

Polar Expeditions

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Entertainment

Midnight Facts for Insomniacs

Podcast Transcript

(Note: transcript consists of episode outline)

The North Pole has been called, “the top of the world” even though it isn’t. The world has no top. There’s no logical reason that the *South Pole* couldn’t be “the top of the world” except for the inherent bias of map makers. I find this really fascinating, and first learned about it in a West Wing episode. In a Eurocentric world view, up has always been associated with good, while down is bad. Thumbs up vs thumbs down. Heaven is up, hell is down. So the maps we use today were created by Europeans with Europe on the top half. And if you start at Europe and keep going further “up” you would eventually land on the most extreme so-called up of all, 90 degrees latitude. Though landing on the North Pole is not as easy as it sounds. Because the north pole isn’t located on a land mass, or any type of solid ground. It’s smack in the middle of the arctic ocean, covered by shifting ice floes—giant sheets of ice 6

to 10 feet in thickness, that are constantly in motion and in various states of solidity—making it impossible to create any type of dwelling or permanent base on the north pole. Sorry, Santa Claus. If Santa lived at the north pole, he'd be in a lot better shape, constantly jogging back to 90° and building a new house every six hours. and also sorry to the polar explorers who were racing to be the first to stand at the so-called top of the world, because the world did not make it easy. That story is pretty epic, and we'll get to it in a minute, but first let's cover some basics about the north and south poles. We'll start with the north pole, and we're talking about the true north pole, not the magnetic port the pole. The magnetic north pole is where your compass points when you're headed north. It's *near* the north pole, but it shifts over time with the movement of the earth's magnetic field. The true north pole, on the other hand, is always in the same spot. It's located at exactly 90° latitude. If you poked a giant stick—or Pole—through the earth exactly in line with the earth's axis, the stick would enter the earth at the north pole and exit at the south. And probably impale a few penguins, but only at the south pole. Beneath the constantly shifting ice of the North Pole, the water is 13,400 feet deep. The closest inhabited location is 600 miles away in northern Canada, a military installation called Alert, founded for the purpose of intercepting wireless transmissions. There are a total of 60 residents of

Alert. 60 bitter, regretful, reevaluating-their-lives residents. Alert, BTW, is the northernmost continuously inhabited location on earth. And because there are no permanent settlements any further north, the north pole doesn't have an official time zone. If you were standing at the North Pole—or kind of dog paddling around in a pool of frigid water depending on the time of year—you could pick your time zone. You get to choose the exact time of day that you freeze to death.

We've talked before about the tilt of the earth, how the seasons are created by the earth tilting on its axis so that for half the year the northern hemisphere gets more sun, and half the year the southern hemisphere gets more sun. If you're having trouble visualizing this, it helps to imagine or even act this out by holding a globe next to a lightbulb. I used to do this for my students when I was a substitute teacher to help them conceptualize the seasons. Turn off the lights, turn on the light bulb, and hold the globe about a foot away. then tilt it forward 23 degrees, which is the maximum tilt of the earth. The top of the globe—in our Eurocentric worldview the “north pole”—will be fully illuminated. If you have a friend to help, you can also slowly spin the globe to simulate the passage of days, and watch how different areas of the globe experience varying amounts and durations of sunlight based on the earth's tilt. And if DOZ you have a friend who's willing to do this with you, congratulations, because you are two awesome

weirdos. So next, tilt the globe in the same distance the other direction and the North Pole will be completely dark. And that's how you'd experience seasons and days at the extreme ends of the earth. Technically, you only get one full day per year at the North and south poles...the sun rises and sets only once—it's just a looong ass day. If you're at the North Pole in the summer, the sun moves above you but it never sets, it just traces a lazy little circular arc in the sky. Over the course of months, that arc starts to move toward the horizon, and eventually dips down into darkness, and it'll be six months until you see the sun again. But keep in mind, that doesn't mean that the north pole and the South Poles are plunged into utter darkness six months of the year. Only at the very extreme limits of the earth's tilt is all of the light extinguished. That's about 11 weeks out of the year. The rest of the time there is a horizon glow that creates "Nautical twilight," which is what you get when you put a bunch of sparkly teenage vampires on a boat. No, that's what you get when the sun has disappeared but you can still make out the horizon line. Nautical twilight ends November 13, and then the north pole experiences true polar darkness until approximately January 29th.

We briefly mentioned Santa Claus, and obviously we have to talk *that* fat, hairy bastard. Prior to the 1850s Santa Claus was just a Saint; he wasn't rotund and bearded, nor was he such a poor judge of real estate that he

would choose to build on shifting sea ice. Creating the mythological figure of pudgy, bearded, jolly Saint Nick was the work of a famous Civil war cartoonist named Thomas Nast.

"Thomas Nast began depicting the saintly character as we know him today: fat, jolly, and with a sack full of toys. Because a flurry of American and European expeditions to the Arctic captured the world's imagination around the same period, Nast selected the fabled location for Santa's permanent home." It's kind of amazing to me that Santa Claus has only been the Santa Claus we know since the Civil War. Abraham Lincoln and George Washington and Benjamin Franklin didn't grow up with our version of Santa Claus.

One more random fact about the North Pole:

On August 2, 2007, Vladimir Putin tried to get around the whole shifting-sea-ice conundrum by planting a flag on the ocean floor at 90 degrees latitude. "The submarines planted a 3-foot Russian flag made of corrosion-resistant titanium, staking its claim to what is believed to be almost a quarter of the Earth's oil and gas reserves underneath. Russia argued that the North Pole is merely an extension of the Lomonosov Ridge, an underwater chain of hills extending from the Russian mainland, and therefore Russian territory." The entire rest of the world disagrees. The world was

collectively like, nah.

Ok, I promised you and the insomniacs that we'd cover the tragic history of Polar exploration, and this is my favorite part, so let's get to it. I know you're eager for that sweet, sweet tragedy. The history of polar exploration is an awful, tangled narrative littered with death, misery, folly, and ponies. That's a real thing. We're going to start again with the north pole, because that was the first Frontier of polar exploration. Initially the flurry of northern voyages were inspired by a search for the so-called northwest passage: a shortcut from Europe to the riches and spices of the exotic orient, which is a term only grandpas are allowed to use. Not even allowed, you just can't stop them. That is a term that was common during the era of polar exploration, but I would avoid it. Try calling calling your asian friends "exotic orientals," and you will soon not have a fat lip and zero asian friends. So during the renaissance and the age of enlightenment, enlightened Europeans wanted to plunder the hell out of Asia, and they wanted to do it with the least amount of inconvenience to themselves. Nothing worse than an inconvenient plunder. The biggest obstacle to successfully plundering Asia was the hassle of actually having to go all the way to Asia. Europeans wanted a shortcut to plundering. They launched a flurry of expeditions—not a slurry of expeditions, which we learned last

week is the name for candy corn batter—a *flurry* of slightly less delicious expeditions by sea to find a direct route to the far east. The problem was that if you're trying to travel to Asia from Western Europe in an Easterly direction, there's a teeny tiny obstacle, and this obstacle is known as the entire goddam United States of America. If you try to skirt America by going south, you have to travel all the way down past the tip of South America, down by Antarctica, and you're pretty much as far away from your destination as you can get, it's an incredibly long voyage. So the alternative was to go north; the northwest passage was a theorized sea route that would allow a ship to avoid America by hopping over it entirely. The British were particularly keen to find this route, because any products trafficked to England from Asia by land had the furthest distance to travel, because England is on the far western end of Europe. Which meant that brits were paying the highest prices for spices. No bueno. So the British royalty had a problem. They were like "Hey, cinnamon is getting a bit pricey, let's send thousands of brave explorers to their icy deaths and see if we can't shave a few cents off of afternoon tea" Seems like a drastic solution but If I were paying like \$1000 for an ounce of pepper or whatever, I'd be like, get me a ship! I'm going to pop over the Arctic Ocean and have a word with these Asians. I'd like to talk to a manager.

By the mid-1800s an icebound route HAD been discovered, so you could technically pilot a ship up to the shifting ice floes in the north, hop on to the ice with a sled and some dogs, and cruise over Greenland and America, reach the east Siberian sea, and then I guess swim to Asia? Build a boat out of ice? This was less of a northwest passage and more of an overly complicated suicide method. Unless you were Robert McClure, the luckiest unlucky guy in history. McClure actually discovered and navigated this ice-locked Northwest passage completely by accident. He had sailed his ship the HMS Investigator into The Arctic Ocean through the Bering strait, supposedly seeking a previous expedition that had disappeared— that of Sir John Franklin of the HMS Erebus and the notorious and accurately named HMS Terror—but mostly it seems that McClure was just trying to find the passage himself. "The voyage was one of the most physically and mentally arduous journeys ever undertaken, pushing some men into the realm of insanity." So McClure was attempting to navigate the Northwest passage by starting in the west, traveling from the Pacific Ocean up through the Bering strait and continuing east. Eventually the HMS Investigator investigated a narrow wedge of ice. It probably should have abandoned the investigation at that point or at least utilized a tape measure in the investigation, to determine the width of the ship and compare it to the

rapidly narrowing ice wedge. My point is, the ship got stuck. "Captain, we have investigated this ice wedge and found it insufficient for forward progress. Also for backward progress or any kind of progress that doesn't involve stationary progress. If that's a thing. There's going to be no progress unless you count progressive starvation. Investigation over. Now we wait to die." Three years. They waited for three years, with half of those years passing in darkness and half completely in unyielding daylight. That is a harrowing experience. "Eventually the crew from another Navy ship, [the HMS Resolute] found the Investigator with its crew suffering from the cold, darkness, starvation, scurvy, boredom, depression and madness." The HMS Resolute had approached from the east, and McClure's party would sled across the ice with them to their ship, which meant that Robert McClure's party was the first to circumnavigate the Americas and successfully traverse a northwest passage. A completely useless northwest passage, but still. The HMS Investigator, BTW, was discovered in 2010 and is relatively intact, kind of wedged under the ice. Inuit people had known about it for years and had been occasionally removing nails and other useful implements. They were like thanks, Europeans, for being simultaneously talented at shipbuilding and horribly inept at navigating the elements. Feel free to deliver more building materials and starve to death in our land.

One degree of latitude btw is 60 nautical miles. I don't know why I included that tidbit of information right here in the middle of the narrative, but ok. Midnight fact.

Over the years the motivation for seeking the north pole shifted from practical to more symbolic. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that the race to the north pole in many ways mirrored the race to the moon that would occur almost a century later. The north pole was considered one of the final frontiers; reaching it would be a point of national pride and result in fame and riches. The British, Americans, and Norwegians in particular were racing to conquer the polar regions. And the final result would be a contentious almost simultaneous declaration of victory by two men who had once been friends and would become bitter rivals, and the resulting firestorm of controversy still rages to this very day.

But before we get to them, a few notable disasters that occurred in the lead-up to the conquering of the pole. The pole did some conquering of its own. That's what she said. Ok.

The most notorious of failed polar expeditions was the previously mentioned Lost Franklin expedition of 1845. the mysterious disappearance of the entire 129 person crew of the ships HMS Erebus and HMS Terror—later determined to have been death

by ice-locked starvation (not super mysterious)—captivated the world, and would launch dozens of rescue missions and salvage crews, many of whom would suffer similar fates. Case in point:

Charles Francis Hall, who would lead multiple expeditions searching for the Franklin party, was poisoned by his own crew after sailing into “thank god harbor.” That is true. A lot to unpack there, and we’re not going to unpack it. The guy was a jerk and the poison was arsenic. Case closed.

Military veteran George W DeLong’s ship the USS Jeannette was crushed by shifting ice in the East Siberian sea and DeLong died of starvation after abandoning ship.

Swedish scientist Salomon August Andrée attempted to reach the pole in a hydrogen balloon, which sailed aimlessly for 65 hours, buffered by arctic winds, and upon landing, all three members of the expedition perished.

So those were some casualties, but not everyone who challenged the pole lost his life. Some just lost a few appendages. The most complicated and fascinating character in this tale is Robert Peary, who dedicated the bulk of his life to the endeavor and may have actually accomplished his goal, but not without alienating his closest friends and losing eighty percent of

his toes. It would take three tries. When I say he was complicated and problematic, I mean it. He had a deep respect for the Inuit people, which would ultimately lead to his success. Unlike the explorers who came before him, many of whom had ignored and/or actively disparaged and spurned the techniques and technology of native people, Peary embraced their innovations from dressing in furs to building igloos. He employed Inuit people to guide his expeditions, and he also relied on an African-American man named Matthew Henson who had become an expert in Inuit language and culture, and is believed to have actually reach the North Pole earlier than Peary due to the fact that he was in the lead during the expedition. But Peary would never share the credit, he would never acknowledge the contribution of anyone other than himself, in fact he would spurn Matthew Henson later in life, and even pointedly refused to shake his hand when Matthew offered congratulations at the moment of their supposed success. He was a real piece of shit, but an extremely driven, motivated, and accomplished piece of shit. But whether one of his accomplishments includes actually reaching the north pole is debatable. As previously established, it was his third time that was supposedly the charm. Over two failed attempts, he had refined his technique, sending advance parties to build igloos and leave caches of food, so that his dogsledding team of Matthew Henson and four Inuit men

could travel as lightly as possible. Notably, he engineered the end of the mission so that all of the other educated explorers turned back before the final leg of the journey, which meant that Peary would be the only man who was actually able to crunch the numbers and calculate whether he had officially reached the pole. Just throwing that out there. It's a little suspicious. He also claimed to have covered a vast swath of territory on that final leg of the journey in an incredibly short amount of time, supposedly moving many times faster in the final stretch than any previous pace he had achieved. So yeah, we only have his word for it that reached the pole, some of the circumstances are suspicious, and experts are conflicted as to whether he achieved his goal. Regardless, he declared that he had reached the north pole, and America took his word for it at the time, because...well, he was American. But his dubious claim to be the first man to reach the North Pole would quickly be challenged, not on scientific grounds, but based on timing and precedence. Upon returning to civilization Peary learned that a physician named Frederick a Cook, who had been a surgeon on a previous voyage to Greenland with Peary and Henson, had recently returned from the north and was claiming to have reached the pole on April 21, 1908, almost a full year before Peary's supposed accomplishment. Cooke is a nuanced character, he seems to have been just

a downright nicer guy than Peary, he was friendly to the Inuit and respected by his various crews, and he is also generally believed to have been either a liar or an idiot who definitely did not reach the north pole. Though his claim was taken seriously through much of the 20th century, it would eventually be pretty much thoroughly debunked by the National Geographic Society, and this was around the same time that he was indicted in a scheme to promote a fraudulent oil company. He had also claimed to reach the summit of Mount Denali, aka Alaska's Mount McKinley, another unlikely boast, which was similarly discredited. So a friendly, shady individual who did not set foot on 90 degrees latitude.

Ultimately there's a good chance that neither man actually was first to the pole. And in that case, the first man to make it to the north pole would be the same man who first made it to the south.

Polar bear liver is poisonous because of vitamin A.

Norwegian explorer Roald Amundson had originally been involved with the race for the north pole, which was considered the premier prize for explorers of the 19th and early 20th centuries. He had planned to use an innovative ship named the Fram, taking his cues from earlier explorers like Fridtjof Nansen who employed a controversial strategy: noticing that the arctic ice tended to drift in a steady east-west direction, Nansen

had constructed the Fram as a specialty ship with the ability to house and shelter an exploration party for three years. The plan was to intentionally embed the ship in an ice floe, which would allow the ocean current to slowly move the ship over the north pole. The ship even featured a windmill for power generation, so that electrical lights could occasionally be used during the long and dark polar winter. Imagine hunkering down in this ship for three years, locked in ice, the wood hull creaking, northern lights flickering in the sky, just a tiny bejeweled wooden boat embedded in a vast white sheet of unbroken ice, imagine spending six months at a time in twilight darkness under blazing stars and then six months in the relentless arctic sun. It must've been incredibly dramatic. And boring as shit. The majesty of the ambience fades pretty quickly. "Nansen expressed his frustration in his journal: "I feel I *must* break through this deadness, this inertia, and find some outlet for my energies." And later: "Can't something happen? Could not a hurricane come and tear up this ice?" When you're praying for a hurricane out of sheer boredom, that's rock-bottom. "I would prefer to be torn apart than sit next to Jim's sweaty ass for another two years. If you tell that story about the fucking sled-dog that bit you on the dick one more time, so help me god, I will toss you over this windmill."

Unfortunately, it gradually became clear that the ice was moving far too slowly, only about a mile a day at its

peak, and also wouldn't take them directly over the pole. Eventually the crew attempted a number of mad dashes for the goal using sleds, and while they did set a new record for highest latitude, besting 86 degrees north, never achieved the required 90°.

Amundson, however, felt that he could do better, but he never had the chance to try. Because before he could accomplish or even attempt this feat, Peary and Cook announced their competing claims to the North Pole, and so Amundson shifted his sights southward.

The race to the south pole would end up being a decisive victory for Amundson. I'm not going to try to build any suspense here, he was a veteran explorer with a legitimate strategy. His competition... Less so. Let's compare and contrast the Norwegian expedition of Amundson with its nemesis, the British party of Robert falcon Scott. Amundson was a master dogsledder and skier who packed lightly but efficiently, bringing sealskin garments, and highly trained, powerful sled dogs. Scott packed massive cases of cigars, man-hauled sledges that the men would pull themselves, a few ornery sled dogs, heavy wool clothing, opium pills, and 19 Manchurian ponies. I told you I wasn't kidding. It wasn't a winning strategy. As you might imagine, bringing ponies was a particularly ill-conceived idea. "Given their weight

and thin legs, the ponies would plunge through the top layer of snow; homemade snowshoes worked only on some of them. On one journey, a pony fell and the dogs pounced, ripping at its flesh." Classic vicious-dog and wounded-pony show. And it gets much, much worse. Two of the ponies were killed in a storm on the trip from New Zealand to Antarctica. Two more died during a subsequent blizzard. The rest...were eaten by killer whales. No joke. In March 1911, the men woke one night to a loud cracking sound. The ice had split, and the ponies were beginning to drift away. The men leapt back-and-forth over the ice floes, trying to usher the ponies to safety, but a pack of orcas began circling the frozen platform. Some of the ponies, spooked, bolted and toppled into the icy water. Eventually the men, realizing that the situation was futile, took a pickax to the surviving ponies, so that they at least wouldn't be consumed alive. Remember when I said it gets worse? So it was pretty much a frigid dystopian pony-nightmare. So I feel like we've provided a pretty good encapsulation of how Scott's expedition started, and if you could believe it, it would go downhill from there. He and his men *would* eventually reach the pole. And when they did, they would find a note pinned to a tent, along with some supplies. The note was from Ronald Amundson, who had arrived weeks earlier due to his superior planning and general lack of ponies. The note was a masterclass in passive aggressive shade-throwing.

"Dear captain Scott, as you probably are the first to reach this area *after us*, I will ask you kindly to forward this letter to King Haakon the seventh [of Norway]. If you can use any of the supplies left in the tent please do not hesitate to do so. I wish you a safe return. Yours truly."

Ouch.

Scott's expedition was subsequently caught in a vicious blizzard—even worse weather than *standard* awful Antarctic weather—and the entire party would perish, trapped only 11 miles from safety. A good dog sled would have knocked that out in like an hour, but when you're hauling your own sledge through a blizzard, different equation.

Back to Amundson. I mentioned that the claims of the first men to supposedly reach the North Pole have been either discredited or are the very least controversial, so it turns out that Roald Amundsen may have been the first man to reach both extremes of the earth's axis. On May 12, 1926, Amundson and an international crew were the first verified visitors at the north pole when they flew over it in a dirigible piloted by Italian airship designer and pilot Umberto Nobile, and financed by American adventurer Lincoln Ellsworth. The international crew dropped the American, Norwegian, and Italian flags as they passed over the north pole, and then zoomed quickly away, bickering about the fact that the Italian flag had been

larger than the others. That's a real thing. And then of course within a few hours those flags were no longer at the north pole because ice floes. So... pointless. But the crew did have the technology to verify their position by that point, so Amundsen can solidly claim to be the most accomplished polar explorer in history. However, even *he* wouldn't escape the curse of the poles. In June 1928 he disappeared while flying a rescue mission in the Arctic, trying to save the stranded crew of the airship *Italia*—apparently he had gotten over his beef with the Italians and their giant flags at that point—but the rescue mission wouldn't work out for anyone involved. Don't know if they sent a rescue mission for the rescue mission, but no one was rescued and everyone died. And on that note...

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