant, a term the explorer used repeatedly in referring to Henson. He accompanied Peary on a survey of Nicaragua, where the United States was planning to build a canal and on the numerous trips to the Arctic.

There was some criticism of Peary's choice of Henson for the final trek in 1909, but the Admiral defended his decision, referring to the black man as "my most valuable companion. I could not get along without him." But in Peary's book on the voyage, Henson



Matthew Henson: Peary's "most valuable companion."

appears in only one group photograph with the Eskimos.

Years later, Frisby recalls Peary's daughter's disputing Henson's role and arguing that he was "only a servant."

After the voyage, Henson and Peary went their separate ways. Henson was found working in a Brooklyn warehouse in 1914 and was appointed a messenger in the New York Customs office by President Taft.

Henson believes their alienation developed when Henson, who broke the trail every day for the ailing Peary, reached the North Pole first.

Henson was supposed to stop short, but, according to Frisby, he kept on going. "Henson told me," Frisby recalls, "I was so close and was so overjoyed that this thing was over that I kept going."

When Peary arrived 45 minutes later, he confirmed the position Henson had calculated. "Henson said he extended his hand to Peary to congratulate him and Peary refused it," says Frisby.

"Matt said that night he removed all the cartridges from his gun and from Peary's because he was afraid he'd kill Matt. Peary never spoke to him on the return trip except to give him a direct order."

One other account suggests that Peary tried to leave the night before with two of the Eskimos in order to beat Henson to the Pole but the Eskimos refused.

Henson was bound by a promise to Peary that he would not lecture or write about his trip. He kept the vow for 12 years but because of his difficult financial situation finally broke it, adding to the hostility toward him from Peary.

Henson insisted to the last that Peary was a great man. "No doubt about it. Personally, he was a little on the cold side, but we always got along well except . . . well, we liked each other, as far as it went."

In 1937, Henson was made a lifetime member of the Explorer's Club but further recognition didn't happen until 1945, when he was awarded a special medal by Congress. Frisby got into the act at that time. His efforts led to a Defense Department citation in 1949, a White House reception with President Eisenhower in 1954 shortly

before Henson's death in 1955 and a memorial plaque in the Maryland State House in 1961, the first such honor for a black man by his home state.

The high point, of course, was the flight over the Pole in 1956, when Frisby dropped a steel canister containing an American flag, a bronze plaque and a photograph of Henson.

"I never could get a single soul to underwrite my efforts," says Frisby, who has published pamphlets and booklets on Henson and on his own Arctic exploits.

"I said that I would devote my life to this even if I spent every cent I had. It has been a complete flop financially," he adds, with no trace of regret. Obviously he has reaped his share of triumph.

One cannot help wonder if his dedication to the memory of Henson is not a result of the opportunities that were limited for a black man who wanted to push back the frontiers of man's knowledge. Frisby came along at the wrong time. Henson had already performed his own feat and it was too early for the next stage of exploration, the conquest of space.

He can count certain achievements. There is a school in Baltimore named after Henson. Frisby's daughter-in-law is the principal. Henson is described in E. L. Doctorow's best-selling book, "Ragtime."

But omissions still occur. Thomas Jackson, who works with the National Ocean Survey in Rockville, Md., noticed last February that Henson was not mentioned in an exhibit on Peary mounted at the Washington Science Center.

He did some research, talked to Frisby and wrote a detailed memo pointing out Henson's achievements. The initial reaction was that officials "did not want to rewrite history."

But the research by Jackson, 28, led to inclusion of a photograph of Henson and plans for an exhibit on the contributions of women and minorities to the National Ocean Survey.

As for Frisby, he still has plans. He talks about having Henson's body moved from an unmarked grave in New York to Arlington National Cemetery.

Don't bet against him.