

Armchair Travel, Inc.



A million ordinary folk banded together in National Geographic have created this fabulous saga of adventure and exploration

by IRVING WALLACE

WHEN THE United States Army recently sent out an SOS for snapshots of Europe and the Far East, the greatest single response came from the National Geographic Society.

Thirty thousand enlarged photographs came from the Washington, D.C. files of this scientific and educational organization. This was only a pint-sized gift compared to other contributions made by the National Geographic to the government. Ever since Pearl Harbor, it has been turning every piece of its global machinery over to our government agencies.

For instance, it has handed 150 thousand maps over to the services. Six hundred of these maps were on their way to the *U.S.S. Lexington*—just as the carrier was sinking into the Coral Sea. Many of the maps, such as those for the Air Forces, were designed to aid navigators by making each inch the equivalent of 236.7 miles, the hourly cruising range of the average 350 thousand-dollar bomber.

A short time ago, General Henry "Hap" Arnold, head of the Army Air Force, returned a heavily penciled and doodled Caribbean map to the National Geographic with the note, "I used it for two round trips to the Panama Canal. It's pretty badly messed up, and I thought I might trade it in to you for a new one!"

It was a deal.

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Last year a United States destroyer commander, whose Navy charts were burned when the Japs bombed Cavite, escaped and navigated his boat safely to Australia. For direction, he depended solely on a map of the Pacific—which he had torn out of an old copy of National Geographic.

Some of the Geographic's other contributions include making available its 18 thousand volume library and all its back issues to the armed services.

*And in addition much research work has been done by the staff of the magazine to further government projects. Typical example was a writer who was the only American to accompany the Citroen-Haardt Expedition in 1932. He traveled some 7,370 miles by motor car across Central Asia and China, and learned much about air and auto routes from the Mediterranean to the Yellow Sea.

TODAY, placing all its vast facilities at the nation's disposal and presenting the public with both escape and education, the National Geographic is one of the most fabulous undertakings of its kind on earth.

It publishes the only magazine in the world with members instead of subscribers. It has its own tri-colored flag (blue for sky, brown for earth, green for ocean). United States presidents frequently present its awards.

And those are not all of the "firsts" of this Herculean project. Its "names" discovered the North and South Pole. Expeditions under its sponsorship established new records for distance in travel. For 55 years it has treated armchair adventurers to articles by explorers like Peary and Amundsen, by executives like Teddy Roosevelt and Coolidge, and by aviators like Lindbergh and General Arnold. Among other widely-known writers for the magazine have been Alexander

* See *Embattled Library Books* by Lawrence Stessin p. 136 to see war contributions of other research institutions.

Conrad and Hendrik Van Loon.

Its members are distributed from Malta (47 members) to the Solomons (12 members) to Russia (46 members) to Japan (750 members) to Buckingham Palace (1 member). And its circulation grew from 209 in 1888 to 1,250,000 in 1942.

The ancestry and evolution of this magazine is a saga in technicolor out of DeMille. In January, 1888, copies of a letter arrived in homes of several hundred prominent gentlemen.

Each letter read: "Dear Sir, You are invited to be present at a meeting to be held in the Assembly Hall of the Cosmos Club, Friday evening, January '13, for the purpose of considering the advisability of organizing a society for the increase and diffusion of geographic knowledge."

Each letter was signed Gardiner G. Hubbard. Fourteen days later the National Geographic Society was formed, with Gardiner G. Hubbard its first president and 165 Washingtonians of social, literary and political prominence as its members.

Early in the next year, a slim scientific brochure, bound between red covers, appeared at the price of 50 cents per copy. It was Volume I, Number 1, of the National Geographic Magazine—a dull item. Its liveliest article was "The Classification of Geographic Forms by Genesis."

The magazine appeared irregularly several years. It had only two hundred readers and was two thousand dollars in debt. The new president of the Society, Alexander Graham Bell, the inventor of the telephone, then decided to hire a full-time editor. He chose Gilbert Grosvenor, a 23-year-old New Jersey teacher, for the job.

In April, 1899, young Grosvenor, renting half of a room on the fifth floor of the Corcoran Building, took over. He also took over Alexander

Graham Bell's daughter for a wife, just as Bell had previously taken over Hubbard's daughter for a wife.

For five years, with Grosvenor receiving his salary from his father-in-law, Bell, the magazine staggered along. Grosvenor edited each issue himself, even addressing the magazine envelopes.

"The first issue," Grosvenor recalls, "was so small a man could carry it all on his back. Today, a single month's issue would form a pile more than five miles high."

True enough, the growth was phenomenal. The circulation rose from 209 in 1888 to ten thousand by 1905. As its readers went up and over a million, its advertising, for the 20 years after the first World War, grossed almost 25 million dollars!

From its closet-sized cubicle, the Geographic expanded to a four-story structure stretching three hundred feet along 16th Street, only four blocks from the White House. Today, in this edifice and in the adjacent library, toil eight hundred employees, half of them dispatching copies to the four corners of the earth.

On exhibit at Explorer's Hall in the Geographic Building is the polished slab from the Mango tree which sheltered Stanley and Livingston in their meeting in 1871 at Ujiji. Also displayed in the oddity room are a silver shekel from Jerusalem which is similar to one of Judas' 30 pieces of silver and the match case Sir E. H. Shackleton took to the Pole.

National Geographic has no endowments, receives no fancy gifts. It is supported by ordinary folk—janitors, doctors, housewives, educators, elevator boys, whose common desire is to find adventure and self-education.

What, then, is the secret of this project's amazing success?

There are many answers. The most

NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC MAGAZINE important, perhaps, is that Grosvenor sold his magazine to "members" not to "subscribers." While many persons will not subscribe for a publication alone, they will become members of an organization because they get two things—the distinction of membership in a well-known society and also a good monthly journal.

THE WORK of the Society is supported wholly by the dues of its members plus advertising in the magazine. Today, the Society and the magazine, incorporated under the laws of the District of Columbia, remain a non-profit scientific venture, without stocks, with no one receiving more than salary.

The arithmetic of success was simple. People bought the magazine and joined the Society at three dollars and 50 cents a year or for a hundred dollars for a lifetime, so that they could, vicariously, enjoy the thrills of adventure and exploration by famous names made possible by their memberships. Members are so interested in their magazine that they sometimes send as many as 40 thousand enthusiastic letters to its headquarters in a single day.

How have their memberships helped to advance science and exploration?

Supported by these memberships the Geographic Society gave Admiral Byrd 75 thousand dollars for his first jaunt to the South Pole. The Society purchased and presented to the government 2,239 acres of famous giant sequoia trees in California. After the eruption of Mount Katmai, five expeditions were sent to Alaska, resulting in the discovery of the Valley of Ten Thousand Smokes—an eighth wonder of the world. In January, 1939, Matthew W. Stirling discovered the oldest date work of man in the new world,—a Mexican stone with the Mayan date corresponding to 291 B.C.

And even the youngest Geographic
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fan knows that the Society established a new stratosphere record in 1935 when the world's largest free balloon, "Explorer II" ascended 72,395 feet or 13.71 miles into the air.

This performance was a fitting climax to the National Geographic adventure of 1934 when Dr. William Beebe and Otis Barton, in their rotund steel Bathysphere, went down 3,028 feet in the waters off Bermuda—a record depth!

Another item which causes members to re-subscribe to the magazine at the astonishing renewal rate of 90 per cent annually, is the quality of its articles. Articles must be "pertinent one year or ten years after publication, minus personalities and notes of trivial character, must avoid the controversial." It had a backlog of manuscripts that would fill the magazine for six solid years.

Maps have also been an important factor in shaping the landslide success of the unique society. "Maps are the shorthand of geography," states Grosvenor, president of Geographic.

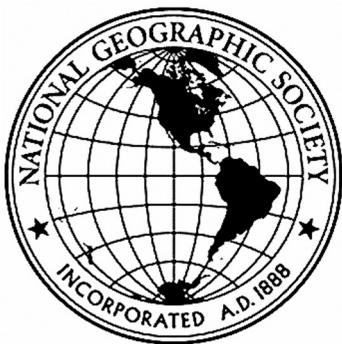
From March, 1915, until his death in 1940, Albert H. Bumstead, inventor of the sun-compass that took Byrd to the Pole, directed the Geographic's cartographic work. In 1940, the Geographic mailed some seven thousand *acres* of maps to its followers. Referring to a new European map, Grosvenor proudly states, "If a single copy of such a map were prepared especially at the whim of a monarch or a millionaire, it would cost him \$10,745!"

As a special service, the National Geographic now supplies five hundred newspapers with simple maps and inside information on "Things Foreign and Timely," and furnishes 30 thousand school children with weekly bulletins on "Events Current."

ITS COLORFUL literary history has also contributed to its popularity. In
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1889, the magazine published a piece by a 33-year-old naval engineer, R. E. Peary. Exactly 17 years later Grosvenor looked on while this same Peary was awarded the Geographic's Hubbard Medal by President Teddy Roosevelt for reaching the "Farthest North." And three years after that, Grosvenor greeted Peary as discoverer of the North Pole.



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