ADDRESS BY DR. VILHJALMUR STEFANSSON *

Ladies and Gentlemen:

I am delighted to have a chance to speak to you; but I have been more delighted to be here to listen to you and to learn your way of thinking and your way of doing, and what progress there has been in my old field.

It is understood I have about half an hour. Of that time I thought I would use about half for a preliminary statement and about half for answering questions.

In the fifteen minutes that I have for the preliminaries, I feel I must sketch to you my background; for I am going to tell you how things have felt and seemed to me -- I am going to present myself as a kind of guinea pig that has been exposed to special conditions; and when you use an experimental animal you should know something of its nature. I am a typical American in being of foreign descent. Of Scandinavian ancestry, I was born in Manitoba and grew up in North Dakota and in Iowa. My graduate work I did at Harvard, first as a research scholar in divinity and then as fellow and finally teaching fellow in anthropology. My most valuable preparation for northern work, I feel, was an open-mindedness which I picked up, it seems to me, particularly in the Divinity School. Of this I give two samples, from a preacher and from a professor.

The great preacher of my time was Samuel McCord Crothers and the great teacher was George Foot Moore. My favorite Crothers sermon was "On the Advisability of Establishing a University of Polite Unlearning". This was published as an essay in the Atlantic Monthly and later in a book. Its thesis was that when there are so many schools and colleges teaching us things that are not so, it would be a good thing to have at least one well-known place where we could go to unlearn a few of them.

What most impressed me in Moore's lectures on Comparative Religions was his enunciation of a principle that well supported the Crothers sermon. Said Moore: If a belief is of hoary antiquity and of world wide scope, then it is probably contrary to fact.

With these and similar points of view, I resigned my Harvard teaching position the spring of 1906 and went north to begin unlearning as much as the facts seemed to require of what I had been learning the previous 27 years. In 1918, when I had spent within the Arctic Circle 10 winters and 13 summers, I felt that of a dozen things I used to propound as arctic specialist here at Harvard, six or more were either wholly or partly wrong.

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*Ed. note: One of the highlights of the Second Annual Arctic Planning Session was the impromptu address given by Dr. Stefansson. Since it was not a part of any one of the scientific programs discussed, and because of Dr. Stefansson's stature as an arctic scientist and explorer, it is thought appropriate that his remarks precede the reports of more recent arctic investigators.

In 1906 I went north through Edmonton and down the Mackenzie river system, expecting to meet a ship and become the expedition's anthropologist. But, luckily so far as unlearning went, the ship failed to meet me and I became the year's guest of some Eskimos who were just emerging from the stone age, who had no European food unless you call tea a food, and even this gave out by midwinter. My most significant unlearning that year was on diet. I had been brought up to believe that one gets tired of a food if one has it several times a week, and that health suffers unless you have a variety. But I learned that winter that you never get tired of your food if you have only one thing to eat, at least not if that one thing is a flesh food, lean and fat, eaten at each meal in such ratio as your palate determines; and the longer I lived on this the better I liked it. I looked forward to every one of the four meals a day; I enjoyed them as much as I ever did any food anywhere, and I had never felt so exuberantly healthy. The story of that year, 1906-07, I have told in Hunters of the Great North, the hunters being the Eskimos who fed, clothed and housed me; and who gave me the main "secret" of whatever success has been mine as an arctic traveler.

For in September, 1907, I went to the American Museum of Natural History of New York and, on the basis of the experience above summarized, asked them to support me for study of a group of Eskimos whom I, and they also, believed probably existed near Coronation Gulf in mid-arctic Canada, and who had presumably not seen white men, except for their ancestors having had some glimpses of Europeans more than half a century before during the search for Sir John Franklin's lost expedition. I told the museum that most places in the Arctic had either fish or game, or both, on which anybody could be healthy indefinitely and which I knew how to secure. I proposed to travel by dogs and sleds, with Alaska or Mackenzie River companions, the main purpose to study these presumably nearly untouched Eskimos. The story of the next five years, 1908-12, is told in my 1913 book My Life with the Eskimos and the 1914 one Anthropological Papers of the American Museum of Natural History: The Stefansson-Anderson Expedition. These tell that we found about 700 Eskimos, more than 400 of whom had never even seen a white man from a distance. They lived on fat and lean meats only, dressed in skins, and were the most healthy and happy-seeming people I had ever known; and I was equally healthy among them, living exactly as they did for a year -- as indeed I had been doing for most of the time the four years before that 1910-11 period that I spent in or near Coronation Gulf.

During the years 1906-12 we lived and traveled with Eskimos who dwelt on shore; or, in winter, on landfast ice near shore. But gradually my conviction developed that the way of life was equally sound for the drifting ice that covered the Arctic Sea to such extent that millions of square miles were unknown because ships could not navigate and sledgers had found it difficult to get far into the unknown or to stay long, because the food they brought would give out. So, by now, I had an obvious solution: Carry no food but only portable tools, and skills which are even more portable. We could, I felt sure, go where we liked, stay as long as we liked, and be safer and healthier the while than the followers of hazardous occupations, such as coal mining or taxi driving.

So we organized on that basis, insofar as planned exploration of the Arctic Sea was concerned, what came to be known as the Canadian Arctic Expedition of 1913-18.

Of course, with six ships, 16 scientists, more than 150 men of the white, South Sea, Negro and other races, this method of life and travel was key to only part of our work. The narrative is a book of more than 800 pages and the reports are numerous in a number of sciences -- the narrative, The Friendly Arctic, privately published; the reports issued by the Canadian Government.

During the organization period of what turned out to be the 1913-18 expedition, the one that presumably might interest this group more than the earlier ones, all candidates for scientific or other positions on it knew we had announced that we expected to search for new land, and to sledge and sound unexplored icy seas, on the basis of carrying man and dog food for only the first few weeks and then continuing indefinitely, whether in miles or months, relying on the hunt certainly for food and fuel and perhaps for clothing. But when the time came, in 1914 on the north coast of Alaska, to outfit for sledge travel north into the then unknown region beyond the penetration of ships, most of our men refused to participate; some saying they had never thought we were serious and all pointing out that local Eskimo hunters were in agreement with scientists like Nansen that we would not find enough game to live on, no matter how skilled we were in finding and securing.

In the upshot seven men volunteered to go on a journey northward of indefinite months and mileage. But only three were needed; and in March, 1914, Ole Andreasen, Storker Storkerson and I started our march north from Alaska and said we would not come back. If we found new land we would spend a year living there by hunting while we explored it. If we found no land, we would travel about 500 miles in a fish-hook curve -- 200 miles north, then northeast, east, and southeast, to land on northwestern Banks or southwestern Prince Patrick, both islands known to be uninhabited but supplied with caribou and having seals in waters along shore. Two of our ships, I directed, were to meet us the summer 1914 at Banks or Patrick.

But most of our own men, including my second-in-command Dr. Anderson, and all the local Eskimos, said we would have to return before the 30 day's food we carried gave out; for we would fail to secure enough other food for men and dogs. So, when we did not return, the belief developed that we were dead. As next in command, Dr. Anderson reported our death to the Canadian Government, who in turn reported it to the press, and agreed in the promotion of Dr. Anderson to command. But, as the expedition had no radio and could receive no direct orders from Ottawa, there developed a split, some expedition members feeling my orders should be carried out even though I was dead, others saying there was no sense in taking ships to Banks Island to meet men who not only were dead but had not even died in Banks, having no doubt perished among the drift ice somewhere about 200 miles north of Alaska and no doubt farther than that west of Banks.

The faction who considered my directives ought to be carried out, whether I were living or dead, was led by George H. Wilkins, later to be famous as Sir Hubert Wilkins. He was given one ship by Dr. Anderson, the poorest one since it was going on a foolish mission. Wilkins himself did not think we were alive but planned to search for us nevertheless, according to orders. His own story and mine are both printed in my book The Friendly Arctic, the narrative of the years 1913-18. This includes Wilkins telling how they were preparing to spend in southwestern Banks the winter 1914-15, when Andreasen, Storkersen and I found them there, we coming from northwestern Banks. As Wilkins tells it, we were all three looking well and our

dogs were all still with us, in good condition. We had made a 700-mile walk in 97 days across moving ice from Alaska to northwestern Banks without missing a meal, losing a dog, or being, so far as we realized, under any stress of hardship or in any danger. We had seen no land and had run a sounding line of 1386 meters, with no bottom, from where we left the continental shelf north of Alaska till we struck it again west of Banks Island.

We who traveled north had found the ice less rough as we got farther from land, the seals numerous in the leads, plus bears visiting our camps frequently, so that from them alone we could have had plenty of meat -- though we preferred the seals both for their lean meat and especially for their fat meat. We saw no land, and since we had carried out the said 1386-meter no-bottom soundings we felt sure that there had been no islands hiding near our course.

Banks Island was uninhabited when we got there, as we knew it would be. It had been explored during the Franklin Search more than half a century before and, since then, it had been unvisited by whites except that about two or three times New England whalers had approached its southwest corner, wanting to get fresh water and kill a few caribou. On the way from Alaska to northwest Banks we had, after we ate up the four weeks' supplies we started with, lived more than 75% on seals and less than 25% on polar bears. We now began living 100% on caribou; for we saw none of the muskoxen that had been numerous when the Franklin searchers were there.

By the maps that have been shown at this meeting I have seen, as you will if you compare them with our maps in my book The Friendly Arctic, that our trail from Alaska crosses that of T-3 as it drifts southerly past the west coast of Banks. Our sledge routes cross the trail of T-3 not only this first year, 1914, west of Banks, but also in 1915 west of southern Prince Patrick Island and in 1917 northwest of Ellef Ringnes Island. On all these journeys as you see by the narratives in my Friendly book, we fed ourselves and our dogs by hunting and secured our fuel the same way.

Question Period

Question: What about pemmican as a travel ration?

Stefansson: As you know, from what I have just said, we ourselves never lived on pemmican but always by hunting. But I know a good deal about pemmican from talking with men who have used it and from reading their books. The standard fur trade and Plains Indian pemmican was by weight about half pounded up and thoroughly dried lean and about half buffalo, caribou or -- later on -- beef fat; it was the most condensed food possible. Man needs some lean meat, animal protein, and pemmican gives about 20% of its nourishment from protein. But fat is more than twice more nourishing per ounce than lean; and pemmican gives from fat about 80% of its nourishment. Peary says (especially in his book Secrets of Polar Travel) that it is the only food a traveler never gets tired of and that, at the end of a long day's march over the drifting ice, he was so well satisfied with half a pound of pemmican that he would not have walked a few yards for the best meal that a New York hotel could have served him. (For summary on pemmican see the five pemmican chapters in

Stefansson's The Fat of the Land. For accurate quotation of Peary, see under "Peary" in the index of that book.)

Question: Did you run across ice islands?

Stefansson: We probably did; but we would not have called them ice islands but old or paleocrystic ice. We used in our writing and thinking the concepts you find in the accounts of men who have long been familiar with the ice of the Beaufort Sea, during the Franklin Search and since -- the ice that, from a distance (for instance when seen from the masthead of a ship) looks like snow-covered rolling prairie. Probably the first account of an ice island in the literature is in the story of Gunnbjorn who, during the tenth century, reported Gunnbjorn's Skerries to the west of northwestern Iceland. The best old accounts of ice islands are those of the Land of Buss, discovered by Frobisher's ship the BUSS of Bridgwater in 1578. One of your speakers at this meeting showed photographs that looked like the old drawings of the Land of Buss, and indeed like the paleocrystic ice described during the Franklin Search (though the expression paleocrystic was, I believe, first used on the NARES expedition of the late 1870's). There was an issue of the journal Arctic which showed the location of numerous ice islands, and in many of those places I have seen what I called old ice. I believe many of the "ice islands" referred to by the said issue of the Arctic could have been formed on the west shores of Banks, Prince Patrick, Borden or Ellef Ringnes islands -- see descriptions of landfast ice in my book The Friendly Arctic where, especially when we landed from our 97 day march on northwestern Banks Island in 1914, we found that ice grounded in 39 meters, which is about the same as the 20 fathoms which Peary gave me as the approximately greatest depth he had ever seen of grounded sea ice (as distinguished from ice of glacier origin).

Question: Dr. Stefansson, would you make comment on the problem of the discovery of Meighen Island?

Stefansson: I am willing, but it would take too much time. I would say that probably the first white man to see it was Dr. Cook (Frederick A. Cook). One of Peary's statements about Cook was that instead of going north from Cape Thomas Hubbard to the Pole, Cook had gone southwest from that cape along Heiberg Island and had swung west from that coast when he saw an island to the west, which story Peary had received from Cook's Eskimo companions. (Here Stefansson referred to his own small book, The Problem of Meighen Island.)