

Our Ocean Backyard — *Santa Cruz Sentinel* columns by Gary Griggs, Director, Institute of Marine Sciences, UC Santa Cruz.

#128 March 23, 2013

Nansen's Dash to the Pole



Nansen, Johansen and 3 dog sleds depart for the 410 mile dash to the pole.

On March 14, 1895, after 18 months in the ice, Nansen and Johansen, the most experienced dog team driver on the crew, were ready to make their dash to the pole. They had built the sleds and kayaks, and had gone through endless machinations about what would be the best gear and supplies to take.

Two months earlier the entire expedition was thrown into doubt as the *Fram* began to tremble violently when the ice squeezed the hull of the ship. Nansen had the entire crew leave the ship, fearing that it was finally going to succumb to the pressures of the ice. But the thick hull and internal bracing held, they all climbed back on board and preparations for the sled journey continued.

On February 17, Nansen had begun a farewell letter to his wife, Eva, writing that should things not work out that “you will know that your image will be the last I see”. He was also reading about Franz Josef Land, their intended destination after reaching the pole. It had been partially explored in 1873, and there were apparently large numbers of both bears and seals, which Nansen realized might come in handy if they got that far.

Nansen and Johansen had two earlier departure attempts in late February but problems with the sleds required their return to the ship to overhaul their equipment and reduce their loads. They finally settled on three sleds, which seems

a little challenging considering there were only two of them. But off they went to the North Pole, 410 cold icy miles away.

Their first week went smoothly and optimism was high as they traversed flat snowfields. Nansen calculated that they would need to average about 8 miles a day to make the pole in 50 days, which was about the amount of food they could carry for the two of them and the dog teams. After eight days their sextant observations indicated that they had been speeding along at 10 miles a day. They were pleased with their progress, particularly with temperatures averaging 40 degrees below zero.

Conditions then began to deteriorate as the surface of the ice got rougher, slowing their progress over the next week. They had also lost a device used to measure how much distance they had covered across the ice. Other measurements suggested that while they were moving north, the ice beneath them was actually drifting south, slowing their progress considerably.

Nansen's journal entry at this point suggested some serious doubt about their outcome: "My fingers are frozen stiff... it is becoming worse and worse... God knows what will happen to us".

On April 3, 1895, after nearly 20 days of tough sledding, Nansen began to wonder if they would reach the pole and still have the food they needed to get to Franz Joseph Land. In his journal he wrote "I have become more and more convinced we ought to turn before time". Four days later, on April 7 at latitude 86 degrees, 13.6 minutes north, the farthest north that humans had ever reached, with a chaotic mass of large ice blocks extending to the horizon, he decided that in order to survive, that they would have to turn back and head towards Franz Joseph Land.