

# OFF *the* BEAT

## Antarctic Notes . . .

### A tragic death on a remote ice slope

Half way up Observation Hill, a peak of dark volcanic rock rising 700 feet above McMurdo Station, Antarctica, is a climber's register. Inscribed beside the date Nov. 4, 1973, is the signature of Wolf Vishniac, University of Rochester. A timber cross erected 61 years ago on top of the mountain honors Capt. Robert F. Scott and his four men who lost their lives on their way back from the South Pole in 1912, and it is said that those who climb up to the cross will someday return to Antarctica. But Wolf Vishniac will not return. Five weeks and two days after his climb of Observation Hill his body was found 500 feet down a rock- and ice-covered slope on the upper reaches of Wright Valley, Antarctica, where he and his research partner had been studying soil microorganisms since making camp Nov. 8. He had fallen from the edge of an ice shelf.

On a continent where most field research seems to be conducted by young Ph.D.'s, graduate students and even undergraduates, Vishniac insisted on doing his own Antarctic field studies. It meant living in a tent in the mountains above the Antarctic dry valleys for two months. His scientific reputation had long ago been well established (he was perhaps the most eminent scientist in Antarctica this research season), and he could have let others do the work. But he loved the activity and the outdoors. The Wednesday before his death he hiked 12 miles down from his camp to Don Juan Pond to see how the Dry Valley Drilling Project work was going there, then hiked the 12 miles back.

He was, in a way, a special friend of SCIENCE NEWS. He had enthusiastically talked about his trip with several of our staff before he left for Antarctica, and I had very much hoped to visit with him when I was there. Instead, I found myself watching from the balcony of the National Science Foundation chalet above the helipad at McMurdo as the orange Navy helicopter brought back his body from his mountain-valley deathbed. It was a grim reminder that all the modern equipment and advanced logistics aids in Antarctica are deceptive; the continent can still take a tragic human toll.

At a memorial service the next morning at the Chapel of the Snows at McMurdo, Frank A. Morelli, a biologist who had known Vishniac for four years, spoke movingly of his qualities as both a scientist and a humanitarian. "The entire scientific community has suffered a great loss."

### Is this really the South Pole?

What is it like at the South Pole? The surrealism of the situation is due not so much to any physical sensation as to the *idea* of being at the southern end of the earth's rotation axis. The incongruities are many. It was cold that summer December day we were there (minus 26 degrees F.), but as well clothed as we were, the effect was hardly noticeable. You do undergo a certain shortening of breath due to the thin air (altitude: 9,186 feet), but again that effect wasn't as striking as I expected. The South Pole itself is marked by a slender bamboo pole stuck casually in the ice, as though it was left there by someone in a hurry to get away. No signs indicate its importance. A striped barber-pole marker surrounded by colorful flags, often seen in photos, is actually the "photographic South Pole," conveniently located a quarter of a mile away just outside the door of the subsurface Scott-Amundsen South Pole Station.

One descends through a tunnel into the station, which is buried deep beneath the blowing snow. Inside it is warm and cozy (undoubtedly a little too cozy at times for the 22 persons who spent the entire dark Antarctic winter of 1973 there).

### Women scientists in a male-dominated land

Yes, there are women in Antarctica. Females might once have been justified in labeling Antarctica a haven for male chauvinist scientists and explorers, but that is rapidly changing (although not as fast as many people, both female and male, would undoubtedly like).

No fewer than 12 women are or have been in Antarctica during these recent 1973-74 summer months as part of the U.S. research program. During our recent seven-day stay on the continent, we met and talked with at least six of them. They seemed, for the most part, to be satisfied with their situation.

Out in the dry valleys region, Paige Geering, Mary J. Olson, Julia Petruska and Alexis Taylor—all undergraduate biology students from Virginia Polytechnic Institute—have been participating in the major VPI project to model

the freshwater and terrestrial ecosystems of Lake Bonney.

At McMurdo, Yuan DeVries and her husband Arthur DeVries, both Ph.D. biologists, are collaborating in fish-antifreeze research. Another marital research team are Hanna and Berry Pinshow of Duke University, doing studies of penguin metabolism.

Katherine M. Muzik, a Duke University marine biologist assisting with the penguin research, sounded one of the few sour notes we heard from the women researchers. She is an experienced scuba diver, but had not been allowed to dive in Antarctic waters. She felt the reason was sex discrimination (although she had not taken the required Antarctic diving course at Scripps Institution of Oceanography).

At the South Pole station, Donna Muchmore and Nan Scott participated throughout November in an Oklahoma Medical Research Foundation biomedical study of the spread of infectious diseases between departing and arriving South Pole station personnel.

At Palmer Station on the Antarctic peninsula, Claire Parkinson was assisting in an Ohio State University study of a volcanic crater blown through the glacial ice on Deception Island.

The history of women in Antarctica began 39 years ago, when on Feb. 20, 1935, Mrs. Klarius Mikkelsen, a whaling captain's wife, became the first woman to set foot on the continent.

The first women to spend a winter in Antarctica were Edith (Jackie) Ronne and Jennie Darlington in 1947-48. Both were there with their husbands. Mrs. Darlington wrote a book about the experience, *My Antarctic Honeymoon* (Doubleday, 1956), where she places on public record that she and her husband conceived a child while there.

No women had ever stood at the South Pole until Nov. 11, 1969. On that day five scientists associated with an Ohio State University project—Lois Jones, Kay Lindsay, Eileen McSaveney, Tarry Lee Tickhill and Pam Young—plus Jean Pearson, science editor of the *Detroit News*, flew to the Pole Station and walked together to the marker indicating the geographic South Pole.

A further bit of the history of women in Antarctica is to be set this year. Two women scientists from DePaul University—both Ph.D. biologists—arrived Jan. 9 at McMurdo Station and will spend the coming 1974 winter at McMurdo studying Antarctic krill. They will be the first U.S. women scientists to "winter over" in Antarctica. They are Mary A. McWhinnie and Sister Mary Odile Cahoon.

—Kendrick Frazier