

In preparing his expedition toward the North Pole in 1894, Nansen asked his friend, Russian explorer Baron Edward von Toll, to procure good sledge dogs from Siberia. The Baron had used these on his trip to the Arctic.

Dr Nansen's account of his first meeting with the dogs reads: "Many of them appeared to be well-bred animals, long-haired, now-white, with up-standing ears and pointed muzzles. With their gentle, good-natured-looking faces, they at once ingratiated themselves into the affections. Some of them resembled a fox, and had shorter coats, while others were black or spotted. Evidently they were of different races, and some of them betrayed by their drooping ears, a strong admixture of European blood."

What Nansen saw as a difference in the dogs

stemmed from a difference in the people that owned them. There were two types of Samoyed tribes – one nomadic, the other pastoral – and each had their own kind of dog.

The nomadic Samoyed tribes had the all-white Bjelkier dogs, who served as hunting and draught dogs for their owners. Bjelkier means "white dog that breeds white." In native usage, the term was also applied to the ermine, the white fox, and the white bear.

The pastoral tribes had dogs of the Renvall-Hund or Elkhound type. Some were white, some black and white, and some brown and white.



**Amundsen and his dogs**



### Siberian Huskies in Antarctica

The great age of polar exploration, from 1870 to 1912, brought all Arctic dogs to notice. However, we shall confine ourselves to the explorers of note who used the Bjelkier, now known as the Samoyed:

Fridtjof Nansen  
 Jackson-Harmsworth Expedition.  
 The Duc d'Abuzzi  
 Carsten E Borchgrevink

Most interesting is the Duc's description of his best lead dog, an all-white Bjelkier named Messicano. We are decidedly rivaling not only Nansen, but also Wrangell, who was celebrated for the rapidity of his marches. We are able to accomplish these remarkable stages now, partly because we have only four sledges, and partly on account of the tracks which Messicano, the leading dog, was able to follow again today, even where they had been almost entirely effaced by the wind. It is a small white dog, with thick hair, and very intelligent eyes. It is so called Messicano on account of the abundance of hair which fringes its legs, resembling trousers which widen at the feet. Ever since our departure from Templitz Bay, it has held the first place of the first sledge, because it followed the man at the head of the convoy better than the others. Has followed obediently from the outset, being the most obedient to the word of command. Although not as big as some of his companions

he always pulls, and falls upon the dogs of the other sledges which try to pass it. One would say that it feels all the importance of its position, and is proud of it. Messicano gallops like a drowsy horse with its nose always down in the snow. Sometimes it loses the track and then goes more slowly. Messicano shows its anxiety, it whines and runs up and down with its tongue out until it finds the track again. Then he darts off in the right direction, often for long stretches where it is utterly impossible for us to see a trace of our former passage.

One Samoyed male from the Abuzzi expedition was returned to England. This dog was Houdin.

Houdin was shown and used at stud, and left a good mark upon the breed. Russ, another dog that had been purchased in Tobolsk by Tronheim for this expedition, also eventually made his way to England, and is in early Samoyed pedigree.

Carsten E Borchgrevink, a Norwegian who lived in Australia, led an English expedition to the Antarctic in 1904. He had over 100 Samoyeds with him at the start of the trip. While he did not write much about the breed, two dogs from his pack had tremendous impact upon the breed. The greatest was Antarctic Buck, left in the Sydney Zoo after the expedition, and in 1908 imported to England by Mr and Mrs Kilburn-Scott. The other dog was Trip, who ended up on the Ernest

Shackleton expedition, and was returned to England by Lieutenant Charles Adams. Borchgrevink handed over 27 of his dogs to Dr Douglas Mawson in 1911 for another Australian expedition.

Roald Amundsen, first to reach the South Pole (planting the Norwegian flag there on December 14, 1911), was the most successful "dog man" of all the explorers. His accounts of the training and selection of his sledge dogs are outstanding. He acquired 97 dogs for his expedition, and after much training used 52 of them and four sledges for the dash to the pole. As planned, they returned with the four men, on sledge, and 12 surviving dogs. The round-trip covered 1,860 miles in 99 days, and the first animal over the pole was an all-white Samoyed lead dog. Twenty-seven of Amundsen's dogs were given to Douglas Mawson for an Australian expedition in 1911, and the rest returned as pets of the crew. On each of these expeditions, except the ill-fated Scott expedition, the Samoyed played a major part. Almost all Samoyeds today can be traced back to expedition dogs. One common reference weaves a thread through all the accounts of travel in Siberia – not of a white dog that breeds white.

*"The Complete Samoyed" by Robert H and Dolly Ward*