Polar Cigarette Cards

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The Arctic and Antarctic have popped up in some of the most unusual places in popular culture, not the least of which is the *cigarette card*.

The cigarette card sprang into existence in the mid to late nineteenth century, and was originally nothing more than a blank card inserted as a stiffener for a paper pack of cigarettes. By the 1880s, American and British companies started putting pictures of products on one side of a card, and later, information related to the picture was added to the other side. People started collecting the cards, thus the hobby of *cartophily* was born.

As a lure to buy more cigarettes, cards were based on a common topic and organized into sets (usually 50 in number). Topics were as diverse as firefighting equipment, British birds and polar exploration. With the success of cigarette cards, other product manufacturers caught onto the idea and began producing similar cards. These were called *trade cards*.

Cigarette and trade cards might reflect the times in which they were produced, so there were several series of cards featuring weapons, uniforms and the like during the First and Second World Wars. They also reached back into history, but were not always accurate in their depictions. For instance, one card purports to show a British sailor from 1602 in "Arctic Kit" – complete with a *penguin* at his feet – in spite of the fact there are no penguins in the Arctic.

While the Arctic was still considered a mysterious place by many people in the late 19th century, the Antarctic was altogether a geographic puzzle. In July 1895, the International Geographical Congress met in London, and it was decided that Antarctica would be the primary focus of new exploration. Up until this time, nobody had explored the hinterland of the frozen continent, and even the vast majority of its coastline was still unknown. The meeting touched off a flurry of activity, and soon thereafter, national expeditions from Britain, Germany and Sweden, as well as private ventures, started organizing.

The sampling of cigarette cards illustrated here were issued by John Player & Sons in 1915 and titled the Polar Exploration A Series. The explanatory notes are taken from the backs of the cards, and reflect the attitudes and knowledge during the times in which they were produced; the author's notations follow in brackets.

1) The Aurora Borealis.

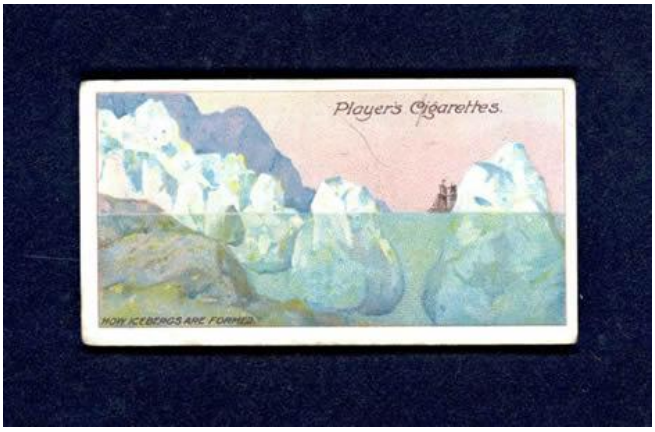
The phenomena known as the Northern Lights appear to be caused by electro-magnetic disturbances, and are closely connected with solar storms. The displays usually take place at a height of 100 to 300 miles [160 to 480 km]. It seems uncertain whether they are or are not accompanied by sound, for while the Lapps claim that the Northern Lights give sounds like the "creaking of the joints of running reindeer," some eminent explorers assert that there is no sound.

[Electric particles put out by the Sun dart through space and are caught by the Earth's magnetic field. These particles then race toward the North and South Magnetic Poles, and in doing so, they agitate the ionized gases that form the upper layers of the atmosphere. Aurorae range in height from 45 to 620 miles (72 to 992 km) above the Earth, averaging 62 miles (99 km) in height. Attempts to record audible sounds during the Aurora have been made, using sophisticated microphones, but no measurements have been recorded. To settle the sound question, one would have to make on the ground instrumental observations of sound, light and the electrical field all at once.]

2) The Aurora Australis.

[An explantory note similar to number one, the Aurora Australis being found in Antarctica.]

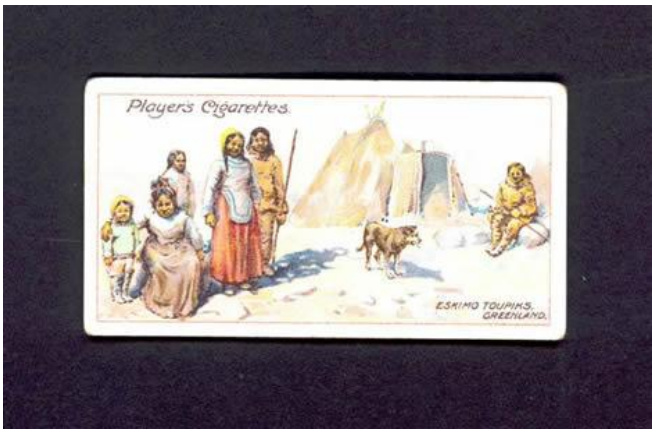
3) How Icebergs are Formed.



On the N.W. of Greenland are great ranges of glaciers. These glaciers are rivers of snow compacted into ice, and in constant motion from the upper Arctic regions of perpetual snow, to the sea. Here the bergs break off by their own weight and float down to warmer latitudes. By far the larger part of an iceberg is invisible, since ice, in order to float must have nine-tenths of its bulk below the water-line.

[West Greenland glaciers produce about 10,000 icebergs a year and an average of 375 flow south of Newfoundland into the North Atlantic shipping lanes, where they become hazardous to navigation. Antarctic icebergs are far greater in number and size than their Arctic counterparts; 90% of the world's mass of icebergs surround Antarctica.]

4) Greenland Eskimo with their Toupiks or Summer Tents.



During summer and autumn the necessity of fishing and hunting makes it important for the Eskimo to have a movable dwelling. Light skin-tents then take the place of the snow-huts of winter. The women sew seal-skin coverings with bone needles, and with narwhal-sinews for thread. The entrance is closed by a curtain of seal-gut, sufficiently translucent to admit light.

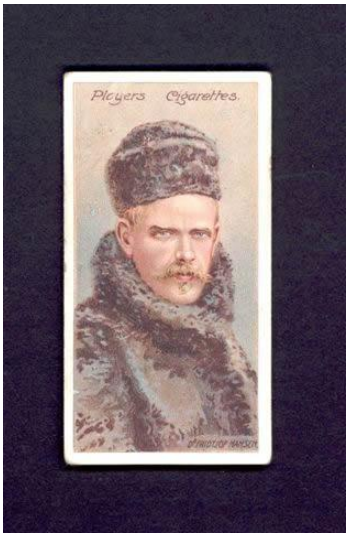
[Once called Eskimo, the aboriginal people of the Arctic and sub-Arctic regions of Siberia, North America and Greenland, are today called Inuit – the name they use for themselves, meaning "real people" or simply "people".]

5) The Discovery of Greenland in 983.

King Eric the Red is one of the heroes of the early Icelandic sagas. Having been banished from Iceland, he set sail in search of a strange land sighted by the Norse viking Gunnbjörn over 100 years previously. There he discovered the country which he called Grönland, and lived there three years. He returned to Iceland, but in 985 came back to Greenland and founded a permanent colony.

[Norse Chieftan Eiríkr Thorvaldsson (Erik the Red) was banished from Iceland for three years after being convicted of manslaughter/murder (accounts vary in this regard). Many years prior to this, his father was kicked out of Norway under similar circumstances. According to legend, Erik deliberately selected the name "Greenland" so as to get others to follow him. It was one of the biggest real estate scams in history. In fact, about 85% of the island's area is covered with an ice cap, extending 1,553 miles (2,484 km) from north to south and up to 650 miles (1,040 km) east to west.]

6) Dr. Fridtjof Nansen, GCVO, FRGS.



Dr. Nansen was born near Christiania [Norway], Oct. 10th, 1861. He was educated at the University of Christiania, and was a naturalist by training. He first visited Greenland in 1882, and in 1888-9 crossed S. Greenland in snow shoes. In June 1893, Nansen sailed from Christiania in the *Fram*, a vessel of 402 tons, intending to drift across the North Pole to Greenland. He reached the highest latitude then attained – 86º 14'.

[Nansen returned to the Arctic several more times before his death in 1930. The *Fram* was used by Otto Sverdrup in his 1898-1902 Norwegian exploring expedition, during which time a group of large islands – now known collectively as the Sverdrup Islands – were discovered and explored west of Ellesmere Island. Additionally, most of the west coast of Ellesmere was explored. Amundsen borrowed *Fram* in a successful bid to discover the South Pole during his 1910-12 expedition. Today, the well known *Fram* is a museum and is housed in a special structure in Bygdøy, outside Oslo.]

7) Andrée's Polar Balloon.

In 1895 Herr Salomon Andrée announced his project to travel to the North Pole by balloon. The required sum of £8,000 was raised by subscription. The balloon was covered with Chinese silk, and inflated with hydrogen; the car being of wood and wickerwork. On July 11th, 1897, the balloon, with Andrée and two others on board, left Spitzbergen. Some weeks later a pigeon message was received, since which no news has been heard.

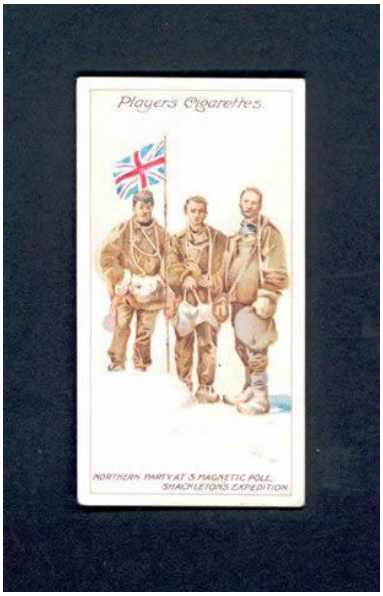
[This was the second attempt in two years for the Swedish North Polar Balloon Expedition, using the hydrogen-filled balloon *Örnen*. Nothing was known of Andrée and his companions until 1930, when a Norwegian expedition unexpectedly discovered remains of their camp. Along with the explorers' bodies, their diaries and other items were recovered and brought home.]

8) A Remarkable Fumarole in the Old Crater of Mount Erebus.

A fumarole, or volcanic vapour well, is usually detected by the thin vapour column issuing from it. In Antarctic regions, however, the cold freezes the vapour as it reaches the surface. Thus there are built up round the orifices ice-mounds which are often of peculiar shape. One observed by the Shackleton Expedition, 1907-09, was in the form of a couchant lion.

[The name *fumarole* comes from the Latin word *fumus* (smoke). It is an opening in any celestial body's crust, often near volcanoes, and releasing steam and gases such as carbon dioxide, sulfur dioxide, hydrochloric acid and hydrogen sulfide.]

9) The Northern Party at the South Magnetic Pole.



The Northern Party, sent by Lieut. Shackleton to the Magnetic Pole, was in charge of Prof. Edgeworth David, F.R.S., of Sydney University. They left winter quarters in Sept. 1908. On Saturday, Jan. 16th, 1909, they reached the calculated position of the Pole – 72º 25' S. latitude, and 155º 16' E. longitude. The Union Jack was hoisted, and the surrounding country formally added to the British Empire.

[The Northern Party was part of Shackleton's 1907-09 expedition, and represented the first successful attempt to reach the South Magnetic Pole and the first ascent of the 12,448-foot (3,794-meter) volcano Mt. Erebus. The mission was accomplished without the aid of dogs or ponies and meant pulling sledges and supplies weighing up to 670 lbs. (300 kg) Like many of the images, the picture on the card was taken from a photograph. Left to right are: Surgeon A. Forbes Mackay, Chief Scientist T.W. Edgeworth David and Physicist Douglas Mawson. Mackay was lost in February 1914, on the Stefansson Canadian Arctic Expedition. David was 50 years old when he led the Northern Party, while his companions on the 1,260-mile (2,028-km) journey were 20 and 24 years his junior. Mawson became the symbol of Australian Antarctic exploration and one of only 18 individuals to earn both the silver and bronze Polar Medals.]

10) The British Antarctic Expedition, 1910: A Motor-Sleigh Tractor

On Wednesday, June 1st, 1910, there set sail from London the expedition which will, it is hoped, nail the Union Jack to the South Pole. The Commander, Captain Robert F. Scott, R.N., is relying for purposes of traction on motor-sleighs of the type illustrated. They are fitted with 4-cyl. vertical motors, and the chain-wheels drive an endless chain designed to grip in the snow and ice.

[Since Scott's last expedition came home in early 1913, it would seem that this card set was put together shortly after Scott left for the Antarctic (and with Shackleton's recent expedition still fresh in the public's mind). Scott and the French polar explorer Dr. Jean-Baptiste Charcot tested sledges equipped with motors and caterpillar tracks in the French Alps before Scott took three of them south on the *Terra Nova*. During 1907-09, Shackleton was the first to take a car to Antarctica, but it could not move in the soft snow and was used only for short distances. It was hoped that tracked vehicles would fare better – they did not. Early 20th century technology and design was still no match for the Antarctic and the motorized beasts suffered from a variety of ailments and each one broke down.]