

# Charge of Hoax Against Robert E. Peary Examined

TERRIS MOORE

EVER SINCE the return of Dr. Frederick A. Cook and Commander Robert E. Peary from the Arctic, within a week of each other in September 1909, both claiming to have reached the North Pole, partisans of the two have been at each others' throats. Because both men were founding members of the American Alpine Club—as was also Peary's wife, Josephine Diebitsch (women were admitted into the Club from the beginning)—the subject in those years very much gripped the attention of Club members. Investigations were made, Dr. Cook was formally expelled from the Club in 1910. Peary, an Honorary Member from earlier years was continued on as such until his death in 1920, with no indication that the Club—except perhaps for one or two members—accepted any of the charges made against him. These have continued sporadically; but principally in what one might call the “yellow press,” of sensationalist editors skating the edges of truth, grasping to increase their readership. But now that the Sierra Club has published *Great Exploration Hoaxes*, by our fellow member and well-known author, David Roberts (see book review), the charge against Peary must be examined with a freshly open mind.

On the jacket of this new (1982) book, we see Peary's polar party featured at their goal the North Pole, over the word HOAX in giant capitals. And inside we study Roberts' map showing the Peary party sledging to 87°47'N, the latitude of Bartlett's return; but from there northward only dotted lines labelled “probably spurious” indicate where Peary with Matthew Henson and four picked Eskimos reported that he had continued on to the Pole. This historic dog-sledging dash the author decries as “pretense of having made the actual achievement . . . a grimly serious effort to fool the whole world;” and he equates the whole thing with “Rosie Ruiz, the runner who tried to fake victory in the 1980 Boston Marathon [but] made a very bad show of it compared to men like Peary. Cross-examined . . . she took refuge in tears and a short memory.” And equating Peary with Cook, the publisher promotes this book with: “Historians now believe that both men falsified their evidence.”

This is all so completely at variance with the A.A.C.'s view of it all from the individuals themselves at the time that we must ask why this utterly different conclusion? Has some heinous behavior by Peary emerged, not known before?

This reviewer has made an exceptionally careful study of the author's sources and argument, but cannot find that at all. Instead, curiously, the one new and really important piece of information which has emerged in all these years is *supportive* of Peary—but the book's author and publisher seem unaware of it.

On just what basis, specifically, is the 1909 Peary expedition charged with fraud, fake, hoax, etc., and judged guilty by this new book? Also, do these charges differ at all from the original anti-Peary publications? Masses of detail of course in argument on this in the vast literature of the Cook-Peary controversy which has raged now for 74 years. But essentially the early charges against Peary and those in this new 1982 book can be summarized under the same three headings.

*The First Charge: Peary Did Not Make Longitude Determinations*, necessary to steering the sledges true north. Roberts in *Great Exploration Hoaxes* says: "In 1973 Dennis Rawlins published a book\* that must be regarded as the definitive analysis of the Peary controversy . . . the crux of this fairly technical matter is [that] Peary's observations are most suspect in the matter of direction-finding." And Dave Roberts' chapter of 18 pages is essentially a readable, workmanlike summary of Rawlins' rambling repetitious book of 320 pages. The essence of their number one charge is that although Peary did make observations for longitude at many key locations on all his preceding expeditions, in 1909 he made no observations for longitude anywhere between leaving land at Cape Columbia and what he asserted at his farthest north was 89°57'. So how could Peary have made corrections en route for transverse motion resulting from inevitable aiming errors in his simplified direction-finding by compass and dead reckoning?

The answer is that Peary's method was actually the same as the simplified navigational method subsequently employed by Amundsen and his navigators in their attainment of the South Pole in 1911. And what was that?

The clearest description of this method which both used may be found in the article "Amundsen's Route to the South Pole" published in the January, 1979 issue (page 331) of the *Polar Record* (Cambridge University's Scott Polar Research Institute). Specifically: ". . . Amundsen's system of navigation. He took no longitude sights during the whole polar journey . . . he trusted to latitude observations alone, combined with dead reckoning based on compass courses and distances run. The compasses were checked by frequent azimuth observations, the logical method at high latitudes. Amundsen's navigation was specifically designed for simplicity and time-saving on the march, based upon the comparatively easy meridian observation. In contrast, Scott used con-

---

\**Peary At The North Pole Fact or Fiction?* D. Rawlins, Washington, 1973.



PLATE 47

*Photo by Admiral Robert E. Peary  
Courtesy of Edward P. Stafford*

**MATTHEW HENSON**

ventional marine navigation as employed at lower latitudes. His navigator, Henry Bowers, made ex-meridian observations and longitude sights, spending considerable time and effort on calculations for a few kilometers, sometimes a few hundred meters, of meaningless accuracy."

Both Peary and Amundsen were criticized for failing to bring back scientific results. Scott was praised for his scientific materials obtained, including of course the "unnecessary" longitude determinations—but he perished at the end of a thousand mile round trip sledging journey, only 11 miles short of safe return!

*The Second Charge: Peary's Dog-Sledging Speeds Were Impossible.* Roberts says: "From Cape Columbia outward to 87°47', Bartlett's turnaround point, Peary averaged only 9.3 miles per day. His six best consecutive days yielded an average of 15.3. Suddenly, once there were no witnesses who could make observations [referring to Matt Henson and the four polar Eskimos] Peary made five days in a row to the Pole at an average, by his own reckoning, of 26 miles per day. . . . But the most astounding feat of all was Peary's alleged return from the Pole to 87°47'—133 miles at the very minimum—in 2¼ days. Between April 2 and April 9 . . . Peary [Henson and the four polar Eskimos] are supposed to have averaged more than 53 miles per day. . . ."

For comparison Roberts offers us ". . . one of the greatest Arctic explorers, Knud Rasmussen, [who] averaged 36.6 miles per day in Greenland in 1912 which may be the legitimate all-time record . . . the impossible distances [are] proof enough that Peary failed to reach the Pole. Certainly no one since has been able to approach Peary's apparent sledging times."

Sorry, but this statement is dramatically unacceptable. As far back as the rushing of the diphtheria serum to Nome in 1925 there are records of desperate dog-sledge racing, greatly in excess of Knud Rasmussen's figure. The Nenana to Tolovana run of 52 miles, on the first day of the 674 miles to Nome was done by the first driver in *half* a day of 13 hours. The entire distance, by some fifteen drivers in sequence, was done in 127½ sledging hours: a rate of far over a hundred miles per 24 hours. Not comparable of course except to demonstrate the maximum possible speeds of work dog-teams and drivers. (The already in-place U.S. Mail run teams were used).

Much more recently, and far more comparable to the thousand mile distance from Cape Columbia to the Pole and return—especially the return as we shall see—is the annual Alaskan "Iditarod" race of 1047 miles from Anchorage to Nome. In the "Iditarod" many drivers, at least one of them a woman, have consistently done over 75 miles per day carrying sleeping gear, tent, and the necessary food provisions. In 1981, the winner, Rick Swenson, set the course record of 12 days, 8 hours, 45 minutes and 2 seconds. This would seem to be 84.8 miles per day, *day after day!* The times and distances have all been publicly verified. Just who has been getting hoaxed by whom in this matter of dog-sledging speeds?

*Third Charge: Matt Henson and Eskimos Were Not Credible Witnesses,* for Peary after Bartlett's turnaround from 87°47'. In *Great Exploration Hoaxes,*



Roberts introducing Matthew Henson, refers to him as "Peary's oldest accomplice, a former manservant . . . neither the Eskimos nor Henson knew how to take observations of latitude and longitude . . . was Matthew Henson privy to the fraud? Rawlins thinks not." The book condescends: "Like the Eskimos, Henson had no independent way of knowing whether he was at the North Pole or not." It then asserts: "He never directly confirmed the astounding sledging distances claimed by Peary."

Sorry to have to differ again, but Matt Henson *did* know how to determine latitude and longitude, and *did* confirm Peary's sledging distances. I knew Matt Henson well for a period of close to twenty years—which is the principal reason for my writing this piece. I knew him from the time Vilhjalmur Stefansson, during Stef's second presidency of the Explorers Club, in the mid-thirties succeeded in getting Matt into its membership (I had the opportunity of voting for this), until in 1954 at the Annual Dinner that year I had the pleasure of sitting with Matt on the dais, his last time.

Matt knew how to determine latitude and longitude from solar sights at the noon and midnight meridian passages: Professor Ross Marvin of Cornell's College of Engineering taught him this during the long winter of 1908-9 aboard the *Roosevelt*. Matt would not have been able to reduce *ex-meridian time sights* for longitude because they are much more difficult, time consuming, uncertain, unnecessary and Peary's navigators were not going to bother with them. But he fully understood the use of GMT, GHA, and the Equation of Time to obtain longitude at simple meridian passages. He also knew that the Analemma, found on most globes in those years is simply a condensed scale for the sun's Declination and the Equation of Time. He never actually used any of this. But like the Eskimos, he knew that the sun *is* due south at its noon high point and due north at its midnight low point, and that no one can walk or steer a sledge closer than about 5° to a compass course anyhow. But if you check your compass for deviation at every noon or midnight opportunity, and have a reasonable number of such opportunities, for which Matt is witness that they did—then, contrary to what Rawlins in *Peary At The North Pole Fact or Fiction* would have us believe—the error in using this method of steering north is *not* cumulative. It is instead self-correcting. Even if you have no idea what longitude meridian you're on, you can still continue to steer north in this way, wandering 5° to 10° in your "pointing" back and forth, but pulled back constantly to averaging true north by your compass and by the periodic check of the sun to correct for any observed change in the magnetic deviation.

The accuracy essential to any *scientific data* collecting for magnetic deviation requires exact longitude, latitude and a precision magnetic device to record "dip" as well as azimuth. It is far out beyond what is adequate for merely steering north. In contrast the navigation for return *is* potentially difficult, and indeed just as demanding as Rawlins stipulates—unless, as Peary's polar party succeeded in doing, they merely follow their outward tracks back.

As persons, Matt Henson and the four polar Eskimos, Ootah, Ooqueah, Seegloo, and Egingwah certainly seem reasonable witnesses. In that day, as

Bartlett points out "the Eskimos never keep a secret." Peary, indeed, not being really fluent in their language (though Henson was) could not have organized them into some conspiracy of fraud even had he wanted to. The five of them were there; they can certainly tell us the essentials about Peary beyond Bartlett. For example, that during the five days April 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6 they travelled north, not some other direction. Henson himself, during close to thirteen thousand miles of sledge travel with Peary on all Peary's expeditions was every bit as familiar with the use of the compass—corrected from the sun at noon and at midnight for magnetic variation—as anyone.

Bartlett turns back at  $87^{\circ}47'$  on April 1st. Onto their five sledges the six of the polar party now take Bartlett's polar provisions of pemmican, fuel, etc. The same was done when the other support parties, Marvin, MacMillan, and Borup turned back—indeed this is what the support parties came out on the ice to do: keep the Peary polar party moving forward. Also Bartlett's return makes it possible to kill one of the dogs, splinter up the poorest sledge, and cook the dog meat with that to strengthen the four Eskimos. "It was a change for them from the pemmican diet. It was fresh meat, it was hot, and they seemed thoroughly to enjoy it." Peary says that though he had eaten raw dog meat in emergencies he did not participate this time.

The very low sun, constantly in the sky now rolling around the horizon, is *nine* solar diameters higher at noon in the south than when grazing the horizon at midnight to the north. South, where Bartlett and his Eskimos have disappeared on their return to land and safety: Ootah (Henson's closest friend), Ooqueah, Seegloo, and Egingwah (the youngest, on whose sledge Peary himself would ride) do notice. They know very well which direction is north, into increasing danger. Even at the 89th parallel the sun is still *four* solar diameters higher behind them at noon than at midnight before them. Beyond  $89^{\circ}$  the difference becomes so slight they cannot really tell, and Ootah becomes more interested in talking to Henson about the compass by which he and Peary are choosing course, sighting on distant pressure ridge features, from time to time.

On the last day, Henson with Ootah, instructed by Peary—who because of the increased speed has mostly been riding on Egingwah's sledge ever since Bartlett's return—goes the final estimated distance fast as he can, and stops. By the time Peary and Egingwah, slowed by Peary's weight in that sledge, pull up forty-five minutes later, Henson and Egingwah have a snow igloo almost finished (an hour is standard time for doing an igloo start to finish). "I think this is it," Henson says to Ootah, starting over to Peary, meaning that at least this is where Peary will be sure to make the last camp. If it's the Pole, Henson got there first; but there's no point about that. Peary says nothing but unpacks the sextant, and the artificial horizon box, turns it toward the sun, pours in the mercury, lies down in the snow. Satisfied for a first reading, he gets up and says to Henson: "Eighty Nine degrees, fifty-seven minutes." Back, the day before, he had got  $89^{\circ} 25'$ .

Then, according to Matt, Peary went into the now finished igloo and fell into exhausted sleep. All accounts agree they spent in total about 30 hours

around this camp. Peary, after a few hours of rest only, found according to his account, he could not sleep long; got up and then taking two Eskimos and a light sledge probed ten miles in one direction, and then in another, making altitude observations of the sun. He reports that in total he took "thirteen single, or six-and-one-half double [upper limb-lower limb], altitudes of the sun at two different stations, in three different directions, at four different times." For probable error on any one of these he estimates "an arbitrary allowance of about ten miles for possible errors of the instruments and myself as an observer" and as to all of them taken together "an allowance of five miles is an equitable one." For the considerable sledging back and forth between the observation spots, he makes a much closer claim—and this one propelled him into great controversy— . . . "no one, except the most ignorant, will have any doubt but what, at some time, I had passed close to the precise point, and had, perhaps actually passed over it." Very doubtful; and "most ignorant" surely arouses the doubters.

Henson, among whose many jobs the keeping of the sledges in repair was a very important detail at this point, never seemed to feel that Peary should have had him check all these sextant readings—which Henson could quite capably have done. To Henson at the time, what value would there have been in that? Or even to Peary: he had Borup, Marvin, MacMillan, and Bartlett for confirmation of latitude to within 133 nautical miles and Henson for the direction and short distance after that. Neither Henson nor Peary at the time had the slightest conception of the bitterness and intensity with which Peary was going to be attacked; and Matt was very busy with urgent sledge maintenance.

He did happen to be in on the last sextant reading. "Matt lay in the snow beside Peary writing down his readings as Peary called them off. At last Peary snapped shut the vernier, rested his eyes a moment, picked up the pad with Matt's figures, and finished his calculations."

The Eskimos had been astonished and quite let down, pleased though Henson and Peary obviously were, to have reached the goal they had so long been pursuing, that nothing tangible or even different was to be seen. "We have found what we hunt," Matt said to Ootah. Bewildered, Ootah stared. Finally he shrugged: "There is nothing here. Just ice, just ice!"

Returning to Peary, Matt found him lying on his, Matt's, sledge "utter exhaustion engraved on the man's face. Now that his goal had been reached, the energy with which he had driven himself . . . had suddenly abandoned him. Touching Peary's shoulder lightly, Matt held out his hand. 'Let me be the first to congratulate you, sir.' . . . Peary shook Matt's hand weakly and then lay back on the sledge. . . . 'Let us go home, Matt, let us go home.'" This is what Henson remembers.

Now began the wild flight for their lives, a furious retreat, led in effect by Henson; sledges light, everything except food and fuel thrown away. Peary in his fifties, much the oldest and most worn-out of them all, and with feet damaged beyond the possibility of keeping up at the now much higher speed over the well packed trail leading south, must ride on Henson's sledge.

Now it was Matt who would bang on the ice in the morning after a minimum of rest hours—whatever the actual time—to wake up and start the five sledges on another double-day south. In fact the first time going south Matt led them the full distance of the last *three* of their northward “marches”. No “day” really about that one, sun circling low, endlessly in the sky; Matt simply kept them on their feet, and the dogs going, until they got there: two empty igloos—and too much for one session on their feet without a ration of real rest. After that, double days only, resting in every other one of the empty igloos they had constructed on the way going north, sleeping in their fur clothes, racing desperately to get shore-ward of the “big lead” over the edge of the continental shelf below, where currents are most likely to open up large stretches of sea-water.

On and on, still they do not slacken the exhausting speed. Actually it was either do two stretches in one, or stop at one and a half and waste time building snow igloos.

As they approach the “big lead” area, fortunately a north wind is at their backs closing the lead, and they find it possible to cross by rafting over on ice-floes. Now their big worry is behind them, but still they keep up the relentless pace, their eyes beginning to strain to pick up the mountains behind Cape Columbia. At last they see mirages of these mountains which vanish. Suddenly the next day, there they are: white peaks unmistakably etched against the blue-gray sky! Still Henson continues the “impossible” pace, until they drag themselves into the empty igloos at Cape Columbia, “6 am, April 23:” sixteen days for something that can be called half a thousand statute miles.

In perspective, what do we see? That for the time, 1909, there could be no proof—short of a separate party such as Scott’s confirming of Amundsen—for having reached any point in the Arctic Ocean out of sight of photographically identifiable land. From the primary evidence—and rejecting carefully examined but unreliable assertions from secondary sources—it appears that our Honorary Member R.E. Peary may indeed reasonably be regarded as the “discoverer” of the North Pole in the sense of having reached within five or ten nautical miles of 90° North. From the top of ocean pressure ridges which he did reach, had there been land at the North Pole, then unknown, it would have been visible. Despite assertions to the contrary, there was in fact adequate witnessing for his attainment of this location. The unnecessary parading of flags of narrow special interest groups at an historic moment, was a great waste of valuable limited time, and stirred much understandable resentment against Peary. No real evidence of HOAX or fraud can be found in the primary accounts of the expedition, and the primary accounts are adequate to reveal any of consequence had such been present. In our society where the presumption of innocence is accepted unless proof of guilt is shown, the featuring of a photograph of Peary’s party over the word HOAX—in our opinion—verges on the irresponsible.

*Literature References.* The enormous volume of literature references on our subject is daunting. Rawlins’ admirable list offers some 235! But published in

1973 it could not include the very important 1979 article in the *Polar Record* quoted at length earlier here.

Much the most important other literature reference, not mentioned at all in *Great Exploration Hoaxes'* list of seven, is *Dark Companion, The Story of Matthew Henson*, by Bradley Robinson, New York, 1967, Fawcett (publisher), first copyright 1947 by Robert M. McBride Co. This is primary material for me because of my nearly twenty year friendship with Matt Henson, who consistently to Capt. Bob Bartlett and others, in my presence, in the nineteen-thirties outspokenly repudiated the many "interviews" and articles over his name which had outrageously been published during the early Cook-Peary controversy for the purpose of attacking Peary. Finally at Vilhjalmur Stefansson's suggestion Henson sat down with his close friend Bradley Robinson and the result, introduced by Stef himself, is *Dark Companion*. Matt afterward always confirmed that everything in it definitely was his as if he himself had personally written it. Everything of interest I remember which Matt told me, I have put in quotes and is confirmed in *Dark Companion*.

*The North Pole*, by Robert E. Peary, New York, 1910 Stokes, publisher, is not accepted by Peary's critics, presumably because there was a "ghost" assistant. But I can find no slightest deviation between its presentation and what Bartlett, MacMillan, and Henson personally related to me. And regardless of whatever effect the "ghost" may or may not have had upon the text, the many excellent and very informative photographs of the Peary sledges in operation during the course of the expedition cannot remotely have been touched up, and are well worth careful study.

The final essential reference, for any reader further pursuing this subject, is the 1934 personal letter from Peter Freuchen to Vilhjalmur Stefansson, describing at length Freuchen's frequent accounts in Eskimo from the four who accompanied Peary and Henson after Bartlett's return. Freuchen was a North Greenlander who lived in the Smith Sound area in his youth, and was fluent from his earliest youth in the Eskimo language. This letter appears to be the *only* available account direct from the four polar Eskimos. It fully confirms the Peary-Henson-Bartlett version of events: *To Stand At The Pole*, by Dr. Wm. R. Hunt (University of Alaska history professor), New York, 1981 Stein & Day, p. 259-266.

### **Answer to Terris Moore Article**

DAVID ROBERTS

Terris Moore was and is one of my climbing heroes, and I've also been proud to count him a friend since 1979, when he kindly gave me a lot of his time while I was researching an article on the Harvard climbers of the 1930s. It is, therefore, doubly daunting to find one's published work subjected to such a sharp critique by a great and good man who is also one of the pioneers of Arctic navigation. To many in the AAC, the debate over Peary may seem arcane and technical; but to those who care, the controversy stirs the blood

almost as much as it did in 1909. I wonder, then, whether Moore's unstinting loyalty to Matthew Henson—who was *his* hero and friend—has not helped persuade Terris that Peary's critics have a thin case.

Three points, in brief:

(1). The debate about steering and observations of latitude and longitude is extremely knotty, and Moore knows far more about this business than I do. His comments here amount to the only substantive rebuttal in print to Dennis Rawlins' detailed attack in *Peary at the North Pole: Fact or Fiction?*—a book that convinced me. The interested student should read Rawlins, then Moore's rejoinder. However, the argument about navigational method seems far less important to me than Peary's admission before a Congressional subcommittee that he made *no* observations between his last camp with Bartlett (87°47' N.), and the Pole, combined with the fact that Henson did not independently verify Peary's reading that gave a supposed latitude of 89°57' N. on April 6.

(2). The distances for daily travel required beyond 87°47' still seem to me utterly improbable. Having averaged only 9.3 miles per day up to that point, Peary must have averaged 26 miles a day to get to the Pole, then an astounding 59 miles a day back to 87°47'. Moore cites the daily records of mushers in recent runnings of the Iditarod Race. These are not comparable, I think, because in the Iditarod the racers have pre-cached food, use each other's tracks, have modern sledges and extra dogs, and follow a well-known marked trail. Peary was *riding* his sledge and traveling over unknown pack ice, with worn-out dogs.

(3). Moore thinks that if Peary pulled off a hoax, then logically Henson must have been in on it, and finds condescending my suggestion (and Rawlins') that Henson could have been duped by Peary. I never meant to suggest that Henson or the Eskimos were in on Peary's hoax. It is interesting to learn from Moore that Bradley Robinson's *Dark Companion* represents, as it were, Henson's authorized version of the story. That book makes no claims as to daily sledging distances, except to note casually that the last 133 miles to the Pole were covered in five days. As for the Eskimos, Henson (through Robinson) relates that on April 5, "Only the Eskimos slept, and theirs was the blissful sleep of exhausted, innocent children. Geographically ignorant of the world's form, they never could comprehend what matter of madness brought their two civilized friends to this desolate, fearful place. And so they slept, completely unaware that the white man and Negro whom they called brother were soon to make a great discovery. . . ." And speaking of condescension, Peary claimed that Henson, while a great sledger when directed by his leader, "had not, as a racial inheritance, the daring and initiative of Bartlett, or . . . MacMillan, or Borup."

I believe, as Terris Moore does, that an explorer should be innocent until proven guilty. Both he and I have had the truth of our own ascents questioned by others who were not there. I'm still convinced, however, that there are too many holes in Peary's story to be compatible with his arrival at the Pole. I invite those who wish to form their own conclusions to look at Rawlins' and my books and then to reread Moore's rebuttal.