



# EAGLE ISLAND JOURNAL

A Publication of the Friends of Peary's Eagle Island

"Inveniam viam aut faciam."  
Find a way or make one.

Volume XIV, Number 2

Fall 2009

## President's Message

The 2009 season was a banner year for the Friends of Peary's Eagle Island. Our wonderful volunteers, as always, did everything asked of them and more, contributing over 1400 hours as volunteer guides and workers.

The 100th anniversary celebrations in Augusta, Washington, DC, Cresson, PA, and here at the Peary-McMellan Arctic Museum, were exciting, and gave a huge boost to our mission to perpetuate the legacy of Admiral Peary.

As meaningful as the commemorative ceremonies were, the frosting on the cake was the return of three priceless Peary artifacts to Eagle Island. The ship's bell clock from the "Roosevelt", and the Admiral's back-up sextant were donated by Ed Stafford and his family. The custom built player piano, also from the "Roosevelt", along with 70 rolls of music, was placed on long term loan by Bert Peary and his family. In this issue of the journal, we tell two versions of the fascinating story of how the piano got to the island. The old house came alive when the first song echoed throughout the house, and there was singing, dancing, laughter, and hugs all around. Admiral and Mrs. Peary would have been delighted.

Lastly don't miss the review on Page 4. about a very exciting newly published book by Tom Avery.

*Harry Rich*

## The Piano Returns to Eagle Island

*And During its Return Offers Proof That Eagle Island Is its True Destiny*

Admiral Robert E. Peary's piano, the player piano that accompanied him on the Roosevelt during his exploration and discovery of the North Pole, and then had its special corner in Peary's Eagle Island home for 50 years, has returned to Eagle Island! In so doing, all probability was defied. Perhaps it was the true destiny of that piano that allowed an event of impossible odds to occur.

The story begins in late August, 2009, when the Admiral's grandson, Robert E. (Bert) Peary III, offered to return the piano to Eagle Island from Victoria, B.C. where it had been in Bert's safekeeping since 1995. The Aeolian piano was given to Admiral Peary by a friend, H. H. Benedict, the President of the Aeolian Piano Company of New York City. Mr. Benedict was attending a meeting of The Peary Arctic Club, the group of supporters who provided much of the funding for Peary's arctic research and exploration. Peary was lamenting the loss of physical fitness during the months on shipboard for the trip north and the following winter when the ship was locked in the polar ice. A deck crowded with equipment, sailors, expedition members, Inuit hunters and their families, sled dogs, and provisions did not allow much room for walking or any type of exercise. Mr. Benedict offered Peary an exercise machine in the form of a player piano. He claimed that the vigorous pumping of the foot pedals required by the player piano would help keep the calf muscles in shape while providing entertainment and diversion for the expedition members. Peary accepted the gift provided the piano could be built one octave less than normal so that it would fit the small confines of his cabin on the Roosevelt. As it turned out, the one missing octave also allowed the piano to fit into the living room alcove in Peary's Eagle Island home as if both were made for each other.



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After Peary's return from the Pole, the piano was taken to its alcove and remained on Eagle Island through three generations. Bert Peary has fond memories of the music that filled the cottage when, as a little boy, his short legs could finally reach the pedals - music that had anyone in earshot singing along before the final notes died away. When the family was considering giving the island to the State of Maine in 1967, Robert E. Peary Jr. took the piano to his home in Augusta as a treasured family heirloom. Bert inherited the piano from his Dad in 1994 and the piano traveled west to Victoria, BC.

This year, being the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Peary's discovery of the North Pole, has renewed interest in Peary, his explorations, and his island, which is now a State Historical Site managed by the Maine Department of Conservation through the Bureau of Parks and Lands. The Friends of Eagle Island, a nonprofit group of volunteers and supporters, assists in the physical preservation of the island and in maintaining awareness of the Peary legacy of contributions to arctic exploration. To help celebrate the centennial, the Peary family and the Friends are identifying articles that were once on Eagle Island and are seeking to return them to the island. Several artifacts have, indeed, been returned, among them a narwhal tusk, the ship's clock from the Roosevelt, one of Peary's sextants that went on his polar expedition, and now the player piano.



The piano's trip east from the West Coast of British Columbia to Eagle Island in Casco Bay began when Bert Peary, now 72, and Greg Stafford, a great grandson of the Admiral and son of Commander Ed Stafford (who for many years delighted Eagle Island visitors as their tour guide), rented a UHAUL trailer just big enough for the piano and began a four day odyssey to get the piano back on the island by



Wednesday, August 19<sup>th</sup>, the date for the annual meeting of the Friends and State representatives held on the island. 3200 miles in 4 days was an ambitious goal, and one that soon seemed doomed when the approval to cross the international border transporting a regulated substance, namely the ivory in the piano keys, was slow to come. But come it finally did and the trip east proceeded as planned. The piano arrived at South Freeport Wednesday morning and was loaded on the *Falls Point*, a marine cargo vessel provided by Carter Becker, owner of Falls Point Marine Services. Carter also provided a tracked vehicle that would take the piano up the 2 foot wide ramp from the float at the end of the Eagle Island dock, across the 100 feet of dock to the island proper, and then up the steep grade to the back porch of the house that now serves as the Peary museum. (For a different slant on the start of their cross-country trip, see the article beginning on Page 3 written by Bert's wife Marjorie)

Unfortunately the arrival of the *Falls Point* at Eagle Island would be just too late for most of those attending the annual meeting. The meeting had adjourned and attendees had to debark with Capt. Claire Ross on the *Marie L.* for the return trip to the mainland just as the *Falls Point* with its piano cargo was in sight. As the two boats passed and greetings were exchanged, there was a short period of shock and disappointment for Bert Peary and Ned Dewey, Vice President of the Friends, who had invested many sleepless nights making arrangements for the piano's safe delivery: Walt Moody, a Peary family friend for many years who had actually helped take the piano off the island 42 years ago, was one of the Friends on the *Marie L.* When he saw the piano pass by on the *Falls Point* he yelled out from the *Marie L.*, "That's not the same piano!" His gruff charge of forgery was softened by the twinkle in his eye and then outright contradicted when he could no longer suppress a broad grin. In response, the guardians of the piano onboard the *Falls Point* raised their fists in playful mock.



There were a few tense moments as Carter Becker maneuvered the tracked vehicle carrying the piano from the boat to the float, up the ramp and along the dock, across the lawn, up a ramp onto the museum porch and over the threshold into the house, before the piano was finally manhandled through the door into the living room and found its place in the living room alcove with just enough room for the narrow case that holds the 65 rolls of musical selections from the turn of the century (the previous century,



that is). And from what follows, you, the reader, must decide if this is the true destiny for the Peary piano.

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As final efforts were made to level the piano and prepare it for its reintroduction to the three-sided fireplace, the stuffed birds, and the pictures of exploration and family in the living room, all of which had waited in place for 42 years for the piano's return, Bert Peary was searching through the boxes of piano rolls for just the right one to be played first. Meanwhile someone asked the assembled onlookers if there was anyone who played piano. A young couple and their son were among the visitors and the husband pointed to his wife. Everyone encouraged her to take a seat on the piano bench and try out the piano. With reluctant shyness she sat down and tried a scale or two and the piano sounded great! It must have sounded satisfactory to her, too, for she began with a few tentative bars but soon opened into a spirited rendition of a ragtime tune from the Peary era. Everyone stood silent, lost in their own sense of history, while the music filled the museum as if the acoustics were engineered for such an instrument. Bert Peary, in particular was transfixed, clutching one of the piano rolls to his chest, listening with his head slightly cocked to one side, a smile of remembrance and appreciation that could only have come from his heart. When the last rousing chords had drifted out over Casco Bay, the pianist was greeted with enthusiastic applause; Bert, still transfixed, approached her and said, "That was the Maple Leaf Rag!" The pianist looked at him with surprise that he would recognize her selection, but Bert went on, "I was looking for, and have found, the piano roll of the Maple Leaf Rag. That was always my favorite tune and I wanted to hear it played one more time on this piano in this place, and you just did it beautifully!"

Now, of all the tunes that the pianist could possibly have chosen to play as the piano's first selection back on Eagle Island, the chance is less than one in a billion that she would chose the Maple Leaf Rag! Less than one in a billion that she would choose the favorite tune Bert Peary wanted to hear played one more time on the piano he had just brought 3200 miles back to its alcove in Admiral Peary's Eagle Island home. And yet, it happened! Proof that the piano has found its true destiny? You decide.

*Author's note:* The visitor who played The Maple Leaf Rag as the piano's reintroduction to Eagle Island escaped without leaving her name. If anyone can help us find who she was, please contact the author. And, if you are ever fortunate enough to be in the same room with her and a piano, ask her to play that piano---Ask her to play The Maple Leaf Rag!

*Steven K. Ingram*

## The Westcoast Version of the Piano Odyssey

The piano that traveled to the Pole with Grandad has been handed down to my husband Bert and we've had it here for the past fourteen years. It is a beautiful piece of work, and still plays the 70 rolls well (as long as legs are willing). It proved to be the only regular exercise he could get whilst on a rocking ship since the deck carried all the Eskimo men, wives, children and some 134-plus dogs. And they all lived outdoors. Bert decided to give the piano to the museum so that it can be appreciated and played regularly by folks on the island.

Apparently, when shipping pianos out of Canada you must get a permit called CITES, (Canadian International Treaty of Endangered Species) And, no, it had nothing to do with the fact that Bert was endangered. **The keys are made of elephant ivory.** Well, Bert has been on the phone for several weeks with both Canadian and U.S. cus-

toms. Now that's been fun! The U.S. will give Bert a permit if he gets one from Ottawa.. Ottawa will give Bert a permit if he gets one from the U.S. Do you see where I am going?

Finally we received CITES, three sheets of permission, on Thursday. He had had a tow hitch fastened to his car and on the Wednesday had the movers in to move the piano. Now that was another fun time. They did a magnificent job getting the piano out of the house, and making it fit into the small trailer. However, with great ingenuity, they packed her in, wrapped her up, and fastened her firmly. Nothing like getting the right people, eh?

Bert and nephew Greg left the next morning, Friday, on the 6:10 am Ferry to Port Angeles. They arrived in Port Angeles and handed over passports and "the sheets". The uniform waved away the passports, asked, "What's in the trailer, where is this going, why is this going, who owns it?" When Bert said that it was his piano, the uniform handed back the passports and papers and told him to have a nice day. Sooooo, "the sheets" that had to be stamped and returned to U.S. and Canadian customs are still in Bert's pocket! We figured that if we hadn't had the sheets he would probably have been asked for them and when he didn't have them he might be turned away at the border. We had been told to be prepared to have the keyboard pulled out so he would have had to return home, find someone who knows about player pianos and have the keys removed, then repack the piano and do the whole scenario all over again.

I opted to stay home since "the boys" would be taking turns driving and probably driving for long hours at a time. Actually, Bert called today to say they had risen at 4:00 am and had already traveled 800 miles. NOW I KNOW WHY I DIDN'T RIDE ALONG!! They are apparently having a wonderful time trying to change one another's opinions on religion, politics, government and every other topic they can agree to disagree upon.

Bert has phoned a couple of times a day to "report in". They are traveling about 800 or so miles a day. The car is cruising along nicely and they have, I think, gotten used to that "orange bus trailing too close" behind. They will be away for a couple of weeks...it's close to 4,000 miles from Victoria to Maine. Hmmm, and then they have to return!

So goes the saga of the west coast piano movers.

*Marjorie Peary*

#### Book Review

### **"TO THE END OF THE EARTH"**

**By Tom Avery**

**St Martin's Press, New York, pub. March 2009, 320 pages, Illustrated.**

**T**his exciting book is not to be missed. Getting to the North Pole by any means is probably the most excruciating and difficult task that anyone could devise. Tom Avery is among a new generation of explorers and he is one of only 41 explorers to reach both the South and North Poles the hard way; on foot by dog sled. A well known mountaineer living in England, he has led expeditions up 12 of the world's tallest peaks.

On March 20, 2005, Tom Avery set out with four carefully selected team members to recreate Cdr. Robert E. Peary's ninety-six year old journey using the same equipment, to show that Peary's team could have done what they had always claimed and indeed discovered the North Pole.

This stimulating book takes the reader over the enormous pressure ridges and across the treacherous leads of frigid open water in extremely low temperatures. Starting from Crane City on the north coast of Ellesmere Island (Peary's equipment was found still there under the snow), they traveled the 413 miles to the North Pole in 36 days 22 hours some 4 hours faster than Peary in 1909. They used the Peary designed sleds with similar Eskimo dogs and used a compass as did Peary. They risked their lives on more than one occasion to prove that Peary and Henson were telling the truth. As he tells the story comparing his journey to Peary's along the way, this adventurer weaves a fascinating, exciting tale, most gripping at times. If you ever had any doubts about Peary's claim, this book will put your doubts at rest. Recent authors who have questioned Peary's veracity are shown to be misinformed by this extraordinary team of intrepid explorers.

Available at the Curtis Memorial Library in Brunswick, local bookshops, or at Amazon.com.

*Editor's note: The Friends of Peary's Eagle Island followed Tom Avery's 2005 adventure with great interest, and were privileged to receive a personal story of his trip, "Ultimate North" which we published in our Fall 2005 Journal. You can read this on our web site by navigating to the Journal page. Tom and two of his team were present at the 100th Anniversary celebrations at the Arlington National Cemetery, April 9, 2009, and were officially recognized by Gilbert Grosvenor, Chairman of the National Geographic Society. We are proud to call Tom a good friend.*