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# Meet the *Other* Pearys

The two family legacies of polar explorer Robert E. Peary reunite.

BY PATRICIA PIERCE ERIKSON

*"You will wish yourself back with your sleek, fat Eskimo woman after you have seen me. If you have succeeded everything will look rosy to you for a little while and you may even persuade yourself that I am not half bad."*

So Josephine Peary penned to her husband, Robert E. Peary, the renowned Arctic explorer from Maine who was celebrated the world over for being 'the first man to reach the North Pole.' Even while he was passing the long arctic nights of 1900 in Greenland with a teenage Inuit girl named Ahlikahsingwah, Josephine was quarantined in a darkened bedroom in Washington, D.C., grieving from the loss of her infant child and nursing her scarlet-fever-ridden daughter, Marie. After writing this let-



The **Greenland school kids** told Hivshu: “You **think** you’re **better** than anybody else **because** your name is **Peary**.”

“You’re **damn right**,” he said, “and furthermore, from **now on**, my name is *Robert E. Peary*.”

Upon learning this, **Robert E. Peary, Jr.**, said, “You **tell** that young man there are **a lot** of Robert E. Pearys **around** and that he’s got to have a **number** after his name. Two and five are **up for grabs**.”

Hivshu picked **Robert E. Peary, II**.

ter, Josephine made a surprise visit to the Arctic to locate her husband; before finding him, Ahlikahsingwah introduced Josephine to her baby boy, Anaukaq-Hammy, who Peary had fathered; another son by Peary, Kaala, would follow six years later.

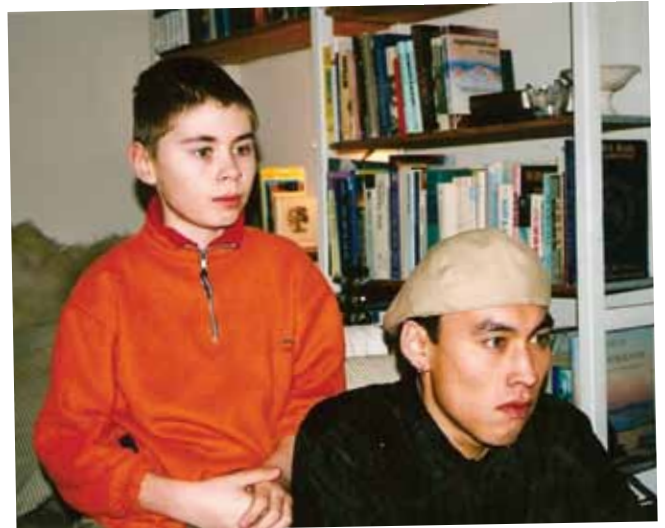
Fast forward a century to a handsome, media-savvy Inuk named Hivshu, who has raised eyebrows and consciousness by embarking upon his own expedition to retrace the steps of Robert E. Peary—his great-grandfather. The result is the 2007 award-winning documentary, *Prize of the Pole*, which tracks Hivshu and his search for identity from Greenland to Manhattan. “Even though Peary is associated with hard memories, I wanted to show it wasn’t just shame,” Hivshu says of his ancestor.

**E**xtramarital trysts of national heroes no longer surprise Americans. From Monticello to the White House, our Founding Fathers, presidents, and sports celebrities have made their legacies more intricate by having children out of wedlock. These descendants present fascinating new opportunities to reconsider the faded photos in our national scrapbook.

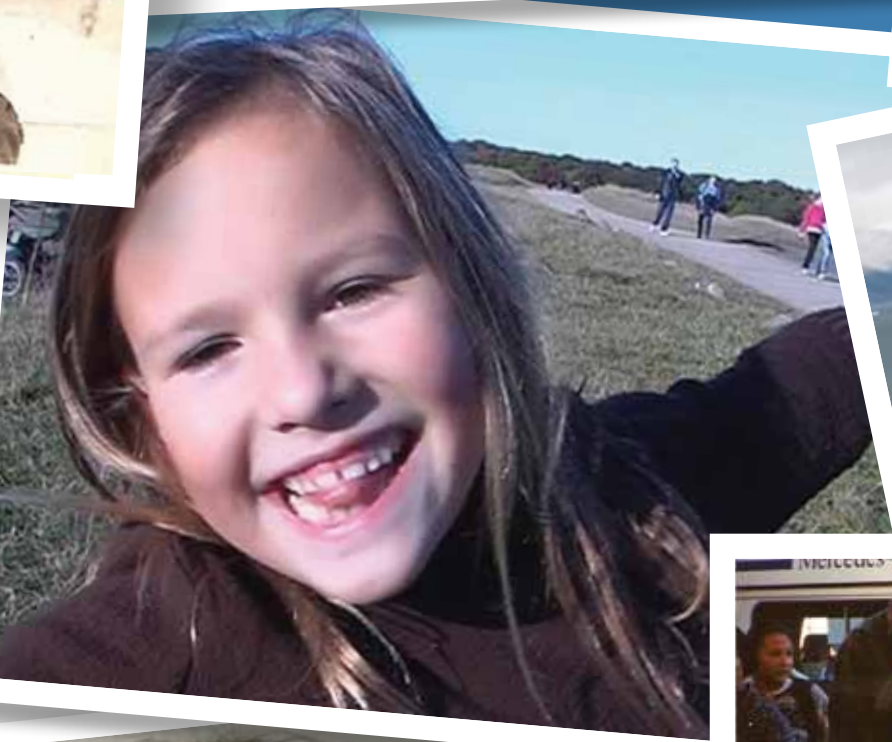
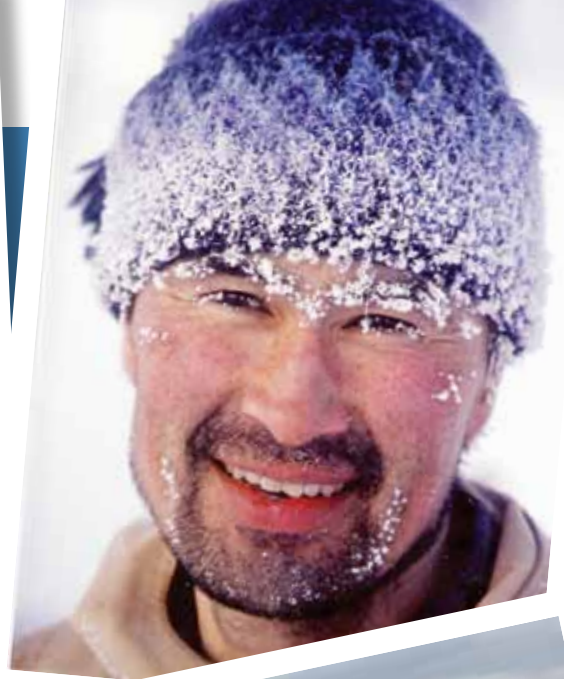
The divergent—American and Inuit—versions of polar expedition history might have remained isolated in their respective countries had it not been for Dr. S. Allen Counter, a Harvard professor who has become an expert on the second families of the Peary expeditions. Traveling to northwestern Greenland himself, Counter was among the first to look this buried history in the eye.

Otherwise, given their mother/grandmother’s anguish over the long-term affair with Ahlikahsingwah, the Inuit kin might have gone unexplored by Josephine Peary’s descendants in the U.S., especially since, in recent decades, Peary’s actual claim to having discovered the Pole has come under fire. As a result, any discussion of his two Inuit sons might have provided opponents with additional “ammunition [to use] against Peary’s credibility,” explained a Peary descendant—who would not identify himself—to Dr. Counter in the mid-80s.

In spite of this, Counter has been able to reunite several family members from the North with their Southern counterparts, including spectacularly Peary’s 81-year-old son, Kaala, with







Hivshu's world, previous page: Hivshu and his grandfather Kaala. Clockwise from top left: mother, Pauline, granddaughter of Robert E. Peary; daughter Klara and son Aleqatsiaq; Hivshu as an Arctic hunter; Hiurapaluk, "my birth place—deep in my heart"; daughter Camilla, grandson John David, uncle K'ulutanguaq, and daughter Klara; Hivshu, great-grandson of Robert E. Peary; Hivshu before leaving for Denmark; sons Nugtaq and Aleqatsiaq; daughter Isabella.



## PERSPECTIVE

Peary's 84-year-old son, Robert Peary, Jr. Consider this exchange in Augusta, Maine, in Counter's *North Pole Legacy: Black, White, and Eskimo*:

Peary, Jr. to Kaala: "Now, are you my half brother?"

Kaala: "Yes, I am Peary's son... [Kaala] Peary."

Peary, Jr.: "Do you have the classic Peary gap between your two front teeth?"

Kaala: "I think I used to have that gap when I had my own teeth. But I can't rightly say that the ones I have now are mine."

In 2005, the two families were reunited again. This time, it was Robert and Ahlikahsingwah's great-grandson, Hivshu, and Robert and Josephine's grandson, Edward Stafford. Stafford says when he met Hivshu, he learned that "at school up there the kids had gotten after him: 'You think you're better than anybody else because your name is Peary.' And he said, 'You're damn right and furthermore, from now on, my

## Case of the 'Stolen' Meteorite

Long before Robert Peary arrived in Greenland and claimed three meteorites as his own, his Inuit associates and their ancestors considered them holy, 'celestial stones' from which they cold-hammered iron deposits into sharp hunting tools of

but was unsuccessful due to weather. In 1897, he finally made off with it, sailing south on *The Hope*.

According to researcher Patricia A. M. Huntington in her *Polar Geography* article "Robert E. Peary and the Cape York Meteorites," Josephine Peary, whose father worked at the Smithsonian, sold the meteorites to the American Museum of Natural History for \$40,000 (estimated at \$757,222.69 in 2002 dollars), claiming in a letter to AMNH's new president, Henry Osborn, "I think it only fair to state that the meteorites are my property, and the money obtained for them will not be expended in Arctic Exploration. It is all I have with which to educate my children in the event of anything happening to my husband. Of this, [former AMNH president] Mr. [Morris] Jesup was cognizant and he approved entirely of my keeping the proceeds as a nest egg."

To our knowledge, the Inuit have never benefited directly from this transaction. Some consider the meteorites consolation prizes he brought home after an unsuccessful attempt to reach the North Pole: In *True North: Peary, Cook, and the Race to the Pole*, Bruce Henderson ventures, "Peary's motives were not altogether altruistic. As if to ensure clear and undisputed title, he made the point of acquiring from a Danish official a bill of sale for the meteorites, although there is no evidence anything of value was received by the Danes or local natives in return..."

» For more on the mystical qualities of Greenland meteorites, read or screen *Smilla's Sense of Snow*.



At 31 metric tons, "Ahnighito" is the largest of the three Cape York meteorite fragments on display at the American Museum of Natural History.

mythical power and excellence. In return for learning the secret locations of these precious pieces of a larger mass known today as the Cape York meteorite (over 4.5 billion years old), Peary bartered a single gun.

The Inuit "never interposed the slightest objection to my removal of their heavenly guest[s]..." the explorer writes in *Northward Over the Great Ice*, published in 1898.

The smaller two of the three, "The Woman" and "The Dog," were taken by Peary in 1895 on *The Kite* before the ice closed and he had to leave behind the largest piece, "The Tent," considered the second largest meteorite in the world. He returned in 1896 for "The Tent"



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name is *Robert E. Peary*.' So I told my uncle Bob, Robert E. Peary, Jr., about that and he said, 'You tell that young man that there are a lot of Robert E. Pearys around and that he has got to have a number after his name. Two and five are up for grabs.' So I told him. So he picked two. So now he is Robert E. Peary, II."

The two have since come together in other ways. Eagle Island in Casco Bay hosts the Peary family's turn-of-the-century cottage—a historic site and museum—operated by the State of Maine. If you look closely, on the mantle of the three-sided fireplace, a framed photograph now joins the two branches of the family for all eternity—a snapshot of Hivshu visiting Edward Stafford. Although it's been a long time coming, the rapprochement is opening the door to extraordinary new insights. ■

**Peaks Island author and cultural historian Patricia Pierce Erikson has published on international indigenous social movements (*Voices of a Thousand People*, Univ. Nebraska Press) and on Josephine Peary's role in Arctic expeditions (in the journal *Arctic*).**

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## Piulirhuaq, The Great Peary

as told by his great-grandson Hivshu

I heard stories about my ancestors when I was a child, but it was difficult to remember at first, since the [Danish] government took me away from my family when I was nine to be educated in the white man's way of life, which is not to believe in life, but in their own man-made values to become 'rich and powerful.'

When I returned at age 20 to live with my grandfather's brother, K'arqutsiaq, and his wife, they saw... that I had to be reborn. I began by being a hunter. When the written stuff of my schooling began to fade, the Universe began to appear. I was again seeing, hearing, and feeling. It was great to be free again! To be alive! That feeling Admiral Peary wanted to share with everybody in the world! It was then I could tell the stories again without being ashamed of my ancestors... like the stories about how we whistle the stars down to bring them closer. But don't whistle too much, we say, or we'll capture the attention of our ancestors playing in the lights (Aurora), and they'll come down and take everything but our bones.

Early on, the Danish-influenced people here harassed me, telling me I was one of "the ugly descendants of Peary," and that I looked "just like [my] grandfather Kaala"—basically saying we should be ashamed of being Pearys.

I never answered back, but in my mind I defended my grandfather, Kaala, and my great-grandfather, Piulirhuaq, The Great Peary.

He earned that name for his courage. Some of the great Shamans were convinced Admiral Peary must have been a great Shaman because he dared to 'cross' the bad weather.

The Eskimos do not go out hunting when it's storm-



ing—it won't help to stand at the seal hole or hunt the polar bear when you don't see, hear, or feel anything but the storm.

What some Eskimos did *not* know was that Admiral Peary was not going out for hunting but to reach a certain point as his goal.

He so often chose to be with Inughuit by himself—alone, without his own people. He lived just like us and could build a snowhouse just like us and hunt just like us. He knew how to survive an Arctic storm and was not afraid to 'take a walk' to get closer to a destination. He spoke our language—although broken—very useful for communication. That was his way of learning about our life without being disturbed by his own people, the ones he had to act like a commander around. When he was with Inughuit he was just like another old people's son.

Oodaaq (Ootah), Admiral Peary's Eskimo companion and leader of the Inughuit, told these stories to my maternal grandfather—son of Admiral Peary. K'arqutsiaq, my grandfather's brother, told me the stories I brought to my children, but now I am sending the materials to my son to keep the stories in our way of telling them...



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