

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

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Nansen- Trying to Get Home



The reunion of crew of the Fram in Oslo in 1896.

We left Nansen and Johansen in a crude hut somewhere near Franz Josef Land where they were to spend eight long months together before emerging like bears from hibernation on May 1896, ready to resume their journey.

Meanwhile, the *Fram* with its crew was still stuck fast in the ice far to the north. Sverdrup had been left in charge and had his hands full after two full years with a bored crew surrounded by nothing but ice. He kept the men busy, cleaning up the ship, chipping off ice, organizing provisions in the event they had to abandon ship, taking short ski expeditions and collecting scientific observations. The ship had become a moving oceanographic, meteorological and biological laboratory.

Soundings indicated deep water and no Arctic landmass. After months of moving towards the pole, they began to drift southward after having reached within just 19 miles of Nansen's most northerly point. After another long winter, leads in the ice began to open, and finally, on August 13, 1896, almost three years after being first frozen in, the *Fram* left its icy prison. The ship had emerged from the ice just northwest of Spitsbergen, very close to Nansen's original prediction.

The *Fram* sighted another ship that same day, a seal hunter from Spitsbergen, but there had been no sighting of Nansen and Johansen, so Sverdrup and his crew began the trip south and east back to Norway.

Nansen and Johansen followed the coastline southward although they were a bit distraught that nothing seemed to match the rudimentary map they had. As weather improved they decided to launch the kayaks again, although at one point, Nansen had to dive into the icy waters as they had drifted away due to a careless mooring. He managed to reach the boats and with a final last ditch effort, managed to haul himself aboard.

On June 13, 1896 walrus attacked their kayaks causing a delay for repairs. Four days later, as they were getting ready to launch their crafts again, Nansen thought he heard a dog bark. As he went to investigate he heard voices and then later saw a person.

It was Frederick Jackson, who had organized an expedition to Frans Josef Land after being rejected by Nansen as a crewmember on the *Fram*. As he approached, Jackson saw “a tall man, wearing a soft felt hat, voluminous clothes and long shaggy hair and beard, all reeking with black grease”. After a moment’s hesitation, Jackson recognized the man: “You are Nansen, aren’t you?” and received the reply “Yes, I am Nansen”.

The pair was rescued after having survived for 15 months alone in the middle of the Arctic in less than pleasant conditions. On top of that, between them they had gained 34 pounds while in hibernation. They patiently waited six more weeks for the arrival of a ship, the *Windward*, which would take them back to Norway.

On August 13, 1896, Nansen and Johansen arrived at the port of Vardo. A flurry of telegrams was sent announcing to the world that they had returned safely. Nansen was concerned, however, that he had heard nothing about the fate of the *Fram*. Within a week, however, he received the news that Sverdrup had brought the ship to the small port of Skjervoy, just south of where he and Johansen were. The very next day, Nansen and Johansen sailed to meet their comrades for a very emotional reunion.

Although it did not achieve the objective of reaching the North Pole, the expedition made major scientific and geographical findings. It was now established that the North Pole was not located on land, nor on a permanent ice sheet, but on shifting, unpredictable pack ice. The Arctic Ocean was, in fact, a deep basin. From its

careful and sustained scientific observations the voyage of the Fram provided the first detailed oceanographic information from the Arctic.

The *Fram* voyage was Nansen's final expedition. He was appointed as a research professor at the University of Christiania in 1897. In his later career he served the newly independent kingdom of Norway in many different capacities, and was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1922, in recognition of his work on behalf of refugees globally. He lived an adventurous and very full life.