

ANECDOTES

By EVELYN CRICKMORE

Explorer Stefansson's letter

Vilhjalmur Stefansson, the famed Canadian-born Arctic explorer, wrote an 11-page letter to my father, Arthur Hawkes, in 1914. It was written in the Arctic.

The letter describes his expedition undertaken for The Canadian Government and the men with whom he had to cope.

"This is a strictly private letter — don't forget your journalistic ideals. A good journalist will put stolen information on the front page but will never publish things told him in confidence. So I write you more freely because you are a journalist."

When I re-discovered

this letter recently I wondered about the ethics of my quoting from it 54 years after it was written when both the writer and the receiver are gone.

Of this great Canadian Lowell Thomas wrote several years ago, "Vilhjalmur Stefansson is one of the foremost if not the foremost living explorer. His name and fame reach the ends of the earth. He is one of the great men of our time."

Stefansson was born Nov. 3, 1879 to immigrant parents from Iceland, in a log cabin in the tiny village of Arnes, in a region called New Iceland,

on the west shore of Lake Winnipeg, 20 miles north Gimli, 100 miles north of Winnipeg, Manitoba.

He died in 1962, aged 81, full of honors, shortly after he finished his autobiography, "Discovery."

This celebrated explorer proved not only to Canada but to the world that Canada has a great and habitable country in the so-called "Frozen North." His career was reported in world headlines. He discovered the famed tribe of blond Eskimos living on Victoria Island. He learned to speak Eskimo. He spent 10 winters and seven summers in

far north between 1904 and 1918.

The 1913-1914 Expedition was to explore above the 141st meridian for the Canadian government to find if land existed there and to test the direction of Arctic currents.

In September, 1913, Stefansson's ship "The Karluk" (the Eskimo word for fish) under Captain Robert A. Bartlett was frozen in the ice for the winter. Stefansson, and five men, two of them Eskimo, left on what would have been a routine 10-day hunting trip to augment their food supply.

An unprecedented storm blew up, broke up the ice, drove the Karluk out into the Arctic Ocean. She was eventually

crushed but not before the captain, his men and their stores were safely established on the ice.

Stefansson and his party reached Barrow safely. But here he was faced with many problems through the loss of the Karluk.

The next winter the explorer and a small party proved his point that men could live on the wildlife of the Arctic. He, his party, their dogs pulling the sled, (which, wrapped in tarp, became a boat when crossing shallow water,) travelled for 90 days over 700 miles of Arctic ice.

When they ended their journey at Cape Killett, Banks Island, men and dogs were in good health. The world thought they had been dead five months.

The letter to my father is headed "Cape Killett Banks Island, Dec. 8, 1914." As in his autobiography, I find Stefansson tells of his problems with Ottawa and with some of the scientists of his expeditions, I feel free to quote: from this unique valuable letter.

"When I was in college

the professor of economics used to consider it an established thing that the world owes no man a living, but I gather the feeling is still common in Ottawa that the government owes several men a living — and not merely a living, but a living with a few trimmings.

There were good men in both sections of the expedition; there were also men to whom it seemed a short of municipal lodging house. They had many excellent qualities that are out of place in a venture fitted out at great expense for the purpose of doing something. Scientific ability is well, but "scientific dignity" has its drawbacks, and we were burdened with much dignity. If they be ever knighted for their most conspicuous qualities, their coat of arms should bear an armchair couchant, a cigarette rampant, and the motto "Otium cum dignitate." (ease with dignity)

The letter ends "I would not write this letter if I did not care about your opinion beyond my care for that of most people. Naval Service Ottawa, Vilhjalmur Stefansson."



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