

## Through the Eyes of a Cat: the Wrangel Island Expedition

I am alive because of the heroism, intelligence, compassion and ingenuity of one person, Ada Blackjack. She is my hero—she feeds me when I am hungry, keeps me warm when I am cold, and gives me attention when I want it. My name is Victoria, but everyone calls me “Vic”. I’m a tabby cat who went to Wrangel Island in 1921 with five explorers – only Ada and I returned.

Come to Rauner Special Collections Library to experience my story in the new exhibit “Through the Eyes of a Cat: the Wrangel Island Expedition” in the Class of 1965 Galleries from September 27 to November 10, 2023. The exhibit was curated by Sam Milnes and Jay Satterfield.

You can learn a lot more about the Wrangel Island Expedition that came to its fateful conclusion 100 years ago by visiting the Library’s digital collection, “Collating Wrangel Island: Inhabiting the ‘Uninhabitable.’” (<https://www.library.dartmouth.edu/digital/digital-collections/collating-wrangel-island>) You can also help us correct transcriptions of documents from the collection at: <https://fromthepage.com/dartmouthlibrary/wrangel-island-set>.

### Case 1: Adventure Begins

My story starts on board the ship *The Victoria* in 1921. My mother lived with the ship’s steward—and I was born on a blanket in his cabin. We steamed back and forth between Seattle and Anchorage. On one trip north, the steward befriended four young men, Allan Crawford, Milton Galle, E. Lorne Knight, and my favorite, Frederick Mauer. They got it in their heads from a famous explorer named Vilhjalmur Stefansson, that they could become modern day pioneers and settle a remote island in the Arctic. They planned to live off of the land, claim the territory and get rich from the rights to the natural resources. Mr. Stefansson had them giddy with excitement but I wasn’t so sure. Seemed crazy to me—who would want to be a pioneer when it is 44 below zero? Give me a warm steward’s cabin any day.

Alas, a steward’s cabin was not in my future because as a parting gift as we approached Alaska, the steward gave me to the explorers—I was to be their “mascot.” How demeaning! I thought of myself as their leader. Still, I love that they named me after the ship, and Mr. Mauer was the best and my first companion.

In Nome, Alaska, we added Ada Blackjack to our party. She was an Iñupiat woman with a young son. They offered her good pay to accompany us and she could cook and sew clothes from all of the hides they were going to stack up living fat off the land.

### Items:

Memorandum of Agreement, Stefansson Arctic Exploration & Development Company and Allan Crawford, 1 July 1921.

Vilhjalmur Stefansson Papers, Mss-98, Box 9, Folder 35

Frederick Mauer, Nome, to his mother, New Philadelphia, 5 September 1921.

Mauer had a lot to tell his mother before setting out to the Island. He got married and was feeling very confident about the expedition—he even said his investment was as safe as Mr. Stefansson’s reputation (ha!). But most importantly, he tells the story of how I joined the party! Vilhjalmur Stefansson Papers, Mss-98, Box 9, Folder 7

Allan Crawford, Nome, to Vilhjalur Stefansson, 6 September 1921.  
Here is Mr. Crawford (our official leader—at least I let him think so) making the final preparations with Mr. Stefansson. At the very end he mentions hiring Ada Blackjack.  
Vilhjalur Stefansson Papers, Mss-98, Box 9, Folder 7

Map of Wrangel Island Vicinity.  
Vilhjalur Stefansson Papers, Mss-98, Box 11, Folder 8

Allan Crawford, Frederick Maurer, Lorne Knight, taken in Seattle, 3 August 1921.  
Vilhjalur Stefansson Papers, Mss-98, Box 79, Folder 1

Ada Blackjack and son, taken in 1921.  
Vilhjalur Stefansson Papers, Mss-98, Box 11, Folder 5

Ada Blackjack.  
Vilhjalur Stefansson Papers, Mss-98, Box 11, Folder 5

Wrangel Island, 1922, Allen Crawford, Frederick W. Maurer, Ada Blackjack, E. Lorne Knight, Milton Galle.  
And of course me, we were a party of pioneers.  
Vilhjalur Stefansson Papers, Mss-98, Box 79, Folder 1

Vilhjalur Stefansson, 1921.  
Vilhjalur Stefansson Photographic Files, Mss-238, Box 1, Folder 15

## **Case 2a: Settling Wrangel Island**

After a lot of hassles securing a boat to take us further north, we sailed on to Wrangel Island in September of 1921. Things were looking pretty good at first. They were keeping me healthy from their hunting and you could tell the guys were having a great time playing pioneer. They took lots of pictures. I learned later that I appeared in more of the shots than any of the people. I was the leader after all—so that was to be expected. I posed with them every chance I could get and was rewarded handsomely with treats. At first it really looked like their plans were all going to work out and I would be a famous fat and sassy explorer cat, but things took a turn when winter set in.

### **Items:**

Allan Crawford, Wrangel Island, to his mother, 15 September 1921.  
They were so confident when they arrived on the Island. And things looked good at first...  
Vilhjalur Stefansson Papers, Mss-98, Box 9, Folder 7

E. Lorne Knight. Diary, August 1921 to December 1922.  
Papers of Errol Lorne Knight, Mss-90, Box 1, folder 1

Ada Blackjack. "Stefansson Expedition, Fall of 1921." 6 February 1924.  
Ada's account of the first year was tempered by her knowledge of what was to come.  
Vilhjalur Stefansson Papers, Mss-98, Box 9, Folder 39

Allan Crawford and Vic, the expedition cat.  
I was a true explorer now!  
Vilhjalmur Stefansson Papers, Mss-98, Box 11, Folder 4

Photographs of Stefansson Wrangel Island Expedition, 1921-1923, page 5 recto. Crawford and Maurer cleaning a skin (#10), Allan Crawford building a snow house (#11), Crawford taking possession of the island (#12), The expedition dory (too heavy for effective hunting) with dogs, spring 1922 (#13) Our camp and the landscape, not much to behold but it was our home.  
Vilhjalmur Stefansson Papers, Mss-98, Box 79

Ada preparing boot soles.  
Vilhjalmur Stefansson Papers, Mss-98, Box 11, Folder 5

Vic making friends with the walrus.  
My first kill.  
Vilhjalmur Stefansson Papers, Mss-98, Box 11, Folder 5

## **Case 2b: Our Desperate Wait**

It's cold off of the Northern coast of Siberia! It was terrible and it felt like my paws would never be warm again. Even with my fur coat the weather was miserable and Ada worked hard to keep everyone else warm with the pelts they had gathered from hunting.

The ice turned bad into worse when it blocked the passage for the relief ship that was going to bring a large supply of cat food (and people food) along with other resources. Initially no one panicked, but when the hunting became harder and the supplies started running low, worry set in amongst the party. I was doing fine, Ada and Mauer kept me fed and warm—they all adored me of course, but Mr. Knight started to get sick, they said with scurvy.

In January of 1923, the three healthy guys decided to leave me, Knight, and Ada behind. They planned to cross the ice and bring back help. I brushed against Mauer, claiming him as my own, on the morning they left. It was sad, but as a cat, it's not in my nature to mope for long. Ada was there to latch onto—she was always good to me. She seemed to know what was going on. I only learned later that Crawford, Galle, and my Mauer never made it to land. No one ever saw them again. A few months later Knight got worse. Ada did everything she could to help him, but in June he died. Ada and I were alone except for each other.

### **Items:**

Vilhjalmur Stefansson, New York, to Harry Galle, New Braunfels, Texas, 2 October 1922.  
Mr. Stefansson seemed confident that the expedition would be fine even though the relief ship failed to reach them. He assured Milton Galle's parents that their son was just as safe as they were in Texas.  
Vilhjalmur Stefansson Papers, Mss-98, Box 9, Folder 18

Frederick Mauer, Wrangel Island, to his wife, 29 January 1923. Typescript from *Toronto Star*.  
My dear Mauer wrote to his wife before setting out for rescue. He was never seen again.  
Vilhjalmur Stefansson Papers, Mss-98, Box 9, folder 17

Ada Blackjack's calendar, 1923.  
Vilhjalmur Stefansson Papers, Mss-8, Box 1, Folder 2

Ada Blackjack. Diary, typescript.  
Ada was amazing—she kept me alive while missing her son.  
Vilhjalmur Stefansson Papers, Mss-8, Box 1, Folder 3

Ada Blackjack, Wrangel Island, to Vilhjalmur Stefansson, 23 June 1923.  
It was a sad day when Mr. Knight died. Ada typed this short note to document it, then moved into another tent with me to wait for rescue.  
Papers of Ada Blackjack, Mss-8, Box 1, Folder 2

Vic, Ada Blackjack's cat.  
The snow and ice really were the worst!  
Vilhjalmur Stefansson Papers, Mss-98, Box 11, Folder 5

Left to right, Crawford, Maurer and Galle starting off for a hunt.  
Towards the end they frequently came back empty handed.  
Vilhjalmur Stefansson Papers, Mss-98, Box 11, Folder 5

Watching for the ship that could not come because of the ice packed against the land by the wind, summer of 1922.  
Vilhjalmur Stefansson Papers, Mss-98, Box 11, Folder 5

Ice along the beach.  
I wonder what would have happened were it not for the ice that blocked the path of our supply ship.  
Vilhjalmur Stefansson Papers, Mss-98, Box 11, Folder 5

### **Case 3: Rescue and Reckoning**

Ada was amazing. Every day she scraped together enough food for herself and me. She hunted with a 22, caught foxes in traps, and gathered algae and lichen to keep us alive. She was even making a pair of slippers for her distant son, Bennett. Then in early August the ice pulled away from the shore and two weeks later, a ship arrived. The crew came ashore and carried us back to their ship but not before getting a good look at where we had been living for the last two years.

The captain, Harold Noice, couldn't believe our story. He interrogated Ada and got her to tell him everything. When we got to shore in Alaska, he sold the story to the newspapers. Ada and I were safe, but some people looked at how healthy we were and concluded that we had hogged all of the food and left Knight to starve. The newspapers accused Mr. Stefansson of sending the boys to their deaths. When Mr. Stefansson heard about it, he was furious, partly at Noice for stealing our story, but also for suggesting we had done something wrong. He sued Noice to try to recover the money and give it to Ada and the families of our lost party. He bought Ada's diary and her story and wrote his own book while battling with Noice in the papers. I am not so sure about Mr. Stefansson's account of what happened—he seemed a little more worried about his own reputation than owning up to his responsibility.

It's a tragic tale, but I did alright. All I know is that without Ada Blackjack, I would have died in the Arctic as well.

**Item:**

Harold Noice to Vilhjalmur Stefansson, telegram typescript, 31 August 1923.  
Papers of Harold Noice, Mss-91, Box 1, Folder 2

Vilhjalmur Stefansson. *The Adventure of Wrangel Island*. New York: Macmillan, 1925.  
Stef Alcove G830 .S8

"Parents Blame V. Stefansson for Allan Crawford's Death," *The Evening Telegraph*, 29 April 1925.

Papers of Harold Noice, Mss-91, Box 1, Folder 3

J. T. Crawford to Vilhjalmur Stefansson, 28 November 1923.  
Vilhjalmur Stefansson Papers, Mss-98, Box 9, Folder 17

Mr. and Mrs. J. I. Knight, McMinnville, to Ada Blackjack, 18 December 1923.  
Knight's parents tried to strike up a friendship with Ada and me. We were their last link to their beloved son.

Vilhjalmur Stefansson Papers, Mss-98, Box 9, Folder 19

Ada Blackjack and Harold Noice.  
Vilhjalmur Stefansson Papers, Mss-98, Box 11, Folder 7

*The Donaldson.*

It was such a welcomed sight to see the ship arrive to rescue us.

Vilhjalmur Stefansson Papers, Mss-98, Box 79, Folder 1

Ada Blackjack and Vic on *The Donaldson*.

I was so grateful to finally be off the island, and to have Ada with me.

Vilhjalmur Stefansson Papers, Mss-98, Box 11, Folder 5

Mr. & Mrs. J. L. Knight and Ada Blackjack, McMinnville, OR, December 15 1923.

Vilhjalmur Stefansson Papers, Mss-98, Box 11, Folder 5

Lorne Knight's grave - Ada Blackjack standing beside it.

Vilhjalmur Stefansson Papers, Mss-98, Box 11, Folder 7