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Linfield into Antarctica

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Linfield into

Editor's note: After Linfield Magazine had gone to press, we received word that Jesse Peterson '06 passed away following a canoeing accident on a remote lake in the Sangre de Cristo Wilderness in Colorado. In November, Jesse left to work at the Amundsen-Scott South Pole Station in Antarctica, an experience that he wanted to share with other Linfield Magazine readers.



Jesse Peterson '06, a philosophy graduate, incorporated the liberal arts into carpentry in the Antarctic, working in support of the NSF scientists doing astrophysics research at the South Pole. He spent three months as a polar carpenter at the Amundsen-Scott South Pole Station.

One sunny morning last November, I stepped off an airplane and onto the bottom of the world. Minus-40 degree air burned my lungs as I took my first look around. The surreal landscape revealed nothing but flat, windswept snow, stretching out endlessly in every direction. The sun shone low in a deep blue sky as we crunched across the snow toward South Pole Station. This would be my home and jobsite for the next three months, working as a carpenter for the United States Antarctic Program.

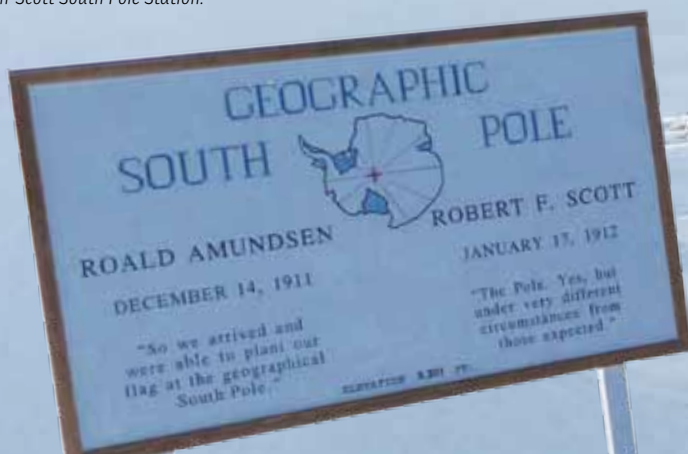
My journey to Antarctica began in second grade, as an obsession with penguins and the strange white continent at the bottom edge of the map. It seemed to me a far-off, semi-mythical place, as remote and mysterious as the moon. At Linfield, I majored in philosophy, with a focus on environmental ethics. Admittedly, philosophy may seem to have little to do with carpentry. But, as my advisor Kaarina Beam wisely told me as a freshman in 2002, philosophy applies to everything – polar carpentry included.

In truth, my passion is the exploration and preservation of

wilderness, in its many forms. Inspired by my travels while a student at Linfield, it has been my goal to hike, climb, ski and immerse myself in some of the wildest, most remote places in the world. From the lesser-known corners of my native Colorado to the fiords of New Zealand to the glaciers of the Indian Himalaya, the blank spots on the map seem to draw me in. So when I had an opportunity to work in the middle of the Antarctic ice sheet, it seemed like a logical progression.

The Amundsen-Scott South Pole Station sits atop 9,300 feet of ice at the southernmost point on earth. Between the scientists and support staff, the population hovers around 200 people during the summer season. Throughout the course of a year, there is one six-month day and one six-month night. During the three months I was there, the sun never set. The temperature fluctuated between -40 and -10 degrees Fahrenheit most of the time, with a nearly constant, light breeze out of the north.

In winter, the prolonged period of darkness, combined with an incredibly clear, dry atmosphere, makes it an



Antarctica

ideal place to carry out astronomy and astrophysics research. By looking at neutrinos and cosmic background radiation, scientists at the South Pole are able to study profound questions regarding the origins of the universe. Additional research at the station includes meteorology, climatology, glaciology and seismology. This research is funded through the National Science Foundation, and is the reason the station exists.

In order to allow this research to happen, support workers are employed by a private contractor to keep the station running. This is where I came in. There is a lot that needs to be done – construct and maintain facilities, handle cargo, operate machinery, etc. – all within the brief window of relatively warm temperatures during the austral summer. As a carpenter, I had the pleasure of working outdoors much of the time I was there. It was cold, challenging and ultimately rewarding work. Our projects included installing two photovoltaic panel arrays, erecting several wind turbines, and, inevitably, shoveling snow – lots and lots of snow.

By and large, participants in the United States Antarctic Program come to Antarctica to work. There is much to be done and little time to do it. But there are plenty of ways to have fun, as well – from open-mic nights to wine and cheese parties to weekly yoga classes. I spent most of my free time in the bouldering gym or cross-country skiing. There is also an 18-hole disc golf course on the outskirts of the station, where I put to use another valuable skill learned during my years at Linfield.

The 2011-12 summer season also happened to coincide with the 100-year anniversary of Roald Amundsen and Robert Falcon Scott first reaching the South Pole. This was a big deal at our tiny, remote community. Jens Stoltenberg, the prime minister of Norway, along with his cabinet and entourage, spent several days at the station, giving speeches, holding ceremonies and casually cross-country skiing across the polar plateau. On the anniversary proper, Mr. Stoltenberg stood at the pole marker and gave an incredibly moving speech, honoring the spirit of exploration, international collaboration



South Pole marker, dedicated in January 2012.

and pursuit of knowledge at South Pole Station. In true Norwegian style, this was followed by spiced wine and cookies, marking one of the most memorable days of the entire season.

For me, to live and work in Antarctica is a dream come true, and an experience I hope to continue for many seasons to come. It may not be the career path I originally imagined, but as Emerson put it, "All life is an experiment. The more experiments you make the better." Our education is never finished, and, as I have learned, it takes us places we never expect. 🍷

– Jesse Peterson '06

