Matthew Henson, American HERO

LOYAL BUT UNSUNG
Robert Peary's "faithful colored assistant" in a photo taken by the admiral in 1891. Henson, who took part in eight arctic expeditions, was known to the Eskimos as "Matthew the kind one."

THROUGH THICK AND THIN
In 1909, Henson photographed the four Eskimos who accompanied him and Peary to the North Pole. Ten miles from the pole, Ootah (second from left) pulled Henson to safety after he fell through thin ice.

BY PETER ANDERSON

Professor S. Allen Counter of Harvard is a neurophysiologist who studies in Stockholm during the summer. He was having dinner there with other scientists one night in 1977 or 1978, he's not sure which, when conversation turned to arctic explorers. Counter said a black man named Matthew Henson had contributed greatly to Robert Peary's success in reaching the North Pole. Then someone said there were rumors that Peary had sired some children in Greenland; in fact, it was pretty well known he had a child by an Eskimo woman. Counter began to wonder. Henson had been isolated in the Arctic for up to four years at a stretch. Perhaps Henson also had descendants in Greenland. And then someone at the dinner table said some of the Eskimos in a certain part of Greenland were darker than others.

Counter is a black man, and Henson is among his heroes not just because Henson reached the pole in 1909 but because of the intelligence and strength it took him to get there. Henson started out as Peary's servant but became, in effect, his executive

PETER ANDERSON IS A STAFF WRITER FOR THE *GLOBE MAGAZINE*.

After finding the Eskimo sons of arctic explorers Robert Peary and Matthew Henson, a professor dedicates himself to righting the wrongs of history

Photographs courtesy of Dr. S. Allen Counter, Harvard University

REUNION IN THE ARCTIC

From left: Kale Peary, the son of Robert Peary; Harvard University professor S. Allen Counter, who traveled to Greenland in 1986; Anaukaq Henson, the son of Matthew Henson; and Kale's son Talilanguaq.

POLAR EXPLORERS

Henson (second from left) with Peary's Greenland expeditionary team in 1891.

THE HONORS CAME LATE

Henson at age 81 with a watch presented to him by a black political group.

officer and companion for eight arctic expeditions. It was Henson who spoke the Eskimo language best and who broke trail for Peary and who, when Peary was disabled by frostbite in 1899, lashed Peary to a sledge and took him by dog team 250 miles to a ship where a doctor amputated all but the little toe on each of Peary's feet. And, another time, they had nearly starved, saved by eating their dogs. Once, weakened by starvation and exposure and his teeth hanging loosely in his shrunken gums, Henson had been nursed by an Eskimo woman who gave him warm seal blood. That woman and her husband, Kongolukso, slept naked against Henson, one on each side of him, their bodies keeping him warm and alive.

Henson was known as Miy Paluk, which translates as "Matthew the kind one." Counter thought it likely he would find Eskimo grandchildren of Peary and perhaps of Henson as well when he arrived in northern Greenland in the summer of 1986. He had brought some instruments with him to measure hearing loss of Eskimo hunters because nerve hearing loss is one of his interests and because he found some evidence in scientific literature that hearing loss was a serious problem among Eskimos of lower Greenland. If he did not find Henson's grandchildren or those of Peary, he would have some scientific data to show for his trip.

Counter knew the population of polar Eskimos was small, and that would make the hearing study interesting, and he could turn over the results to the Danish government. Counter studied more than 100 Eskimos and found that hearing loss was severe among the hunters, even the young hunters. "The nerve can't be regenerated, so the loss is

Continued on page 42

Henson

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 20

permanent. I took a special new ear plug and put them in ears and watched them hunt. They would turn [after firing a rifle] and smile and say, 'It hurts little, it hurts little.' "

This scientific finding, however important, was eclipsed by the two old men Counter found. He had talked to several people before going to Greenland, seeking information about light-skinned Eskimos who might be related to Peary and dark-skinned Eskimos who might be related to Henson. A Danish itinerant doctor told him if he went to a certain place in Greenland he would find people called ***kulknocktooki,*** meaning dark-skinned people. After arriving at Thule Air Base, Counter went north by helicopter to a settlement where he hoped to find the ***kulknocktooki.***

The helicopter landed at a place too small to be called a village. It was a settlement of about 30 people on the northwestern coast of Greenland. An Eskimo greeted him there, a man who spoke some English, and he led Counter to a place where he could put down his gear. Then the Eskimo took him to where there were several dark-skinned Eskimos. By this time word of the black American man had spread in the settlement, and when Counter entered the settlement, an old man was coming out of a small wooden house. His name was Anaukaq, a man born in 1906.

Through the interpreter Anaukaq said to Counter, "You are Henson, you come here to find me." Anaukaq's logic was understandable. Counter was the first black person to visit this settlement; who else would he be but a relative? Counter said he was not a Henson but an admirer of Henson and was looking for his relatives. Anaukaq said, "I am his son."

Anaukaq was the son of Miy Paluk, Matthew Henson, and he was 80 years old. "I had no idea, no belief that I eventually would come up with the kind of find I did," Counter says. "It is remarkable. It is remarkable. To start off just with an idea and to reach it and find an 80-year-old

son of your hero."

Anaukaq had curly hair, was clearly a black man, Counter says, but he wanted more proof. He relied on oral history, word-of-mouth from the old to the young. "I've always felt that Western anthropologists had been somewhat disappointing in their approach to things like this. Unless some white wrote it down or said it, it was in doubt. But the indigenous peoples have their truths as well." Counter listened to the stories and showed old pictures of Henson. "Every time they saw a picture they delighted in it. They started naming people, and sometimes they would correct Peary's captions: 'Oh, no, that's the wrong name,' something like that. I documented on film interviews with the older people about the authenticity of the man I met. Elders throughout the village, people 70 to 80 years old, over and over. There was no question it was Henson's son. Could it be the son of someone else? Oh, no. They remembered the time, or their parents told them the time they were born, and so forth."

Anaukaq told Counter about a childhood friend he called "Cousin" who lived about 90 miles north, and Counter went there, first by helicopter, then 30 miles by boat to an island of another polar Eskimo settlement, the northernmost nonmilitary settlement in the world. Counter found a white-skinned Eskimo. "He again said the same thing. 'You must be a Henson.'" Counter had found Kale, 80-year-old son of Adm. Peary and Alakaseena.

"I was again shocked to find a son of Peary that I could confirm," Counter says. There are a number of light-skinned Eskimos in Greenland, offspring of Danes and Eskimos, but Counter satisfied himself that Kale was Peary's son. Counter feels his interviews of people on film document that as fact. "[But] one article in a New York paper says these are people that Dr. Counter *says* are sons of Henson and Peary. There is no question in my mind. You don't put your academic credentials on the line. I believe there is conclusive evidence, and there is no evidence to the contrary," Counter says.

Counter is 39, an associate professor of neuroscience, a neurophysiologist at the Massachusetts General Hospital and Harvard Medical School, and is director of the Harvard Foundation for Intercultural and Race Relations. He went to Sweden in June 1986, financing the trip himself, and spent about a month getting ready. He bought cold-weather tents, sleeping bags, mountain climbers' head gear, snow glasses, special boots, coveralls of different kinds, including a red pair that frightened whales. "So when I went out whale hunting I had to switch to blue."

He had snow melters and cookware and stoves, and says, "I was loaded." As it turned out, he often could use the tents of Eskimos and also their stoves. Henson and Peary had much equipment, also, but had to carry it all on sleds pulled by dogs to the pole. They left land on March 1, 1909, to travel 400 miles over ice on their last try to reach the pole. Peary's plan was to have several men and sledges to carry all the supplies. At certain points men and their dogs would leave the expedition until only two Americans and four Eskimos and their dogs would make the last leg to the pole.

On March 14 Peary sent back a white man, two Eskimos, one sledge, and 12 dogs. March 15: Donald B. MacMillan, two Eskimos, two sledges, and 14 dogs turned back south. March 26: Another white man was sent back and on the way was shot and killed by one of the two Eskimos with him. Two more white men and more Eskimos were sent back by Peary the commander. Peary had not announced beforehand who the last man would be, the one to go to the pole with him. Five white men were sent back by Peary; he chose Henson for the last leg.

Peary, Henson, and four Eskimos — Ootah, Ooqueah, Seegloo, and Eginwah — were left. Peary had chosen Henson for the last 132 miles to the pole because he could not do without him, because Henson was strong, could handle the dogs, and could speak the language of the Eskimos. Peary himself was hobbled, his feet maimed by frostbite on an earlier expedition.

Later, MacMillan, one of the white men selected to turn back early, wrote:

"Matthew Henson first went north with Peary in 1891. He was with him on his long trip

over the Greenland Ice Cap in 1893. He was with him when he rounded the northern end of Greenland in 1900. He was with him off Cape Hecla in 1902. . . . He was the most popular man aboard the ship with the Eskimos. He could talk their language like a native. He made all the sledges which went to the pole. He made all the stoves. Henson, the colored man, went to the pole with Peary because he was a better man than any of his white assistants. . . ."

On April 2, 1909, Henson and Ootah left camp to make trail, marching for 10 hours, stopping to build igloos for the overtaking party. On April 5, only 10 miles from the pole, Henson went through thin ice but was pulled to safety by Ootah, who then took off Henson's boots and put his feet against his bare belly to warm them. On April 6, Henson and Ootah reached a place on the ice where there was no wind coming from the north. They had reached the pole and built an igloo. Peary and the three other Eskimos arrived 45 minutes later. Peary wrote in his diary, "The Pole at last. . . . My dream and goal for 20 years. Mine at last! I cannot bring myself to realize it. It seems all so simple and commonplace." That's what the Eskimos thought, too, that the ice was common, the same at the pole as it was at home. And they had 400 miles to go to get back to land before the full moon of May 3 would bring flood tides that could break the ice they had to walk on.

There were many honors for Peary, including promotion to rear admiral. Henson was left out; three times Congress failed to vote him a pension. Professor Counter says such treatment attracted him to the story of Henson. "He was excluded from the Explorers' Club, of which his commander [Peary] was president. It was some 30 years before they finally inducted him. There's no excuse for that. Having met at least four presidents — Roosevelt shook his hand, Taft shook his hand, Warren Harding shook his hand, Eisenhower shook his hand — and not one thought he should be considered for burial among the heroes at Arlington National Cemetery." Counter says someone in the white com-

Courtesy of Dr. S. Allen Counter, Harvard University

Dr. Counter and Matthew Henson's grandson Avataq prepare to travel by dogsled.

munity should have stood up and said "fair's fair" and given honors to Henson, the self-educated black man. According to Henson biographer Floyd Miller, Peary would praise Henson as "my faithful colored assistant," but could not bring himself to drop the word "colored."

Matthew Henson was born in *Charles County*, Maryland, ran away from his widowed stepmother at about age 11, was taken in by a kindly black woman in Washington, D.C., and at 12 went to sea as a cabin boy on a sailing ship. In six years, under a wise captain, Henson learned to read and write and navigate. His friend the captain died when Henson was 18, and Henson held several jobs after that — stevedore, chauffeur, messenger, common laborer and finally stock clerk in a hat store in Washington, where Peary hired him as a valet on the recommendation of the store's owner. With some breaks in service, Henson was with Peary for eight arctic expeditions over 22 years until their last one, in 1909, the year they reached the North Pole.

Peary was retired on an admiral's pension; Henson was nearly broke in New York. In 1913 a black politician got Henson a job with US Customs, an appointment signed by President Taft. But it wasn't much of a job, a messenger with pay of $900 a year. Later he rose to mail clerk and made $2,000. His wife, Lucy, worked at a bank; they had no children and lived in Harlem on West 150th Street. In 1936, at age 70, Henson was retired with a pension of $85.72 a month. Some honors would come to him. He was elected a member of the Explorers' Club in 1937; in 1948 the Geographic Society of Chicago gave him a gold medal; in 1950 he was honored at the Pentagon and received a salute from President Truman; in 1954 Eisenhower received him in the White House. He died on March 9, 1955, at age 88.

Counter outfitted himself with equipment in Sweden in June 1986 and applied for permission to fly into Thule, a Danish airfield shared by the United States. In the end he had to return to the United States and fly from a military base in New Jersey to Greenland, arriving in July. He stayed about five weeks, until the end of August, in an area north of Thule in northwestern Greenland, where there are about 400 polar Eskimos (Peary called them arctic Highlanders) spread along the coast in settlements as small as eight houses.

It was just good fortune that Counter found Henson's son in the first place he looked, though Counter had been directed to the general area where the *kulknocktooki*, the dark-skinned people, lived. Anaukaq Henson was living in his son's house, a wood-frame building built off the ground, above the snow, a box-shaped building with one room downstairs and a loft upstairs. All houses are called igloos by these Eskimos, whether made of ice or of stones and dirt; the wooden igloos were introduced by the Danes to a country where there is no timber. There is no electricity in the house, but a generator in the settlement provides electricity for the church and school. They use lanterns for light in Anaukaq's house, but there is natural light much of the year. Though there is little light in December, January, and February, by March there is much light. By April it is light 24 hours a day until the end of September. As Counter remembers Anaukaq's house, there was heat from a stove that burned bottled gas, fuel brought up once a year by Danish ship. There was no refrigerator and no need of one.

There was a frozen seal hanging in

the house, and as it thawed, people would cut small pieces from the carcass and eat it raw. The skin of the seal is carefully taken from the carcass because of its value for making boots and jackets. Much of the seal blubber is fed to the dogs as are the entrails, though some intestines are saved and used as tubing. Counter ate raw seal but preferred it cooked. "It's a strange taste. You feel in your mouth beef but you taste fish. I thought [cooked seal] was delicious. The only thing I liked better was whale. They also hunt birds a lot. They shoot these little auks and store them, about 100 or so, in sealskin pouches and bury them for about a year and let them get nice and vinegary, nice and juicy. They bring them up and sit around and eat them. It's a delicacy, [but] I can't say they were delicious." Counter tells this story in his Harvard office and laughs. "I can say it tasted like dead birds."

Counter saw the sons and grandsons of Henson and Peary kill several seals and saw Henson's 9-year-old great-grandson kill three. Counter thought whale hunting was more exciting. "You sit up on a mountainside looking out over the fiord, watching for a whale hump to come out of the water, and I sat there with them, drinking cup after cup of tea and sleeping, taking turns on watch." Then someone would yell, and everyone would jump up, and the designated hunters would paddle kayaks out to the whale and toss a harpoon into the creature. The harpoon is attached by rope to a blown-up sealskin and then to the kayak. When the whale was clearly exhausted and surfaced, the Eskimos would shoot it. Counter marveled at their confidence, and understood why they kept their rifles loose in the bottom of the kayaks and didn't tie them down. They had no intention of being capsized and knocked into water cold enough to send a man into shock.

These Eskimos have had rifles since the time of Peary and Henson but used string bows and crossbows until the 1950s. Counter saw Peary's grandson Talilangquaq kill two whales with harpoon and rifle.

Counter learned that Anaukaq Henson had five sons and 22 grandchildren; Kale Peary had five children — three daughters and two sons — and,

Counter thinks, 18 grandchildren. Counter, after returning to Harvard in 1986, went back to Greenland that November and at that time discussed bringing some of the Peary and Henson descendants to the United States. Anaukaq wanted to see where his father, Matthew Henson, was born and where he was buried, and Counter was able to arrange that. Counter brought Anaukaq Henson and Kale Peary to Cambridge on May 31 for a celebration at Harvard called "The North Pole Family Reunion." John H. Johnson, publisher of *Ebony* magazine, helped finance the reunion and spoke at the banquet. Anaukaq was accompanied by his five sons and three of his grandchildren; Kale came with his oldest son and oldest grandson. Counter says it took some doing to get them visas because communications are difficult out on the ice.

Counter wrote letters to the US Embassy in Denmark to get visas allowing the Eskimos to enter the United States. The paperwork was complicated by the most basic of reasons. "Most of the men were out hunting because they needed food for their families and for their dogs while they were gone [to the United States]. So I tried to contact someone who would contact them. I managed to get some things signed with the help of a small police outpost up there." He got passports made up and sent to Denmark. And the American Embassy in Denmark granted Counter permission to sign the visas, one of the embassy officials remarking it was the first time he saw listed as occupation on a visa "retired hunter."

The Eskimo descendants of Henson and Peary were welcomed at Harvard's Memorial Church on May 31 and honored at a banquet at Harvard the next day. While in Cambridge, Kale Peary met his half brother, Robert E. Peary Jr., 83, of Augusta, Maine, and Anaukaq Henson met a cousin, Olive Henson, of Dorchester, who is the daughter of Matthew Henson's brother. June 3 in Washington was declared Matthew Henson Day by D.C. Mayor Marion Barry Jr., and Kale Peary laid a wreath at the grave of his father, Adm. Peary, in Arlington National Cemetery. Counter says of that day: "We had a full honor guard from the Navy. Absolutely impressive. Then a welcome from the superintendent of the national cemetery. Then we had a letter from President Reagan presented by Mr. Charles Untermeyer, assistant secretary of the Navy, who read the letter from Reagan and presented it to the family. I spoke about the fact that Matthew Henson, who by all accounts deserved equal credit for the North Pole discovery, should be interred in Arlington National Cemetery near Peary because they were inseparable in their arctic lives, and it is important as heroes they be inseparable again."

There was more ceremony. The Eskimos were taken by bus to Charles County, Maryland, and Anaukaq saw where his father was born. Just a foundation and chimney remain of the house, and it was some distance back from the road in the woods. Counter was worried that the walk might be difficult for the frail Anaukaq, "but he insisted. He stood there, and I said, 'This is where your father was born and raised.' " Anaukaq took two bricks from the chimney to bring back to Greenland.

Continued

He was honored by the commissioners of Charles County in a televised ceremony. Later, in New York, Counter took him to the Explorers' Club, where he saw a picture of his father and one of the sleds used in the trek to the pole. Anaukaq laid a wreath at the grave of his father in New York, and Counter remembers that Anaukaq said, "Miy Paluk sleeps here, and very soon I will sleep, too. I am so pleased to finally see where he sleeps." Counter says it was so sad that he said to Anaukaq, " 'I am coming [to Greenland] 10 years from now, and you'll be hobbling with your cane still,' and he burst out laughing."

Counter has written a book, *Peary, Henson, and the North Pole Secret,* which he was revising this summer, and has a film of his Greenland adventure, narrated partly by himself, that he expects will be shown on television. The book and the film will tell the story of Kale Peary and Anaukaq Henson, but Counter says the story will not have come full circle until Matthew Henson's remains are reburied in Arlington National Cemetery with other heroes, something he thinks will be done eventually. He thinks the Peary-Henson partnership is "the ultimate race-relations story."

Anaukaq Henson could not be expected to understand why his father is considered less a hero than Perry in the United States; among Eskimos in Greenland it is the other way around. There was a ceremony at the grave of Matthew Henson in New York, where there were military guards, a proclamation from Mayor Ed Koch, and a representative of Gov. Mario Cuomo. Counter tried to explain to Anaukaq the racial prejudice that existed in Henson's time, but the concept is difficult for Anaukaq, who does not experience prejudice in Greenland because he is darker than other Eskimos. Counter thinks Anaukaq is not bitter because his father is not buried with Peary, only confused, because, for one thing, the mayor of Washington, D.C., the nation's capital city, is a black man.

Matthew Henson has no known children in the United States. His brother, David, worked as a Pullman porter and moved to Boston, perhaps because it was a rail terminus, and lived in the West End with his wife, Maude Briscoe, a woman from Washington, D.C. David had a son, Earl, who married a woman from Nova Scotia named Pearl, and they had three children, two boys, and a girl named Olive.

Olive Henson is 60 years old, grew up on Humboldt Avenue in Roxbury, and works as a mail clerk at the Veterans Administration hospital in Jamaica Plain. "We all knew about Matthew Henson," Olive says. "We visited him in New York and knew he went to the North Pole. He told us many stories and showed us many pictures, but he never mentioned his son. I guess that was a deep, dark secret."

Courtesy of Dr. S. Allen Counter, Harvard University

Aviaq Henson, a great-granddaughter of Matthew Henson, in Greenland.

She met her cousin Anaukaq and his children and grandchildren at Harvard and spoke to him with some difficulty through an Eskimo interpreter. "There was so much love there," Olive says. "I just kept talking, they kept talking," but she is not sure how much anyone really understood.

When Olive Henson was 14 or 15 she was assigned in school to write a biography of a famous person. She wrote about her uncle. "I handed in the paper, and I was told there was no such person, that the whole thing was a lie, that there was nothing in the history book about him." She will not say what school it was, only that it was a parochial school and the teacher was a nun. "One word led to another. She yelled, and I yelled."

She was dismissed and had to have her mother and father come to school to get her readmitted. "I learned a lesson then: to give back to school what they put out and keep what I learn on the outside to myself." Nearly the same thing happened this year to a neighbor's child, she says. But the child could show newspaper stories and an *Ebony* magazine article, and this time the teacher admitted he was wrong and said he was sorry.

Olive Henson says her uncle's achievement in reaching the pole is important because "our young men need heroes other than basketball players. But I'm not knocking basketball players. A hero is a hero. Henson was a hero to Dr. Counter, and if he can be a hero to other black men, we can save some of them." •