

# The World's Greatest Explorers finally get discovered

By George Vrechek



Discoveries are relative. Columbus discovered the New World in 1492. The New World inhabitants likely felt that they had discovered the place themselves centuries before 1492. In 1855 Dr. David

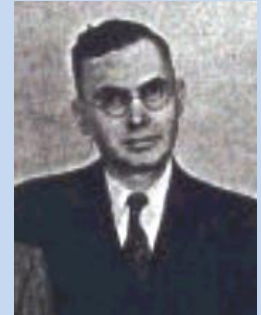
Livingstone discovered Victoria Falls in Africa. Local residents probably wondered how anyone could have missed seeing such a large waterfall.

This collector just discovered an amazing set of affordable cards, although they have been around for 108 years, The World's Greatest Explorers.

Jefferson Burdick was a kid when this set was issued in 1910 during the second great wave of tobacco card inserts. James B. Duke's American Tobacco Company (ATC) cartel was duking it out with competitors for the Turkish-style tobacco market and smokers enjoyed the extra kick from the plethora of insert cards issued during this brief 1909-1915 insert era.

### **T118s named by Burdick**

When Burdick got around to organizing cards in the 1930s, he separated 20<sup>th</sup> Century U.S. tobacco inserts into large-sized, general, sports and novelty issues. Burdick listed the general issues alphabetically and assigned them numbers (T)25 to (T)121 in his "American Card Catalog." The 25-card (The) World's Greatest Explorers became T118, while an accompanying 25-card issue of Arctic Scenes became T30. Burdick had a sentimental attachment to cards from his youth, and we can imagine that the informative T118 and T30 sets would have scenes and descriptions of great interest to him.



### **Interesting backs**

Most of the insert cards just had the tobacco brand name on the backs. Cards of animals and pretty girls didn't need much explaining anyway. However, issues of aeroplanes, aviators, generals and explorers rated interesting descriptions. The T118s were inserted in packs of Hassan cigarettes issued by either New York ATC Factory 30 or Factory 649, creating two versions for each subject. Backs are found in black ink, green ink or something in between.

### **Albert Operti (1852-1927)**

The name Albert Operti appears on the back of each T118 and T30. According to an article, "Albert L. Operti: chronicler of Arctic exploration" by Douglas W. Wamsley, Operti was an artist with a particular attraction to Arctic scenes. He didn't just sit in a studio and imagine what it was like. Operti lived in New York City, but mentally he was a sea-loving adventurer. He traveled to Lapland and hitched along with Robert Peary on an 1897 expedition to Greenland as a special correspondent and artist. He was an Arctic explorer groupie. He even lived in the New York Explorers Club for a time.

As a professional artist, Operti was always scratching to make ends meet. His day jobs were as a scenery artist for the Metropolitan Opera House and later for the American Museum of Natural History. It must have warmed his heart to be commissioned to do 50 educational water colors about the Arctic. He got to pick the subjects, which included his friends in the Explorers Club, and write the backs. He adapted card images from works he had painted over the years. The results were very realistic paintings and descriptions.



*Peary, Shackleton and Franklin*

### **Arctic and Antarctic explorers**

Individuals Operti chose to depict were primarily contemporary North Pole explorers. Robert Peary was credited as the first to reach the North Pole in 1909, although there is dispute as to who actually got there first. Robert Bartlett and Mathew Henson went with Peary. Roald Amundsen raced to the South Pole in 1911. Polar explorations were big news at the time.

Ernest Shackleton is depicted a few years before his incredible 1914-17 Antarctic journey on *Endurance*, documented in books, diaries, photos and a PBS documentary. Carsten Borchgrevink had been to Antarctica in 1895.

Sir John Franklin made the set too and joined others like George W. DeLong and S. A. Andrée who died on expeditions. Franklin's unfortunate efforts to find a northwest passage are described in "The Man Who Ate His Boots" by Anthony Brandt. Yuck. Amos Bonsall and Elisha Kane searched for Franklin. George Melville was part of DeLong's expedition and searched for him unsuccessfully.

Adolphus Greely lost most of his men, including James Lockwood, exploring the Arctic in 1884. Greely and David Brainard were rescued by W.S. Schley. Otto Sverdrup, who sailed with Fridtjof Nansen, was a patient soul, having been stuck in Arctic ice for most of 1888. He freed his ship only to get stuck again for another three years. Henry Hudson (1565-1611) was the only vintage explorer in the set. You get quite cold looking at all these explorers bundled in their fur coats in front of gloomy backgrounds.

### **Out of the cold**

David Livingstone and Henry Stanley provided a break from the cold by their inclusion. Their famous meeting of 1871 is mentioned. Sven Hedin didn't get too cold either exploring central Asia.



THE WORLD'S GREATEST EXPLORERS  
**MISS ANNIE S. PECK**

Miss Annie Smith Peck was born at Providence, Rhode Island, and was graduated from the Rhode Island State Normal School and the University of Michigan, and took the degree of master of arts in the latter. Studied German and music in Germany, and was the first woman student of the American School of Classical Studies at Athens, Greece, specializing in Greek and archeology; was professor of Latin in Purdue University and Smith College. Ascended the Matterhorn, Popocatepetl, Orizaba, Funffingerspitze, and made the record ascents of Mount Sorata, Bolivia, to 20,500 feet and Mount Huascarán, Peru, to 19,000 feet.

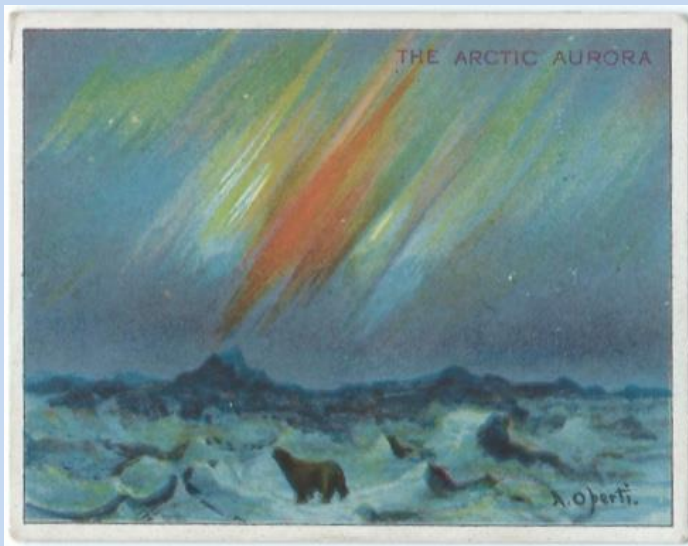
—Albert Operti, F. N. A. G. S.

**HASSAN** CORK TIP CIGARETTES  
*The Oriental Smoke*  
 THE LARGEST SELLING BRAND OF CIGARETTES IN AMERICA.  
 FACTORY No. 30. DIST. N. Y.

One of the more interesting bios was that of Annie Peck who graduated from the University of Michigan in 1878 and studied or taught Greek, Latin, music and archeology. She was a suffragist and always among the first women to do many things, especially mountain climbing. In her spare time, she ascended the Matterhorn and made record ascents to 20,500 feet in Peru.

**Arctic Scenes**

The 25-card T30 Arctic Scenes set references some of the same events and locations described in the explorers' bios. While the portraits of explorers are more prominent to collectors, Operti's paintings of Arctic scenes were likely the real payback to the artist. His work was recognized.



THE ARCTIC AURORA

The most magnificent of all natural phenomena is the Aurora Borealis, which has been observed to some extent by all living in the northern part of the United States. Words are inadequate to give more than the faintest description of the marvel. George Kennan, the celebrated explorer, writing from Siberia, where the Merry Aurora Dancers are seen at their best, writes of them, "A constant procession of strange forms and designs, mingling color schemes. . . I worked with half frozen fingers incased in silk gloves to catch these marvels." In their terrible awesomeness they remind the beholder of another world, filling him with trembling and half-dread.

—Albert Operti, F. N. A. G. S.

**HASSAN** CORK TIP CIGARETTES  
*The Oriental Smoke*  
 THE LARGEST SELLING BRAND OF CIGARETTES IN AMERICA.  
 FACTORY No. 849 1ST DIST. N. Y.



### **Findable and affordable**

I was able to peruse 17 of Burdick's 394 card albums at the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2004. Burdick's collection includes 270,000 non-sport single cards, most issued prior to 1950. I assumed that many of these cards would be impossible to find today or incredibly expensive.

I finally "discovered" that not all old sets are of expensive, hard-to-find fish or would-be actresses, but of interesting people who explored the world before there were airplanes, autos or even Google Earth. I presume many readers could have told me that years ago, but, like many of the world's great explorers, I had to stumble around myself.

### **This may get out of hand**

I have made progress on the T30s and T118s without spending more than a few dollars for any card, although the backs of some of mine suffer from too much scrapbook paste. I learned more about the explorers and who Albert Operti was.

Of course, once completing the sets, those different factory numbers on the backs will tempt me to go after the variations...and then maybe the green and black inks will need to be collected...and maybe even a few more non-sport sets. I've heard the T53 Cowboys and T73 Indians are doable. This may get out of hand.

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