

Why the claims that Amundsen's lead dog to the South Pole in 1912 was a Samoyed (perhaps named Etah) cannot possibly be true

By George H. Johnson

This article will take up these contentions in two parts:

- 1) The claim that Samoyeds were used on the 1910–1912 Antarctic expedition, including Amundsen's lead dog; and
- 2) That this leader was named Etah.

Who makes these claims, and based on what evidence? A search of the Internet reveals a large number of Samoyed-centered and other websites that do so, probably more than those that don't. Set a search engine to "Amundsen Samoyed" (don't use quotation marks) and see for yourself. You can do the same for "Amundsen Etah" and get a similarly large number of websites (with some overlap).

The Source of the claim

The claim that one or more Samoyeds went to the South Pole with Amundsen is based on just one source, in three editions, *The Complete Samoyed* (1971), *The New Complete Samoyed* (1985) by Robert and Dolly Ward, and *The New Samoyed* (1997) by Robert and Dolly Ward and Mardee Ward-Fanning. Other books of the same type as the Wards', and the websites, simply cite one of the Wards' books, sometimes with, sometimes without, a page number for reference. (1)

It doesn't matter, however, if the Wards' books' page numbers are cited or not. The fact is, the Wards' books themselves cite no source, and thus no page numbers, from Amundsen's accounts (or any other), making their claims impossible to verify by looking up pages. Thus, those who wish to determine the accuracy of this claim have no recourse but to search Amundsen's accounts and others for evidence of this claim.

The evidence from Amundsen himself

Such a search turns up no evidence whatever of Samoyeds or a dog named Etah. Helen Smith, who like this author has made such a search, writes:

"Dogs are mentioned as coming from Greenland." . . . "Dogs who definitely were on the South Pole trip and returned are: Suggen, Arne, Colonel, Mylius, Ring. Other dogs mentioned by name include Bjorn, Bone, Brun, Camilla, Else, Fix, Frighjof, Fuchs, Funcho, Gorki, Hai, Hans, Helge, Hok, Jaala, Jakob, Jens, Jeppe, Karenius, Knaegten, Kvaen, Lap, Lassesen, Lucy, Lurven, Madeiro, Major, Mas-Mas, Mikkell, Neptune, Nigger, Odin, Ola,

Pan, Peary, Per, Puss, Rap, Rasmus, Ravn, Rex, Rotta, Sara, Sauen, Schwartz, Snappesen, Svarten, Svartflekken, Thor, Togo, Tom, Ulrik, Uranus, Uroa, Vulcan, Zanko.”(2)

Smith’s findings match those of Tronstad and Scampos of the Norwegian-U.S. Scientific Traverse of East Antarctic (sponsored by the Norwegian Polar Institute and U.S. National Science Foundation), which concluded:

“Some current sources on the Internet claim that a Samoyed dog named ‘Etah’ was the first on the Pole. However, there is nothing to support this claim in Amundsen’s own accounts, nor in any other available Norwegian sources. No dog by that name is mentioned in the texts. We can also establish that the dog in question was not a Samoyed. All of Amundsen’s dogs were Greenland dogs, supplied by the Danish inspector for Northern Greenland, Jens Daugaard-Jensen.” (3)

Helen Smith has compiled a highly useful bibliography of Samoyed history that includes the South Pole expeditions, with her own summaries of the books’ contents as well as where they can be obtained, whether books or websites. Included in this compilation are the important accounts of Amundsen as well as his comrades on the expedition, which all support the findings that Greenland dogs were used, and mention no Samoyeds or Etah.(4)

It is also clear from these sources, as well as from Amundsen’s account, that he and other expeditionists held these dogs in high regard, and considered them vital to their success. Amundsen wrote:

“There can hardly be an animal that is capable of expressing its feelings to the same extent as the dog. Joy, sorrow, gratitude, scruples of conscience, are all reflected as plainly as could be desired in his behavior, and above all in his eyes.”(5)

These works are full of such praise for their dogs, and make much mention of them by name, including Amundsen’s favorites, Fix and Lassesen (Lasse). The Norwegian-U.S. Scientific Traverse study reported,

“Lasse is a nickname for Lars, and this Lasse was again nicknamed Lassesen. He was Roald Amundsen’s favourite dog on the expedition to the South Pole, and one of the 17 dogs to take part in the final push across the high plateau and reach the Pole. Lasse was a Greenland Dog and quite a character. He earned Amundsen’s respect from the very beginning, as writes Amundsen:

““But I can tell you that when I had to pass Lasse, I always judged the distance first. As a rule, he just stood looking down at the deck—exactly like a mad bull. (...) A fortnight passed in this way. Then at last the upper lip sank and the head was raised a little, as though he wanted to see who it was that brought him food and water every day. But the way from that to friendship was long and tortuous. (...) I came a little nearer to him every

day, until one day I risked my hand. He gave me an ugly look, but did nothing; and then came the beginning of our friendship. Day by day we became better friends, and now you can see what footing we are on.'

"He was lost in poor weather on one of the depot trips in March 1911, but found his way back. Amundsen: 'I was very sorry for it, as he was my strongest and most willing beast. I was glad, therefore, when he suddenly appeared again, apparently fit and well. (...) It must have been food that had revived him. From 80° S. home he did remarkably good work in Wisting's team.'"(6)

The first dog to the pole?

Tromstad and Scambos continue:

"The question has often been asked which dog was the first one to reach the South Pole. Lasse is in fact an unlikely candidate since he was running in Oscar Wisting's dog team. The question is, however, hard to answer. Amundsen got all his dogs from Greenland, and the three dog teams to go on the Polar Plateau were driving Greenland style, i.e. with the dogs in a fan formation. Thus the teams had no obvious front runner. What we do know is that Helmer Hanssen's dogs were leading on the day of arrival at the pole, December 14, 1911. On this afternoon Amundsen himself was the forerunner, followed by Hanssen's dogs. When the camp was moved closer to the exact position of the pole 3 days later, Olav Bjaaland was the forerunner, followed by Sverre Hassel and then, again, Helmer Hanssen's dog team. Wisting and his dogs and Amundsen himself followed behind. Olav Bjaaland's dog team had been dissolved two days earlier, and the dogs distributed between Hanssen's and Wisting's teams."(7)

Helen Smith writes:

"On the trip to the pole there were 5 men, with four sleds and 13 dogs to each sled, so 52 total dogs (Amundsen vol. 2, p. 1-2). As they left the pole they had 16 dogs divided between 2 sleds. They arrived back at the Fram with 11 dogs (vol. 2, p. 173). They had 39 dogs at the end of the trip, 11 of which had been to the South Pole and gave 21 to the Mawson expedition (vol. 2, p. 181 and p. 352). The boat then sailed for Buenos Aires with 18 dogs (vol. 2, p. 352) puppies are born which 2 are allowed to live, so 20 dogs. Further disposition of the dogs is not described. Dogs who definitely were on the South Pole trip and returned are: Suggen, Arne, Colonel, Mylius, Ring (vol. 2, p. 182).(8)

"In (a) short article, Helmer Hanssen claims that they came back from the south pole with eleven dogs, but that 10 of them died in Buenos Aires, and the only surviving dog that had been to the pole was named 'the Colonel' who did come back to Norway." This article, "Sledge Dogs on Amundsen's South Polar Journey" from *Polar Record*, puts paid to the claim that any British (and thus U.S.) Samoyeds descended from dogs from this expedition.(9)

It is clear that Amundsen and his mates had a deep interest in, and respect and love for these dogs. It is beyond my belief that they would not have reported it if one or more of their dogs on the 1912 expedition was a Samoyed.

When Amundsen did use Samoyeds

In fact, Amundsen did use Samoyeds on one of his polar expeditions, that to the Arctic Ocean aboard *Maud* in 1918–1923. Smith describes Amundsen's account, as follows: "Amundsen's health mishaps are described, with 'Jacob', the watchdog of the *Maud* playing a role in two of them, a broken shoulder and an encounter with a bear.(10) The fact that 'Jacob' is a Samoyed is related in a *NY Times* article 'Amundsen Relates Thrill of Pole Trip; Explorer Tells the Rotarians of Brush With Bear While Strolling on the Ice. Race for the ship is a tie and dog averts abrupt ending of 1919 expedition—500 dine at Waldorf on reindeer meat.'"(11)

Amundsen himself was the source for this article. Would he not have told the reporter if Samoyeds were his choice of dog for the Antarctic expedition?

The Amundsen Photographs

Another valuable source on Amundsen's dogs is *The Amundsen Photographs*, edited by Roland Huntford, who wrote *Scott and Amundsen: the last place on earth* and *Shackleton. Photographs* contains prints taken from Amundsen's Northwest Passage exploration (1903–1906); his South Pole expedition (1910–1912); and the *Maud* expedition through the Northeast Passage (1918–1923).(12)

The South Pole photographs are remarkable, reproduced from Amundsen's lantern slides which he used in lectures. They were discovered in the attic of the widow of Amundsen's nephew and heir. They are much clearer than the reproductions used in earlier editions of Amundsen books, clear enough to determine that Amundsen used no Samoyeds on this journey. The book does show, however, that Samoyeds were used on the *Maud* expedition (the photograph on p. 154 shows four Samoyeds).

The book's photographs of all three of Amundsen's voyages show no evidence of tampering with pre-digital ancestors of Photoshop, although Kathleen Scott, widow of the ill-prepared Robert Falcon Scott, who had been beaten to the Pole by Amundsen and died trying to return, was ungracious enough to say of them that they "were very poor, and many of them faked—painted, etc." The grapes in the widow Scott's vinyard were sour indeed.(13)

The (somewhat dubious) Princess Rosalie

Charges of tampering, or better, outright faking, are impossible to sustain about Amundsen. Not so *The Last of a race* by Rosalie Mercy-Argenteau (1862–1925), who claimed to be a Belgian princess, among other titles.⁽¹⁴⁾ She showed dogs in Europe and later in the U.S., and is often credited with bringing the first Samoyeds to the States. Her book bears a dedication to “Etah,” and a photograph at the end of the book of a Samoyed-looking dog identifies it as “Etah, son of Antarctic Buck, leader of Amundsen’s sledge team during the South Pole Expedition.” “Etah” appears nowhere in the text of the book, leading one to conclude that his inclusion in the dedication as well as the caption to the photograph following the text were an afterthought. The linking of “Etah” with Antarctic Buck—a real dog from an earlier expedition, and found in an Australian zoo—is not possible. From the accounts of the South Pole expedition members, as well as the findings of Tronstad and Scampos, there were only Greenland dogs aboard the *Fram* sailing to the southern continent and only one of those, The Colonel, on the return trip to Norway. The Wards repeat the assertions of Mercy-Argenteau (p. 45 in 1973, p.19 in 1997).

About the real Antarctic Buck we read:

“Ernest Kilburn-Scott, a breed founder in the UK, acquired from an Australian Sydney Zoo the Samoyed he named Antarctic Buck. Many claim this dog was descended from dogs taken south on the Newnes/Borchgrevink expedition in 1899/1900. However, Ivy Kilburn-Morris, Ernest’s daughter, wrote in a letter that ‘in 1906 my father found a pure bred Samoyed chained up in Sydney Zoo, where it had been for six years. The dog had NO history behind it. In 1908 my father returned to England (after his lecture tour at Sydney University) taking the dog with him. After quarantine and his first show, he died of distemper, and only five of his puppies survived the epidemic.’”⁽¹⁵⁾

In the princess’s book, note the wording of the caption: “Etah, son of Antarctic Buck, leader of Amundsen’s sledge team during the South Pole Expedition.” This wording leaves unclear which dog was the alleged leader for Amundsen. Antarctic Buck died in 1909, so it couldn’t have been him. If “Etah” truly was the son of Antarctic Buck he could have been born no earlier than 1908 or 1909, and there would have to be a record of the dog in England, including his purchase and acceptance by Amundsen. Since no evidence has been put forward to support this contention, it must be regarded as false.

There are additional reasons to doubt the princess’s story. Helen Smith reports that “in her memoir she claimed that she went to America with her maid and two dogs (although popular newspaper accounts of the day say she came with four dogs). She was accused of putting false color on one of her Chow Chows, but was acquitted in the libel suit, and

never showed again. She claims she finds her half brother in Cuba (although newspaper accounts say Coney Island).“

Her memoir also fails to mention her second husband, who was an animal trainer in Hollywood. The March 23, 1917 issue of *Variety* headlined: “POLAR BEAR KILLS (Captain Jack) BONAVIDA.” Bonavita, whose real name was John F. Gentner, was said to have married the princess in 1905, which was shortly after she came to the U.S.(16)

She has clearly left much out of her memoir. She does, however, find space in the book for many of her escapades with hard drugs.

In short, her account is impossible to take at face value. It is also difficult for me to believe that those who cite her book as a reference have actually read it.

Conclusion

It is not my intention in writing this article to be unduly harsh with those who have started these myths, or passed them along. Some of these people are highly regarded in the fancy, and are rightly considered to have made significant contributions to the breed, in the show ring, in rescue, and in sledding and skijoring.(17) And, of course, probably most of those who have repeated them didn't know them to be false. Nevertheless, these claims need to be challenged and discontinued. They are an embarrassment, even an insult, to the dogs and to those who run Samoyed teams. The breed has done very well for itself on Arctic and other Antarctic expeditions, and continues to do so elsewhere (dogs, along with other animals, are no longer allowed in Antarctica). There are solid Samoyed teams running in North America on both sides of the Canada-U.S. Border, as well as many in Northern Europe, and in Australia and New Zealand and elsewhere. The breed hardly needs poofing of the goods; reality will do quite well.

It is hardly a secret that these claims are untrue. Many in the Samoyed world know the truth. After all, this article is not the first to debunk the claims. The Samoyed Club of America has had at least one article in the SCA *Bulletin* (by Jim Osborn) which supports these conclusions.(18) Many mushers, of Samoyeds and other dogs, are aware of the falsities. Certainly the Greenland Dog fancy knows which dogs went to the South Pole with Amundsen. It is long past time to put these myths to rest. To do this it is necessary to check *all* claims against the documentary evidence. The practice until now, of taking someone's word as fact simply because many others have done the same, has brought us to the unworthy state of affairs that exists today.

How to make these necessary changes? What are the first steps? The first step, it seems to me, would have to be a discussion of these historical problems and how to resolve them. I would suggest the adoption and publicizing of statements by the various national breed and kennel clubs declaring that the claims are false and encouraging the fancy to drop these claims from websites and printed works. Let us hope this happens.

(1) The Wards do not cite as their source for this claim any of Amundsen's accounts of the expedition, the most comprehensive of which is *The South Pole: An account of the Norwegian Antarctic expedition in the Fram, 1910–1912* (two vols.). The 1997 edition of the Wards' book, *The New Samoyed*, p. xvi, and the 1971 (first) edition, *The Complete Samoyed*, p. 28, show the same photograph of a human with Norwegian flag and seven dogs. The captions read "Samoyeds were among the breeds that served the Roald Amundsen Expedition across the South Pole" (1997) and "Samoyeds across the South Pole with the Roald Amundsen Expedition" (1971). However, the seven dogs are Greenland dogs, certainly not Samoyeds. On p. 29 (1971) and p.8 (1997) we read that "the first animal over the pole was an all-white Samoyed lead dog."

(2) Amundsen, Roald (1912). *The South Pole: An account of the Norwegian Antarctic expedition in the Fram, 1910–1912* (vols. 1 – 2). Retrieved from <http://www.booksshouldbefree.com/download/text/South-Pole-by-Roald-Amundsen-2.txt> (Text-searchable) For a page-searchable version see <http://archive.org/details/southpoleaccount01amunuoft> (Vol. 1) and <https://archive.org/details/southpoleaccount02amunuoft> (Vol. 2)

(3) The study's website is:
<http://traverse.npolar.no/historical-traverses/historic-names/index.html>

(4) See https://www.zotero.org/groups/history_of_the_samoyed_dog/ and https://www.zotero.org/groups/history_of_the_samoyed_dog/items

(5) Amundsen 1912, (vol. 1, p. 110).

(6) Tronstad, S., & Scambos, T. (n.d.). *Historic Names. Norwegian-American Scientific Traverse of East Antarctica*. Retrieved April 25, 2014, from <http://traverse.npolar.no/historical-traverses/historic-names/index.html> .

(7) *ibid.*

(8) Amundsen 1912, (vol. 2, p. 173, 181, 182, 352)

(9) Hanssen, C.H. (1937). Sledge Dogs on Amundsen's South Polar Journey. *Polar Record*, 2(13); pp. 57 -- 59. See <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0032247400035579>

(10) *Roald Amundsen: my life as an explorer* (Doubleday, Page, Garden City, N.Y. 1927), pp. 85 – 87.

(11) *New York Times*, 1927, January 14, p. 14.

(12) *The Amundsen Photographs*, Hodder and Stoughton Ltd., 1987.

(13) *ibid* p. 8. English churlishness was not limited to Scott's widow. On page 198, Huntford quotes Amundsen: "The year after my journey to the pole, the son of a prominent Norwegian living in London came home to his father and protested against having learned at his school that Scott

was the discoverer of the South Pole. On investigation, the boy was proven right, and also it was common in other schools to ignore the Norwegian expedition.”

(14) *The Last of a Race* by Rosalie Francoise Adelaide Caroline Eugenie Marie Mercy-Argenteau (1862–1925), George H. Doran, NYC, 1925. See where her memoir can be found, and the description of her in:

<http://www.worldcat.org/oclc/1068575>

(15) Gabb, H. (n.d.) *The Myths and the Mystique Surrounding Early Samoyeds and Their Owners*. Go to

<http://www.thesamoyedclubinc.orconhosting.net.nz/i6/i6-5r.htm>

(16) Bowers, Q.D. *BONAVITA, Captain Jack*. *Thanhouser Films: An Encyclopedia and History*, Vol. 3 Biographies. From

http://www.thanhouser.org/tcocd/Biography_Files/196bjj.htm

(17) Bob and Dolly Ward and their daughter Mardee were active mushers for many years. Bob Ward served on the committee that established the SCA working standard.

(18) Osborn, J. *SCA Bulletin*, Winter 2006, The legend of Etah. pp.14 – 15. The magazine cover says Winter 2006 but the internal running heads say Fall 2005. This article is excellent in every way. See especially how Osborn thinks the Wards may have come to make this error and how the legend of Etah began. Go to: <http://www.samoyed.org/LegendOfEtah.pdf>

In addition, there is a fine article by Helen L. Corlew on the dogs obtained for several expeditions, and another of interest by the same author on the origins of the Samoyed dog. See: <http://www.samoyed.org/history/picsandnotes.pdf> and <http://www.samoyed.org/history/SAMOYEDSthenandnowwithpics.pdf>