

Cold Case File

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It was not a dark and stormy night, not even close. It was just an overcast morning in August, 1968. Four men trudged slowly across the frozen Arctic tundra, carrying packs, a variety of digging tools and other equipment. They were in no hurry. The bush pilot who had dropped them off the previous afternoon would not return for thirteen days, and the object of their interest hadn't moved for almost a century. The four men included a Dartmouth English professor, an ex-Marine recently returned from Vietnam, a veteran outdoorsman, and a physician from Massachusetts. An odd group, on a most unusual mission. Ahead of them was the only man-made object on the bleak landscape—a stone cairn topped by a brass tablet attached to two wooden posts indicating the grave of Charles Francis Hall of the U.S. ship *Polaris*, who had died on November 8, 1871.

As some in this room know, in several previous papers I have explored unusual murders: Honolulu's 1932 Ala Moana case, the bludgeoning of George Parkman in

Boston in 1849, and, locally, the horrible Pearl Bryan murder in 1896. For one paper, I even created an alter-ego private detective, Otto Steinbrecher, to solve a murder involving a U.C. historian. But nothing on Hall's grave marker indicated anything other than a natural death. Yet, suspicions and even an accusation surfaced during the official inquiry held in 1873. The Navy board skirted the issue, almost willingly, and concluded that Hall had died of apoplexy. The members of the board apparently had little aptitude to open up a potentially embarrassing incident for the Navy, much less for the Grant Administration, already awash in embarrassing scandals. However, newspapers had already picked up on rumors about dissension among the crew and even the implication that Hall had been poisoned. And then, in 1874, a book largely based on the journal of George E. Tyson, assistant navigator on the *Polaris*, provided details about tension among the crew, personal conflicts between Captain Hall and both his sailing master, Sidney Budington, and Dr. Emil Bessel, the German-born and trained chief scientific officer and physician; and, finally, a serious division between the ten German members of the expedition and the other seventeen men. Tyson's account also raised questions about Budington's propensity for alcohol and the general lack of discipline aboard the ship. Soon the Navy Department commissioned Rear Admiral C. H. Davis to write the official version of the inquiry. In 1876, this 686 page account, which cherry-picked the testimony, simply whitewashed the whole affair. The *Polaris* expedition, which had garnered headlines for over two years, soon faded from public view, superseded by administration scandals, George Custer's defeat at the Little Bighorn, and the presidential election of 1876.

No doubt, some of you are still wondering what a Dartmouth Professor of English was doing in the Arctic wilderness, some 500 miles from the North Pole. Chauncey C. Lewis was a student of the Arctic whose love of photography had already taken him to the frozen North on four occasions. Fascinated by the Hall expedition, he eventually wrote a biography of Charles Francis Hall, which has been a major source for this paper.

But if Chauncey Lewis remains little known, what about Charles Francis Hall himself? Hall was born in 1821 in Rochester, New Hampshire, where, after several years of common schooling, he was apprenticed to a blacksmith. Caught up in the restlessness of Jacksonian America, he drifted west, finally settling in Cincinnati in the late 1840s. The city directory in 1849 identified him as employed at a seal engraving business. A few years later he opened his own engraving shop. In 1858 ambition led him to start the *Occasional*, initially a single-sheet newspaper which certainly lived up to its name. Actually, newspaper is somewhat misleading, for his enthusiastic opinion pieces usually crowded any news off the page. The following year he published the *Daily Penny Press*, a more ambitious undertaking, while his wife took charge of the engraving business.

Both publications reflect Hall's fascination with modern technology, an interest certainly in tune with the city's commercial and manufacturing growth. Articles on the newly laid Atlantic Cable, new types of machinery, and various hot-air balloon ascensions dominated his editorials, but the 5-horsepower "Caloric engine" which ran his printing press seems to have had a special appeal for him. His enthusiasm for this new so-called "dry heat" engine led his friends, and probably others, to convert his initials C. F. into "Caloric Fool."

During the decade of the fifties, he married, fathered a daughter, and apparently purchased a home on Celestial Street in Mt. Adams. In essence, then, Hall embodied the American Dream of upward mobility, personal initiative, and at least modest success. However, domestic life left him unfulfilled. The spirit of adventure which brought him to Cincinnati now beckoned him on. A voracious reader, he became fixated on the Arctic frontier, and he regularly visited the Young Men's Mercantile Library to read the latest magazines and newspapers. What particularly caught his attention was the search for Sir John Franklin's missing expedition. In the mid-nineteenth-century Sir John Franklin was one of the great heroes of the English-speaking world. An accomplished British naval officer and experienced arctic explorer, he and 129 men aboard two Royal Navy ships left England in 1845 in search of the North Pole. They vanished in the vast polar region. For the next ten years, relief expeditions, representing various countries, headed north in search of the missing men and ships. Eventually, anecdotal evidence from Eskimos, a variety of found personal relics, a buried ship's form noting the death in 1847 of Sir John, and several frozen bodies hinted at the fate of the entire crew. By 1859 few people doubted that all had perished. Yet Hall remained unconvinced, for from his reading he knew that it was possible to live for years in that desolate country if one followed native practices. Smoke-shrouded Cincinnati now seemed all too tame to the energetic, driven Hall. He was determined to find the missing members, dead or alive.

Hall had succumbed to polar fever! Or, what today might be called mono-polar disorder.

He eagerly sought support from prominent Cincinnatians, and later he would name various geographical places in the Arctic for some of them. He even attempted to

prepare himself physically by camping on the hillside behind the observatory on Mount Adams. This ended abruptly when two somewhat inebriated local citizens demanded the whiskey they assumed anyone camping on Mt. Adams must have. When he denied having any, they fired a shotgun in his direction, and Hall fled, barefooted and half-dressed. But this comic opera belies Hall's determination and sense of mission.

Although he lacked any nautical experience or scientific training, and had never been further north than New Hampshire, he sold his printing press and soon left the Queen City for the East, carrying letters of introduction from Cincinnati supporters and several pledges for funds. In New York he met with more potential supporters, even earning the blessing of retired shipping magnate Henry Grinnell; and in New London, Connecticut, Hall discussed his plans with various whaling captains. Three months of furious activity finally brought some additional financial support and free passage to the north. In May of 1860 Hall departed for the Arctic on the whaler *George Henry*. His plan was to disembark on Baffin Island, taking a sledge, a boat, and a dog team, along with a meager \$980 worth of supplies, and from there travel west with the help of natives to King William Island. There, he was confident he would discover what happened to Franklin's men, perhaps even rescuing those who might have survived the fifteen years. Most people considered it a foolhardy plan.

Hall had the enthusiasm of a novice, the will power of a self-made man, the certainty of a self-righteous man, and the belief that he could survive an arctic winter if he adopted native ways. Although on this first venture into the Arctic, Hall failed to reach King William Island, the trip was important in other ways. First, he was able to prove that Frobisher Strait, as it was marked on existing maps, was in reality a bay, and

he even discovered relics from Martin Frobisher's long lost 16th-century expedition. Second, over the course of two winters he lived for over twelve months with natives, supporting his theory that Sir John Franklin's men might still live; and, third, he made the acquaintance of two English-speaking Inuit, Ebierbing and Tookoolito—known to white men as Joe and Hannah. Both would join him on his later voyages.

When Hall returned to New York City, it was to a nation at war. His first response was to request from Treasury Secretary Salmon P. Chase a commission to organize some whaling men, obtain a ship, and go after the Confederate blockade runner, the *C.S.S. Alabama*. Chase never responded to this flamboyant offer, after which Hall seems to have ignored the war. After spending two weeks in Cincinnati with his wife and now two children, Hall returned to New York to give lectures, work up his notes into a book, and make preparations for a return to the far north. However, the Lincoln administration expressed no interest in supporting such a venture, while the war sucked funds and interest from potential backers.

Plans for a polar expedition in 1863 collapsed. Still obsessed with finding Franklin survivors, he found little time for his family. Indeed, between 1860 and his death in 1871, Hall probably spent less than a total of six months with his long-suffering wife and children. For all practical purposes, he had abandoned them. In the meantime, delays and unfulfilled promises continued to frustrate him. Never known for tact or tolerance, he nursed personal slights and quarreled with various people, including the man who was editing his book. At last, however, the stars aligned, and in 1864 he headed back to the Arctic, this time to spend five years—an extraordinary

accomplishment in itself. On this second venture he was dropped off just north of Hudson Bay.

Hall lived much of the next four years with a small party of natives, staying in an igloo during the long winters, hunting with the villagers, dressing in animal skins, and learning the language. He learned to eat seal blubber and blood soup, caribou brains and marrow from cracked bones, and as much as possible he followed their customs. Inevitably tensions flared, usually when Inuit behavior offended Hall's sense of propriety, but nothing angered him more than when the natives failed to share his enthusiasm for traveling further north. Horrible weather, illness, recalcitrant natives, uncooperative whalers, all interfered with Hall's express purpose of getting to King William Island.

Finally, in March, 1869, he set out by dog sledge with a small party of natives, including Joe and Hannah, to explore King William Island. They found human bones and scattered relics linked to the Franklin expedition. Having accomplished his purpose, and putting any hope for Franklin survivors to rest, Hall returned to the states on a whaler in the summer of 1869. Hall also brought back a wealth of experience. He had learned how to survive by going native. No other white man had spent this much time in that frozen region. Of course, there was the troubling matter of his having killed a man. In 1867 he had recruited several whaling men to join him on his search, but this proved deadly. At times imperious, often suspicious, and certainly thin-skinned, Hall quarreled with these men, particularly one Patrick Coleman. At one point, feeling threatened by this man's insolent and surly attitude, Hall returned to his quarters, picked up a revolver, and mortally wounded Coleman. Although Hall reported the incident when he returned to

the United States, nothing ever came of this, perhaps because no one knew what laws applied to that remote region.

Five years in the Arctic had made Hall something of a national hero. He now gave numerous lectures in the East and in Cincinnati—where he returned several times to visit his family and raise funds. Much of 1870 was spent pressuring Congress to fund a return expedition, with Hall arguing for national honor, a need for more accurate nautical charts, and increased access to oil. The oil in question, of course, referred to whale oil. Hall even estimated that just seven captured whales would more than offset his proposal for \$100,000. He secured support from Ohio senators and representatives, and even from President Grant, whom he visited in the White House. But Hall's lack of formal scientific training, to say nothing of nautical experience, continued to plague him. There was talk of making him subordinate to someone with a more professional background. Essentially a loner, Hall wanted nothing to do with that. The political machinery moved slowly, much too slowly for Hall's disposition. In 1870, Congress finally approved \$50,000 for a polar expedition, with Hall as its leader, but the delays meant no voyage until the following year.

For the next several months Hall busied himself with outfitting the ship and assembling a crew. The Navy had provided a 380-ton former tug, re-fitted with six-inch oak timbers and sheeted with iron that terminated in a sharp prow—in essence an ice breaker. Two masts were added to complement the powerful coal-fired engine. Two other changes would be particularly helpful: the propeller and drive shaft could be raised to the deck to avoid damage from ice; and one of the boilers was fitted for use of whale or seal oil to operate a steam generator that provided heat to the cabins. To command the

vessel, Hall turned to an old whaling acquaintance, George Tyson, but Tyson had a previous whaling commitment and declined. Then, he selected Sidney Budington whom he much admired from his 1864 trip, despite their occasional clashes of personality. Shortly after recruiting Budington, Tyson's commitment fell through and Hall then retained him as "assistant navigator" and "master of sledges," two titles that lacked any clear definition. Problems of authority would soon follow. Charles Hall served as expedition commander; Budington as ship's captain; and a former captain, Tyson, had no clearly defined role. Hall simply wanted Tyson with him. Hall's first choice for chief scientist, Dr. Daniel Walker, also ran into problems, largely because he was primarily a physician and not a trained scientist. Joseph Henry of the American Academy of Sciences successfully pushed for a 24-year old well-trained German scientist and physician, Dr. Emil Bessels. To add to the complicated command structure, Bessels was given authority over the scientific side of the expedition; and, if all that wasn't enough, although the *Polaris* was a navy vessel, no one on board actually served in the navy. Another German, Frederick Meyer, was appointed as meteorologist, and yet another served as engineer. Of the ten common seamen, seven were German, along with one Swede, one Dane and one American. Of the ship's 25 man crew, 10 were German, ten were American, and the rest from other nations. To this international crowd were added Joe, Hannah and their four-year-old daughter, Punny. Off the coast of Greenland another Eskimo family of five joined the ship.

It is not clear when trouble first arrived. Even before the *Polaris* was ready, Hall, in conversation with Judge Joseph Cox in Cincinnati, expressed concern about insubordination among his officers. Was this just another example of Hall's suspicious

nature or had something happened? The question cannot be answered. We do know that when the expedition left the Brooklyn Navy Yard in late June, 1871, Hall was jubilant. His moment in the sun had arrived. The United States Polar Expedition, as he called it, was charged with locating the North Pole and making such scientific investigations as would be feasible. For Hall, however, the Pole came first; for others, science was paramount. And therein lay part of the problem.

Much is known about the *Polaris* voyage. Although Hall's personal records are gone, the ship's log survived and many in the ship's company kept personal journals. Thus, we can reconstruct the expedition from several perspectives, perspectives that are often in disagreement. There is also, of course, the Navy Department's report based on its board of inquiry. When the *Polaris* reached Greenland some four weeks after departing New York, signs of conflict had already emerged. It seems that Meyer, the meteorologist, who had been keeping Hall's official journal, resented this essentially clerical role. When he complained that it interfered with his professional duties, Hall ordered him to stop making meteorological observations, which really weren't necessary yet, and attend to the journal. However, Dr. Bessels supported his fellow countryman. The two German scientists, who felt themselves intellectually and socially superior to the untutored Hall, chafed under his command, and when Hall threatened to have Meyer sent ashore, Bessels said that he and all the Germans would also leave. Faced with the collapse of HIS expedition, Hall capitulated. Hall also irritated the two Germans when he insisted that everyone on board receive equal shares of food. Equality was not a Prussian trait. But personal dislike went both ways, and Hall once referred to Dr. Bessels, as "that little German dancing master." About the same time, another conflict emerged. Hall

caught Captain Budington raiding the ship's food stores, a serious breach of morality and discipline in Hall's eyes, and Budington may also have been sneaking from the ship's supply of alcohol. In turn, the ship's captain took to bad-mouthing Hall to the rest of the crew. Although the breach was repaired, Hall never fully trusted Budington again. On another occasion, Hall severely admonished the cook for swearing and ordered that swearing would not be permitted on board—surely a first on a U. S. Navy vessel!

After making several brief stops along Greenland's west coast, and learning that arctic ice conditions were favorable, the *Polaris* moved swiftly north. On August 24, Hall left his last dispatch at the tiny village of Tasiussaq, bidding “farewell to civilization for several years, if need be.” In an age before wireless communication, the *Polaris* might as well have been traveling to the dark side of the moon. In six days they steamed to the northern end of Kennedy Channel, a latitude of 82° 11'. They were now at the edge of the Arctic Ocean, which Hall and other explorers had predicted would be open water. Instead the ship met impenetrable pack ice. Going ashore, Hall raised the American flag and claimed the land for the United States. Bad weather soon forced the *Polaris* southward, and Hall finally sought refuge in a small harbor on the northwest corner of Greenland, where they settled in for the long winter. He named it “Thank God Harbor.”

Dr. Bessels put up a scientific observatory on shore and some provisions were stored nearby in case of an emergency. When the weather was favorable, Hall and others took brief trips to explore the immediate area, then on October 10, accompanied by one crew member and the two Eskimo men, he spent two weeks exploring the area to the north in preparation for the planned spring push to the Pole. On October 24 the group

returned in good spirits. Soon after arriving on board, Hall drank a cup of coffee, which he thought was too sweet, and within minutes became violently ill to his stomach. There is some disagreement whether Dr. Bessels was with Hall when he drank the coffee or whether he arrived soon after. In any event, after vomiting, Hall complained of weakness in his legs and lay down. He soon lapsed into a coma. According to Bessels, his pulse was irregular, ranging between 60 and 80 beats per minute. The doctor applied mustard poultices to Hall's legs and chest, and a cold compress to his forehead. In about a half hour Hall regained consciousness, but he now suffered from paralysis to his left side. Bessels concluded that he had suffered a stroke. By evening, however, the paralysis had lifted.

The next day, Bessels injected Hall with quinine to allay a fever, and the patient was clear-headed and much improved except for some numbness in his tongue. But, the following day he showed the first signs of dementia, shouting that Budington and George Tyson were going to shoot him. He also began hallucinating, believing that a poisonous blue vapor floated in his cabin, and became convinced that he had been poisoned, accusing almost everyone of conspiring against him. He soon refused further treatment from Dr. Bessels, by now his prime suspect. Interestingly, after four days without professional aid, Hall's condition improved. On November 4, eleven days after the first symptoms, he again allowed Bessels to treat him, and on November 6 he was up and about, even appearing on deck for a short time. He ate well, worked on his journal, and discussed plans with various people. Then, just after midnight he lapsed into a coma and died 26 hours later.

By prearrangement, Sidney Budington now assumed command of the expedition, but everyone still had to await the next summer's thaw that would free the *Polaris*. It was a difficult eight months. The constant threat of shifting ice, unbearable temperatures, gale force winds, and monotonous food became their companions. Boredom and the long arctic nights led to frayed tempers. One crewman became delusional. The ship's company broke into factions, and discipline lapsed. Several men later commented on Budington's heavy drinking at this time. In June, George Tyson led a small party northwest by boat to see if there was an open passage that might lead to the Pole. Still blocked by ice, they spent four weeks camped on shore, doing anything to avoid returning to the ugly atmosphere on board the *Polaris*. Finally, a note from Budington reached them, ordering them to return because the ship was now free from the ice. By this time, Budington, never very enthusiastic about reaching the North Pole, had determined to head back. However, within days the ship was again trapped in an ice floe, and for the next two months it slowly drifted southward. The laboring sound of the ship's pump served as a constant reminder of their precarious situation.

In mid-October, 1872, during a violent gale, Budington, fearing the ship would be crushed, called for its abandonment. Many in the crew jumped onto the floe, and the captain ordered that supplies and equipment should be thrown to them. Then, when it appeared the ship wasn't sinking, he reversed the order. In the confusion the ship suddenly broke free of the surrounding ice and the sudden lurch caused the hawsers to snap. Within minutes the *Polaris* had disappeared into the arctic gloom. The next morning the stranded members of the crew spotted it about six miles to the south, moving under both steam and sail. Apparently no one on the ship saw them, for it soon steamed

out of view. George Tyson, the ranking officer on the ice, now took charge of the 19 people, which included meteorologist Meyer and all eight of the Inuit. Their story is one of extraordinary endurance.

From October to the next April they drifted southward between Baffin Island and Greenland. As their ice floe gradually broke up, they used the small boat which had been saved to move periodically to larger floes. On Christmas Day they ate the last of the canned ham and dried apples from the ship's stores thrown onto the ice; on January 1 frozen entrails, a little blubber, and pemmican tea ushered in the new year. They now depended on the Inuit hunters for obtaining food and building shelter. Temperatures dropped regularly into the negative thirties and forties. The long Arctic nights added to their difficulties. They were not happy campers. As spring approached, hope for rescue from a passing whaler helped offset the fear of the steadily shrinking ice. At one point their "ice island" was so reduced that not all could lie down at the same time. Discipline collapsed and Tyson feared that they were approaching either death or savagery, meaning cannibalism. Battered by squalls of sleet and rain that swept away their tent and supply of animal skins, they were at the end of their resources. Finally, off the Labrador Coast, they boarded the patched up boat and placed their faith in the sea. On April 30th the steamer *Tigress*, out of Newfoundland, picked them up. In six and one-half months they had drifted over 1800 miles through an arctic winter.

Meanwhile, Captain Budington and the damaged *Polaris* made for the Greenland shore where they abandoned the ship and spent the winter near an Inuit settlement. In the spring these thirteen men set out in two small boats, rigged with sails, to head south along the coast of Greenland. On June 23, a whaler out of Dundee, Scotland, picked them out

and a few more weeks saw them back in New York City. Although several men lost fingers and toes to frostbite, and one or two suffered severe emotional problems, the only person to die on the Polaris expedition was Charles Francis Hall.

Charles Hall's polar expedition was not a complete failure. It led to improved navigation charts, provided proof that the best route to the North Pole lay through Kennedy Channel, and greatly expanded understanding of Inuit culture. He also penetrated further north than any European, perhaps any human, had done. In 1875 the French Société de Géographie posthumously awarded him its Roquette Medal.

But what about those four men trudging across the tundra in 1968? Tom Gignoux, the ex-marine, did most of the digging. Soon his pick struck a pine coffin. After removing the lid, they discovered Hall's body, shrouded in an American flag and still not yet completely decayed. For three hours, Dr. Frank Paddock poked and prodded the frozen corpse, eventually taking hair and fingernail samples. Afterward they replaced the lid, covered the coffin with dirt, and piled the rocks back on top. Thirteen days later they were back in the United States. The hair and fingernail samples were sent to Toronto's Center of Forensic Sciences. Some weeks later the report came back: in the last two weeks of his life, Charles Francis Hall had received toxic amounts of arsenic.

Arsenic poisoning is clear, but how was it administered? Could the cook have taken his long-delayed revenge by poisoning the coffee? What about Captain Budington, who feared going further north, and certainly had access to both arsenic and to Hall? However, Dr. Bessels remains the best suspect. Did he "spike" the coffee and perhaps other food or medicine later? He certainly had opportunity and knowledge, but no really creditable motive, unless you count arrogance. In fact, there would not seem to be a

rational motive for anyone, although one can never know how the fear of a long Arctic winter might have affected someone's rationality. There is also the possibility that Hall did indeed suffer a stroke and might have self-ingested arsenic acid, at that time recommended for several ailments and which would have been in the ship's medical kit.

Accusations, rumors, personal quarrels, conflicting and confusing evidence—Is the truth out there somewhere, perhaps waiting for Agent Mulder? Probably not. Certainty is rarely the historian's companion.