The Legend Of Etah

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The first expedition to reach the South Pole was that led by the Norwegian explorer, Roald Amundsen, in 1911. Legend has it that Amundsen used Samoyed dogs, and that the first living thing to set foot on the South Pole was a Samoyed dog named “Etah” who supposedly led one of the teams. In his later years, Etah was owned by de Mercy Argenteau, Princesse de Montglyon, whose memoirs give rise to the legend. As will be shown herein, that legend is complete fiction, and neither Etah nor any other Samoyed has ever set foot on the South Pole. There are several “players” in the Etah legend, and we will deal with each of them in turn.

Princess de Montglyon was born of Belgian nobility and spent much of her life among the social circles of Europe’s upper crust. She immigrated to the US circa 1906. Her ancestral castle was destroyed during the German invasion of Belgium at the start of WWI, and she remained a resident of the US until her death in 1925.

The Princess was an active fancier of Collies and Chows before developing an interest in Samoyeds. According to AKC records, Argenteau Kennels was the owner of the first AKC registered Samoyed, “Moustan of Argenteau“. who was registered in 1906. The Princess also owned the first two AKC Champion Samoyeds. de Mercy Argenteau thus has a legitimate place in Samoyed history. The somewhat romantic story of how the Princess acquired Moustan has been told and retold in Samoyed breed literature. The first telling seems to be by Keyte-Perry (circa 1963’: 19-20), and it was repeated in all three editions of the Ward’s book as well as others. The story is taken directly from the Princess’s memoirs (de Mercy Argenteau, 1925:264-269).

The dog, Etah, is also mentioned in the memoirs of the Princess, but in a very limited way. Part of the book’s dedication says “Also to the affectionate remembrance of ETAH.“ A photograph of a Samoyed dog opposite page 304 carries the caption: “ETAH. SON OF ANARCTIC BUCK, LEADER OF AMUNDSEN’S TEAM DURING THE SOUTH POLE EXPEDITION“

(1) The Princess elsewhere makes absolutely no mention of Etah, and he
remains identified only by that one photo and simple caption. Etah was never registered or shown, and seemingly never bred from, so he would be of zero significance in Samoyed breed history except for the contention that he was at the South Pole with Amundsen.

The story of Etah seems to have been first picked up by Bob & Dolly Ward (1971:28-29). It was repeated in the subsequent editions of their work (1985 & 1998), and has been repeated by other authors and widely accepted. The Wards recognized the fallacy of Etah being a “... son of Antarctic Buck ...” as professed in the caption in the book by de Mercy Argenteau, and they wisely did not repeat it. (All of Antarctic Buck’s progeny are accounted for, and all were owned and bred from in Britain.) However, for some inexplicable reason, the Wards embraced the idea of Etah being on the Amundsen expedition, and not only repeated it, but embellished it with the notion that Etah was “the first living thing to set foot on the South Pole.” That myth is now firmly embedded in Samoyed breed lore. The Wards referenced the book by Amundsen, but they seemingly ignored the wealth of significant information he gave about his dogs. Even when they summarized his exploits they erred –

in trivial ways. They said that Amundsen “... returned from the South Pole with four men, one sledge, and 12 surviving dogs”. The correct numbers are five men (including Amundsen himself, two sledges, and 11 surviving dogs, as will be cited later herein. They also say that 27 dogs were turned over to Mawson in Australia. but Amundsen says 21. (The Wards also misspelled “Montgylon,” an error endlessly copied by other authors.)

So ... we have the Wards largely to thank for the legend of Etah. But, that is very strange. Bob & Dolly Ward were among the few Samoyed breed authors to have done significant original research, and their book, in all its versions, remains a very important contribution to Samoyed literature. The Wards were true scholars. Bob & Dolly were neighbors and friends of this author. We shared research materials on some topics, and I have repeatedly cited their work as a source of information. It seems to be simply an example of the old adage that all humans make mistakes. May Bob and Dolly rest in peace.

To understand why the story of Etah cannot possibly be true, we have only to look at Amundsen’s own words describing his South Pole expedition (Amundsen, 1913 & 1928). At the time of undertaking that expedition,
Amundsen was an experienced explorer of some accomplishment. He had previously been to the Antarctic region at the end of the 19th century aboard the ship Belgica which, under the Belgian flag, had carried the first men known to have wintered in Antarctica. In 1903-1906 Amundsen became the first to navigate the entire Northwest Passage.

Amundsen planned his expeditions with the greatest care, and in meticulous detail. In planning his South Pole expedition, Amundsen thoroughly studied every previous polar expedition, trying to identify the reasons for their respective successes and failures. A big concern of all explorers was the choice of motive power. Dogs had been used of course, along with horses and ponies. Jackson had experimented with reindeer. Shackelton had experimented with motor vehicles, and Scott repeated that experiment. Some resorted to manpower only, with no draft animals. Amundsen concluded, quite correctly it turned out, that the only way the goal could be achieved was through the use of dogs, and he wanted the toughest, most powerful animals available. These were the Eskimo dogs of Greenland. These are dogs in the 75 to 105 pound range. We might note that other explorers had sought those dogs also. Even Nansen, who was the first explorer to use our Samoyed, had thought of the Greenland and Hudson Bay dogs, but was turned off by the difficulty in obtaining them (Nansen, 1900:47). Amundsen, however, had the necessary contacts to obtain the Greenland dogs. Amundsen (1913:VI:57) describes arranging for “... 100 of the finest Greenland dogs ...” through the director of the Royal Greenland Trading Company, with the dogs to be delivered to Norway in July, 1910. Amundsen (1913:VI : I OS-I 06) describes bringing 97 Greenland dogs on board the Fram (Nansen’s former ship, obtained by Amundsen and retrofitted for this expedition).

When Amundsen (1928:69) was later discussing the factors affecting his expedition, he says “... the one which was most essential to our success was our use of dogs.” Throughout his journal, Amundsen (1913) devotes many pages to describing every aspect of the dogs and their management, training, and performance. He describes the difficulties in managing 97 dogs on board a small ship for a long and difficult voyage. Starting with 97 dogs, a few were lost in various ways during the 5-month voyage to Antarctica. He arrived with 116 dogs, including puppies born in route (VI : 169). He notes that they were “... as wild as wolves ...” and even after living and working together for many
months, fights were not infrequent. The vast majority of his dogs were males. for he notes that in April, 1911 “... the entire feminine population – eleven in number. ..“ were all pregnant at the same time (VI :260).

Amundsen set up depots of supplies along his southern route, and then waited out the winter. He started his dash to the Pole with five men and 52 dogs. The dogs were in teams of 13 for each of four sledges. He returned with all five men, 11 healthy dogs, and two sledges. They had covered 1860 miles in 99 days in the world’s harshest environment (1913:V2: 173-17 4). After leaving Antarctica, the Fram sailed to Australia, and Amundsen turned over 21 dogs to the Australian expedition led by Sir Douglas Mawson. The 11 dogs that had been to the Pole, along with seven pups, remained with the Fram (1913:V2:352).

Amundsen’s use of the dogs was, as with all explorers. necessarily harsh. At times the dogs had to be whipped to keep them working, and whip handles were used to break up fights. A few dogs collapsed and died in harness. Others became so emaciated that they had to be killed. As the expedition progressed, loads lightened, and fewer dogs were needed. The surplus were killed to feed their comrades and the men as well. Amundsen (1928: 70) describes the planning for the expedition, and says that “... there are about fifty pounds of edible food in the carcass of an Eskimo dog“. Amundsen was by no means hard-hearted toward his dogs. He felt respect and affection for most of them, but he was a resolute and infinitely pragmatic man who would not let sentiment interfere with doing what was necessary. About butchering the dogs, Amundsen says, “It was hard but it had to be done.” (1913:V2:62).

Amundsen (1913:V2: 130) also tells us precisely about “the first living thing to set foot on the South Pole.“ Amundsen got to the Pole with four men besides himself: Olav Bjaaland, Helmer Hanssen, Sverre Hassel, and Oscar Wisting. They had two sledges, each pulled by eight dogs. The dogs were “fan-hitched“ to the sledges, so there were no “lead dogs“. On the final day to the pole, December 16, 1911, the group traveled in a specific order. First came the “forerunner“, which was Bjaaland. The forerunner set the course and looked for crevasses and other dangers. He was followed by Hassel. Next came the sledge team driven by Hanssen, and he was followed by the team driven by Wisting. Amundsen himself brought up the rear. That then was the order of “first living things“ to reach the South Pole.
So, Amundsen used only Greenland Eskimo dogs, and there is no possibility of his having included any Siberian animals. The idea of introducing a little Samoyed into a team of those large beasts is preposterous. The Samoyed would only make a light hors d’oeuvre. Also, the fan-hitched teams of Amundsen’s group had no “lead dogs“, and Amundsen himself was not driving a team on the approach to the Pole. Lastly, the first living thing on the South Pole was the man, Olav Bjaaland.

Princess de Montglyon herself may have made up the story about Etah to give some status to a favorite pet. It would have seemed harmless enough at the time. However, there is another possibility. Etah was seemingly sold or given to the Princess. That brings us to the last “player“ in the Etah legend - the unknown person or persons who provided Etah to the Princess. Etah ‘s fictitious heritage may have been invented by such a person to promote the transaction. The Princess had mostly show dogs, but might have been enticed to take on a pet having an allegedly illustrious background.

The name “Etah“ is peculiar also. One of this author’s correspondents noted that “Etah“ is the name of a town in Greenland used as a staging area by Peary for his arctic expeditions, but it’s hard to imagine why a Samoyed dog would be named after a Greenland town (Newman, 2005). Another correspondent discussed the observation that “Etah“ is “hate“spelled backwards (Newton, 2005). Maybe it’s just coincidence, or maybe the name was chosen to signify that the loving Samoyed is the opposite of “hate“. Or could it be part of a prank that someone was playing on the Princess? Unfortunately, the details of Etah ‘s true background remain a mystery.

In summary, the legend of Etah, like many other myths of Samoyed history, is total fiction with no foundation in fact.

Footnotes
(1) There are two possible interpretations of the caption on Etah’s photo: 1) Etah was a son of Antarctic Buck [and] was the leader of Amundsen’s sled team; or 2) Etah was a son of Antarctic Buck [who] was the leader of Amundsen’s sled team. However, the second interpretation would be absurd because Antarctic Buck died in 1909, a year before the start of Amundsen’s expedition.

References:
Amundsen. Roald, 1913, South Pole. An Account of The Norwegian Antarctic


Newton, Margaret 2005 personal commucation of the date 10/20/2005.


Ethan (Japanese: ヒビキ, Hibiki) is the main playable character in Pokémon Gold and Silver and is the male choice in Pokémon Crystal, Pokémon HeartGold and SoulSilver. In Crystal, his female counterpart is Kris, while in HeartGold and SoulSilver, his female counterpart is Lyra. Ethan's journey as a Trainer begins when Professor Elm asks him to run an errand for Mr. Pokémon, who lives north of Cherrygrove City on Route 30. Because he may encounter dangerous wild Pokémon along the way, Elm gives him a