

The First to the North Pole: Cook? Peary? Byrd? Amundson?

Name-calling, politicking, vested interests, biased opinions, etc. How can one even approach the truth? Only with an effort to present the established facts ... and only the facts. This is such an attempt.

Criticism of the following lists can be based upon only the veracity of the fact. Conclusions drawn from these lists have no place here.

The Facts about Peary

1. Peary's polar party left base camp on Feb. 22, 1909 and traveled up to "Camp Bartlett": Latitude 87 degrees, 47 minutes; i.e., 133 nautical miles (153 statute miles) from the pole. To Bartlett's utter dismay, on Apr. 1, Peary sent him and all the others back, except for Matt Henson and four eskimos. This party of six then headed toward the North Pole and were not seen again until they returned to base camp on Apr. 27. Peary later claimed that the party had reached the pole on Apr. 6 and had stayed through Apr. 8 before starting south.
2. The average speed of the full party from the base camp up to Camp Bartlett was 13 nm/day. After Bartlett and the others had been sent back, Peary's remaining party of six would have had to double that speed - to an average over 26 nm/day, in order to reach the pole in the time claimed (eating small rations, battling the cold, and negotiating the jumbled and treacherous pack-ice). On the return trip from the pole to Camp Bartlett, the speed would have had to double again: an average of over 50 miles/day!!! Then, from Camp Bartlett back to base camp, retracing a route whose distances and positions were firmly established, the average speed was suddenly again 13 miles/day.
3. Peary criticized Cook for his reported speed of 24 miles/day, saying that such progress was impossible in the arctic.
4. During the following year when the navy tested Peary's ability to walk in a mild climate, on flat roads, hauling no sledges, eating full meals, and sleeping in soft beds, it took Peary 3 days to go 55 miles (Years before, nine of Peary's ten toes had been amputated due to frostbite).
5. For many years, Peary repeatedly claimed that: ~"Longitude observations are absolutely necessary when navigating in the polar regions." Experience had shown that when traveling only 100 miles without positional measurements, a typical error in position would be on the order of 50 miles. On his dash northward from Camp Bartlett, however, Peary made no observations at all, yet he claimed to have arrived within a 5-6 miles of the pole.
6. On previous explorations, Peary would draw maps with his observed compass variations amply included. In 1909, he criticized Cook for not having provided such information on Cook's supposed polar journey. However, for Peary's own "polar" journey, he failed to provide any himself, yet gave no reason for this.
7. Before taking solar sights at Camp Jesup (purportedly, the Pole), Peary always was friendly and outgoing toward Henson; he always shared his observations with Henson, who recorded them in his own (Henson's) diary - in order to insure their survival. This all

changed abruptly on April 6: Peary went off by himself, took some observations (sun sights), and then returned, according to Henson, silent, glum, morose. Nothing to the effect that “we did it!”; no “hooray!”; no “success!”. He barely spoke to Henson after that time, and he certainly did not share his observations with him.

8. The pages in Peary’s diary for Apr. 6-8 were blank. Instead, when he eventually submitted the diary for examination, there were loose slips of paper inserted into the appropriate spot.
9. Polar diaries are universally black and greasy. In those times, polar travelers ate pemmican (ground meat in animal fat) using their fingers; and, they had no way of washing their hands. Peary’s diary was nearly spotless - no grease marks, no smudges.
10. The photos that Peary later submitted were hazy and of poor quality; only one contained any positional information at all, and that had a large amount of uncertainty - contrary to claims by many, including the National Geographic Society, no less. Peary later “borrowed” Henson’s photos, ones which possibly could contain contrary positional information. Peary never returned those photos, despite repeated requests for them by Henson. They have not been seen since. (See the notes.)
11. The cover of Peary’s diary had blanks in its title which were to be filled in subsequent to the entry of the diary’s contents. The blanks were for the objective achieved, the beginning date, and the ending date. Both dates had been filled in; the space for the objective was still blank: “No. 1 Roosevelt to _____ & return, *Feb.22 to Apr.* [28 crossed out] 27, R.E. Peary, U.S.N.” (See the notes.)
12. Peary: “You must understand that there is no riding in sledges when you go hunting the pole ... One must be sound of wind and limb, ...”. Henson: ~“Peary had to be sledged most of the way.”
13. Peary delayed the submission of his “proofs” for over a year. He claimed that he was prevented from doing so because of a prior agreement with his publishers ... even after his book had been published!
14. Peary hired H.C.Mitchell to “check” on his observations (measurements of the sun’s altitude above the horizon). Mitchell would not admit to the investigating subcommittee that such observations are easy to fabricate. In fact, it is easier to fabricate such an observation, given the time and location, than it is to determine the location, given the time and the observation. Also, Mitchell never mentioned to the subcommittee that he had been hired by Peary months before.
15. The National Geographic Society funded Peary. They took him at his word; they never examined closely his supporting evidence.
16. The NGS never questioned Henson.
17. Peary: “I am the only white man to have ever reached the Pole.”

18. Peary made a statement to the effect that he chose Henson and the eskimos and sent Bartlett back because he wanted to be the only white man to reach the pole. Peary supporters call anyone who doesn't support Peary "racists".
19. Peary was driven from an early age to achieve fame and glory for himself. He considered that the eskimos and Greenland were his and had been put there for his exclusive benefit.
20. When asked to submit his "proofs" to the Danes, Peary tried to have a statement published saying that the Danes did not want to see his proofs.
21. In response to the question, "Did you have success [in reaching the Pole]?", Peary gave the following ambiguous statement: "I can't say that I didn't."
22. Peary claimed that the eskimos accompanying him would "walk through hell if he asked them to do so" and that the eskimos and Henson were "as loyal and responsive to my will as the fingers of my right hand."

Appendix/Notes

[10] From a single such photograph, one can not determine a position; only, at best, a rough measure of the sun's altitude above the horizon which, in turn, gives a crude line of position. It requires at least two photos, taken hours apart, in order to provide intersecting lines of position, and thus, a crude location determination. On the other hand, it *is* possible for a photograph to *disprove* a position. E.g., on April 6, 1909, the sun was between 6 and 7 degrees above the horizon as seen from the north pole. But, the sun's elevation goes between 6 and 7 degrees *twice on that date anywhere on the earth* north of 76 degrees south latitude. However, a photo indicating the sun at 10 degrees, for instance, would *not* be possible from the pole on that date.

[11] Who would not have immediately entered "North Pole" into the title blank - even before entering the dates? Someone who was considering whether or not to make such a claim.

[17] The reason for sending Bartlett back and not Henson?

[20] Does this mean, "I can't bring myself to admit that I didn't have success."? or does it mean, "I was successful.", in which case, wouldn't he have answered just "Yes; I did have success."?