

An Insurance Salesman and a Doctor Walk Into a Bar, and End Up at the North Pole

And it all started at Ely's Farm Lake

The 1986 Steger North Pole Expedition put Ely on the map for extreme adventure. But of the dozen polar treks that have based here (surely a world record!), the quirkiest by far was the first: the little-known 1968 Plaisted Polar Expedition. And it all started at Ely's Farm Lake.

In the early '60s, Ralph Plaisted, a high school drop-out from the Moose Lake area, seized on the new-fangled technology of 'motor toboggans.' At his cabin on Farm Lake's "Plaisted Island" (at the river mouth & shown below), he'd putt around in one of the first "Ski-Doos." Though little more than a riding lawn mower with skis, it was the pride of Canada's Bombardier Company. In 1965, he got the gumption to putt his prototype machine 250 miles from Farm Lake to his home in White Bear Lake, surely the first long distance sno-go trek.

Then the "Big Idea" was born. While bragging up his accomplishment at Duluth's Pickwick Bar, his skeptical friend Dr. Art Aufderheide, said, "If this contraption is so great, why not do something really spectacular – like drive it the North Pole?" Ralph eyes widened as he swirled his scotch on the rocks, "Game on!"



With a crew of middle-aged suburban dads (including Art) they began training. They spent January nights fending off deep cold in crude sleeping bags on the ice of Farm Lake. They piled up ice blocks like Arctic ridges to challenge their 16-hp machines. They plunged into the freezing water to prep for mishaps. And Ralph, a 'Barnum & Bailey' bigger-than-life character, put his sales bluster to work (he had an insurance business) and cajoled over 50 sponsors on board, including Bombardier.

In March 1967, they launched from Ellesmere, Canada's northernmost island. It was a rough start. They got turned around in the blowing snow & were headed south. Fortunately their resupply aircraft --set to drop them gas, beer, steaks, smokes, booze, all the necessities-- as they

progressed, caught site of their error & dropped corrective messages scrawled on cigarettes packs. A month later, pinned down for a week by an enormous storm, they reluctantly pulled the plug on the trek, 400 miles from the Pole.

Undaunted, they returned in 1968, this time with the dashing young scion of the Bombardier company Jean Luc who named his machine "Le Swinger." Their other 3 Ski-Doos were "Polecat," "Caribou Queen," and "Little Lady." Another rough start. Setting camp on Day 1, Ralph found that his crew, in their flurried departure from base, had neglected to grab the first kit, repair tools, and radio generator. He was livid. But handing out soup in the frigid tent, he sullenly admitted his own mistake. "Shut up and drink it," he said, "I forgot the silverware."

They began making miles but challenges continued. Engines seized. Walt Pederson, a St. Cloud farmer and 'engine magician,' rebuilt them under a tarp at -60 temps. Punctured fuel tanks saturated sleeping bags so they zipped remaining ones together and huddled up. Air-dropped resupplies proved very tricky maneuvers, though they were mostly concerned about their cans of beer bursting upon impact. When another huge storm pinned them down, they hit the breaking point and their tent took on the air of a confessional. Ralph shared regret about an affair he'd had. Walt lamented his abusive parents which had driven him to risky ventures to overcome his sense of worthlessness.



The weather broke clean and off then went with steady progress. But the ice was thinning with spring thaw. Then a specter appeared on the horizon, shimmering and ethereal -- an expanse of open ocean 2 miles wide. The scale was terrifying. Waiting at its edge for days, they carefully probed it's growing skin of ice. When it reached a couple

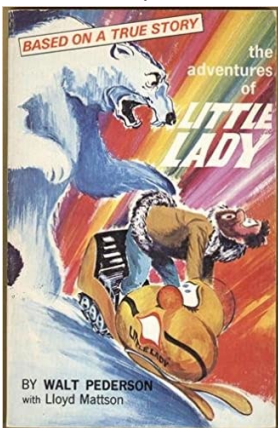
inches thick, Walt shouted “Let’s go!”. They roared across at full throttle as the rubbery salt ice bent threateningly beneath them. Walt’s machine bogged down. Alarmingly, his track punched through, but his skis held on the gelatinous surface. Ralph gingerly crawled alongside, gave Walt’s skis a tug and saved him from the grasp of the frigid sea. “A miracle,” recalled Walt.

On April 15 they made history – the first confirmed surface trek to the Top of the World. But their unlikely triumph was largely lost to history. Ralph snubbed National Geographic’s cover-story contract offer in hopes of bigger glory, which never came (he envisioned a New York ticker-tape parade). And they all trundled back to their quiet lives.



But the Farm Lake connection continued: In the middle of a January night in 1977, a knock sounded on a door of a cabin in the lake’s water-access cabin bay. Communally owned by friends of Paul Schurke, it became the base for Wilderness Inquiry, the non-profit adventure program for disabled persons that led Paul to Ely. That night they opened the door to find a bedraggled ice-encrusted crew: Plaisted and buddies. With their machines mired in deep slush, they were near frozen and needed help. But after thawing out around the cabin’s stove, they reverted to form. Ralph pulled steaks and scotch from his pack and they partied through the night.

In the mid ‘90s, journalist Charles Kuralt vacationed in Ely every August. He had covered Plaisted’s 1967 North Pole attempt for CBS and wrote a book about it. In Ely, he helped keep struggling WELY on the air. In 1997, he joined Paul Schurke and Steve Piragis in the announcer booth for the broadcast of their “Wintergreen Adventure Hour.” He shared tales of his Plaisted connection and, on August 28, sang happy birthday to 12-year-old Bria Schurke over the Ely airwaves, a prized Schurke family memory.



Art Aufderheide, who became the world’s top forensic pathologist of ancient cultures, became a close friend of Will Steger and advised Will & Paul on their North Pole plans.

Following that successful 1986 expedition, Walt showed up at a 1988 talk Paul was giving at this alma mater, St. John’s University. Then in his 60s, Walt implored Paul to help him find a way to the South Pole. When Paul declined, Walt meekly acknowledged that “God gave me more ambition than any man should have.” He wrote an endearing book about the Plaisted trek from the perspective of his Ski-Doo: “The Adventures of Little Lady.”

Plaisted team Jerry Pitzl, a high-school teacher turned polar navigator, tutored Paul on the use of a mariners sextant to find the Pole through celestial navigation, the only means in those pre-GPS times.

Ralph advised Will and Paul on their North Pole plans as well. During their preparations, they met Ralph and wife Rikki at their trailer park home in Wyoming, MN. Paul commented

that a U of M psychological research project was in the works for their 8-member team, which also included Minnesotans Ann Bancroft and Bob Mantell. Ralph responded that his crew had been part of a research project as well, a psychological test to determine their suitability for an arduous trek. “We all failed,” he said with a laugh as he swirled his scotch on the rocks.

by Paul Schurke, Ely, MN, August 2020

FOOTNOTE: In 2016, Hollywood optioned a film on the Plaisted Expedition. Appropriately, Will Ferrell was pegged to play a swashbuckling Ralph (who passed away in 2008). Film plans on are hold but let’s hope Ferrell will reenact training scenes on Farm Lake. The film’s working title? The same as this story.

