

Peary's Polar Mystery

Was the Explorer's Dash to the Pole a First—or a Snow Job?

By Boyce Rensberger

EIGHTY-TWO years have passed since Robert E. Peary returned from the frozen Arctic claiming he had set foot on the North Pole. But with each passing year, his hold on what once was the supreme prize of global adventuring has been weakened by an accumulation of evidence that he probably faked the feat.

Never mind that Peary himself warned of faked discovery claims and said "proper proofs" should be demanded. Put aside the fact that the prestigious National Geographic Society and the U.S. Congress long ago thought they settled the matter by proclaiming Peary the conqueror of that quest.

These are among the ironies amid the mountain of muddle that has accumulated in the 82 years since Peary, racing rival explorer Frederick A. Cook, made his famous—or spurious—dash to the top of the world.

This spring, yet another attempt was made to resolve the question: Was Peary ever there? The latest effort, in a cause carried forward mostly as an avocation by dedicated astronomers, navigators and geographical sleuths, took the form of a symposium at the U.S. Naval Academy. Sponsored by the U.S. Naval Institute, it was the first public face-to-face meeting of Peary supporters and skeptics. The session was not a judicial proceeding but it came close—without a jury—to convicting Peary of having pulled a fast one on the history books.

Five experts addressed the forum and examined Peary's claim. Three of them, including two Arctic explorers who unquestionably reached the Pole, said overwhelming evidence supports their verdict that Peary never got close. A fourth said Peary did reach the Pole, but this speaker offered as evidence only the fact that there existed a method Peary could have used to find his way—even though it is not the method Peary said he did use. The fifth panelist, recruited to Peary's defense by the National Geographic Society, said his analysis of photographs Peary said he took at the Pole yielded a 75-percent chance the explorer came within 23 miles of the Pole and that that was good enough.

"I'd say the evidence was pretty well lined up against Peary," said Charles Burroughs, chairman of the Washington chapter of the Explorers' Club, of which both Peary and Cook, who claimed he beat Peary to the Pole, once were presidents. "The pro-Peary side just wasn't very convincing to me."

The current debate arose after a 1983 television "docudrama" indicated Cook deserved the honors because Peary faked his claim to have reached the Pole first. In rebuttal, the National Geographic Society commissioned Wally Herbert, a British Arctic explorer who dogsledded to the Pole in 1969, to comb newly unsealed Peary papers for evidence of the explorer's true accomplishment. Herbert concluded, in the September 1988 National Geographic magazine, that Peary probably missed the Pole by about 60 miles.

Herbert stopped short of saying Peary knew he had failed, which would imply he deliberately faked his claim. But a longtime Peary critic, Dennis Rawlins, who teaches astronomy and physics at Baltimore's Loyola College, charged that Peary knew he had failed—but then knowingly perpetrated the longest-running scientific fraud in American history.

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TERRY SMITH FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

sightings to determine his longitude and checked his compass against the stars to learn the compass's exact variation from true north. In making other major Arctic claims, such as his legitimate discovery of the northernmost point of land on Earth, Peary made detailed records and asked others to confirm his sightings. Although Henson could use a sextant, Peary didn't ask him for a confirming sighting. A corroborating witness is one of the "proper proofs" normally sought in verifying explorers' claims.

Instead, Peary left Henson at their northernmost camp and went on alone to make his "North Pole" sightings. Henson recalled asking Peary upon his return, "We are now at the Pole, are we not?" "I do not suppose that we can swear we are exactly at the Pole," was [Peary's] evasive answer." From that day on, Henson later said, Peary rarely spoke to him. Peary never mentioned the North Pole until his ship returned to civilization five months later. Rawlins and Herbert have suggested that Peary—who at 53 knew he would never again try for the Pole—decided on the voyage home to claim success anyway.

At some point Peary wrote "The Pole at last!!!" on a slip of paper and placed it in the diary of his expedition. The bound pages of the diary dated April 6—the day Peary said he reached the Pole—were left blank. Adding to the mystery, Peary entitled his diary: "No. 1. Roosevelt to ——— and return," an odd way to describe the goal he presumably had so arduously won. Peary explained at congressional hearings that he didn't have time to fill in the diary entries.

Rawlins also said Davies's analysis of the photographs contained numerous errors in methodology and mathematics, raising basic questions about Peary's location. Another source of error is the fuzziness of the shadows in the photographs. A slight fluctuation in determining the tip of a shadow could translate into a shift of many miles on the Arctic ice. Rawlins said his own analysis of the shadows concluded that Peary was about 100 miles from the Pole.

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"There are good answers to all [the criticisms]," Davies said, "but I don't want to take up my time answering a lot of nonsense." Instead he focused on the two newly found Peary photos which, even Rawlins agrees, show the sun at the correct elevation for the North Pole on April 6, 1909. One shows the sun peeking around a high ice pinnacle from which an American flag flutters.

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Davies announced that three such "lines of position" derived from Peary's photos intersected so close to the North Pole that they support Peary's claim. Actually Davies did not use lines but bands up to 30 miles wide—a width arbitrarily chosen to cover estimated error in the measurements. The area within the intersecting bands included the Pole.

"Peary was not a fake or a fraud," Davies declared. "He did reach the North Pole. He was where he said he was." Grosvenor pronounced the conclusion "unimpeachable" and said, "Unless something better comes along, I consider this the end of a historic controversy and the confirmation of due justice to a great explorer."

A few months later Davies checked two newly found Peary photos that showed the sun and the horizon and said they confirmed his finding. The NGS called the photos "direct proof" Peary had come within three miles of the Pole.

But latter-day polar explorer Ralph Plaisted denounced the photos to the Annapolis conference. "I don't care what they say about the shadows in those pictures, there's no way in hell Peary got to the Pole." Plaisted, who snowmobiled to the Pole in 1968, declared, "I've been there. I know how you find your way there. And I know this is a myth."

Plaisted argued that Peary's claimed navigation method as well as the speed of his final "dash" for the Pole were not credible.

Peary's final assault on the Pole began April 1, 1909, when his party had gone 22 days and 280 miles out onto the ice but was still 133 miles south of the Pole—as determined by a sextant sighting confirmed by other crew members. Peary sent home all his colleagues except Matthew Henson, his exploring companion of two decades, and four Eskimos. At this key point, Peary critics all say, something odd happened. The previous daily average of northward progress—less than 13 miles a day—mysteriously doubled to 26 miles a day.

"No dog born can go that fast," Plaisted asserted. Even a snowmobile couldn't, he said. The reason is that Arctic Ocean pack ice is rough, marked by numerous long "pressure ridges" up to 20 feet high. Polar travelers must go many miles around or hack paths up and over. Plaisted said he thinks Peary simply made up the daily distances so that the total would look like enough to get him to the Pole from the last undisputed navigation point.

Wally Herbert, who attended the Annapolis meeting, agreed: "The distances and speeds claimed by Peary are incredible, to say the least." Davies said other explorers had achieved such speeds. Herbert said those speeds were on smooth bay ice, not Arctic Ocean pack ice.

Herbert also dismissed Davies's assertion that Peary could find the Pole—as the explorer claimed—by simply following his compass and his shadows. Magnetic north is geographically different from true north and as one approaches the Pole, the difference widens dramatically, making it necessary to check the variation with longitude sights, which Peary said he did not do.

Peary critic Rawlins told the session a comparison of Peary's usually meticulous navigation methods on previous polar attempts with the 1909 try proves fraud. "His very greatness is the best simple evidence against him," Rawlins said. In earlier expeditions, Peary always took celestial

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short of the Pole, he deceitfully took the picture at just the right moment when a rising or setting sun reached the elevation required if he had been at the North Pole. (At the Pole the sun stays at the same elevation all day and appears to circle the sky. At lower latitudes, it appears to rise and set, passing through the polar elevation twice a day.)

Davies said if Peary had intentionally faked the "Pole" photo, he would have used it as evidence to rebut later criticism that he lacked proper proofs. Rawlins suggested Peary suppressed it because he realized that if he produced a photo showing the sun and the pinnacle from one angle, he would be asked for the impossible: a second picture taken later in the day when the sun had circled around but was still at the same North Pole elevation. Two or more such pictures would have constituted the most proper proofs of all that Peary had stood at the Pole.

Davies rested his case by repeating his father's finding, but conceded that "some judgment" was involved in interpreting the shadows. He said there was a 75 percent chance Peary had gotten within 23 miles of the Pole.

But Keith Pickering, a computer expert from Minnesota, told the participants that when he factored in all sources of error and uncertainty, the photos meant no more than a 90 percent probability that Peary was within an irregular area ranging between 193 miles and 312 miles from the Pole. "I quite agree with Pickering," said Brad Schaefer, an astrophysicist from the Goddard Space Flight Center, who said he came to the conference an agnostic. "There are some well known types of errors on the pro-Peary side."

Schaefer said the debate boiled down to:

- The strongest evidence put forth by Peary's advocates was the photographic analysis, to which the opposition made persuasive objections.

- The strongest evidence that Peary didn't make it, Schaefer thought, was the assertion by two polar explorers—"people who actually have real-world data"—that Peary's speeds and aiming methods could not work, to which the pro-Peary side had little more than denials.

One close observer of the debate who was not at Annapolis is Geoff Chester, an astronomer at the National Air and Space Museum. His great-grandfather, Adm. Colby Chester, headed the original National Geographic Society panel that certified Peary's claim. Geoff Chester questioned Davies's claims that put Peary on or near the Pole. But he also questioned whether Peary really knew he was way off the mark.

"How close do you have to be to say you were at the Pole?" Chester asked. "Given the navigation techniques available back then, I'm not sure Peary could have told exactly how far away he was once he got within maybe 60 miles. I think many people would say that's good enough."

Boyce Rensberger is science editor of The Washington Post.