

Greenland Beckons: Explorer Louise Arner Boyd aboard the *Veslekari*

by Joanna Kafarowski

California native Louise Arner Boyd's ambitious plan to sail to Greenland from northern Norway in 1928 was thwarted when she signed on to the international rescue mission to find missing polar explorer Roald Amundsen, who had disappeared in June of that year.¹ Tragically, Amundsen and his crew perished, but for Boyd the experience awakened a passion for exploring. Several years passed, and Boyd's desire to launch

an expedition to East Greenland was finally materializing. Her previous ship, the wooden steamship *Hobby*, was not available for hire. Instead, this would be the first time she would sail in the sealer and expedition ship *Veslekari*, another respected Norwegian vessel. She and *Veslekari* ("little Kari" in Norwegian) would sail together on four successive voyages to East Greenland, Jan Mayen Land, and Svalbard, in 1931, 1933, 1937 and 1938.

Throughout her long and illustrious career going to sea, Boyd developed a deep sense of connection with each of the three ships she sailed in, but *Veslekari* would be her favorite. There were several available ships she could have chartered, but *Veslekari's* connection to her hero Amundsen made it an easy decision. *Veslekari* was the sister ship of *Maud*—used by Amundsen during his 1918–25 transit through the Northeast Passage. These vessels were constructed of oak, pine, and greenheart and built in Christian Jensen's shipyard in Volen in Asker near Kristiania (now Oslo). She had a gross tonnage of 285 and was approximately 134 feet in length and 27 feet on the beam. The vessel was ketch-rigged with a maximum speed of 10 knots. *Veslekari* had also participated in the Amundsen rescue mission, so this new relationship boded well.

Exuberant crowds shouting "God Reise!" were on hand as *Veslekari* departed her home port of Ålesund, Norway, on 1 July 1931. While Captain Paul Lillenes and the rest of the local crew were familiar faces to the onlookers, few amongst the well-wishers were accustomed to seeing a woman expedition leader, and an American woman at that. Along with the sailing crew, Boyd had also invited Swedish geographer Carl-Julius Anrick and American botanist Robert Menzies. Both men brought their wives with them, although this proved to be one of the last times Boyd allowed other women aboard on her expeditions. Open conflict between Boyd and the geologist's wife during the 1933 expedition confirmed her decision. From that point forward, Boyd was the only woman to participate in her expeditions.

Louise Boyd on the deck of her first expedition ship, Hobby. "People openly told me the Arctic was a place only for men — that for me to go where I did was not to be taken seriously. Determination and persistence brought me to the position I achieved."

—Louise A. Boyd



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¹ Read about this chapter in Louise Boyd's life in *Sea History* 177, "Searching for Amundsen: Louise Arner Boyd aboard the *Hobby*."

The ship set a northwesterly course through the turbulent Norwegian Sea to Jan Mayen Land, located halfway between Greenland and Norway. The sea state during this passage was less than favorable, and one by one the expedition scientists disappeared below deck, leaving Boyd alone on deck with the sailing crew. It was a point of pride with her that she never succumbed to seasickness. The ship lived up to her lively reputation, and a crewmember reported: “*Veslekari!* God help us all! First she rolls like an ordinary boat, then she rolls some more, and then you think that she will go all the way around.” Louise Arner Boyd was steady throughout and carried on with her work—checking the ship’s progress or confirming the course plotted with the captain.

After spending time on Jan Mayen Land, the ship carried on to East Greenland, where the team conducted research in the Kjerulf and Kong Franz Josef Fjords. It was a remote area in a challenging part of the world. *Veslekari* was the first ship to reach the region that summer, and Boyd was thrilled with a *New York Times* headline trumpeting: “Three Greenland Groups Held by Ice Barrier: Bartlett² Caught but Miss Boyd Gets Through.” Despite her inexperience, Boyd’s decision-making and Captain Lillenes’s years at sea proved to be a potent combination. Boyd was not only the expedition leader, but the chief photographer as well. She enthusiastically filmed and took hundreds of images documenting the geographic features of the coast. These images and the scientific data

collected by the team were later used to create new maps of the region.

Two months later, the ship returned to Ålesund and Boyd flew back to the United States. Her first expedition to Greenland had been an outstanding success, including extensive photographic

documentation of the coastal regions of East Greenland, the discovery of a glacier located next to the Jaette Glacier, as well as several botanical species previously unknown to science and new data about musk oxen herds in Greenland and on Jan Mayen Land.

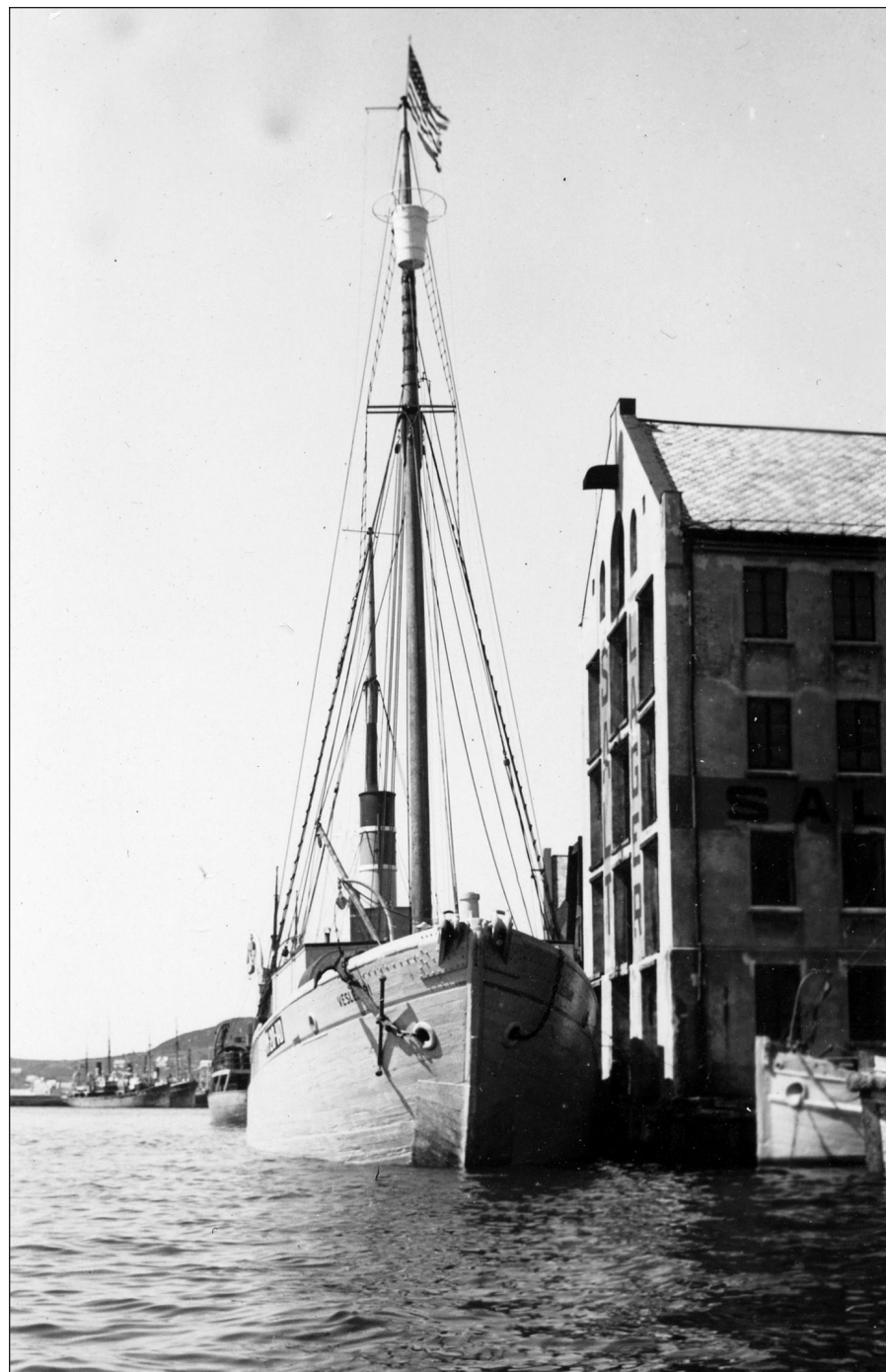


PHOTO BY FINN BRONNER, COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR

Veslekari in Ålesund, Norway. Veslekari was launched in 1918 from the same shipyard near Kristiania, Norway, that built Roald Amundsen’s expedition ship Maud. Built for sealing, she was well-suited for polar exploration. Louise Boyd chartered the ship for four expeditions to Greenland and the Arctic in the 1930s. Veslekari saw war-time service in World War II under the name HMS Bransfield. She returned to sealing after the war and was actively working until 1961, when she was wrecked off Newfoundland.

² Capt. Bob Bartlett was an internationally famous Arctic explorer, having served as both master of SS *Roosevelt* and one of the expedition leaders for Robert Peary’s quest to reach the North Pole, as captain of the ill-fated *Karluk* expedition, and finally aboard his schooner *Effie M. Morrissey* (now *Ernestina-Morrissey*).

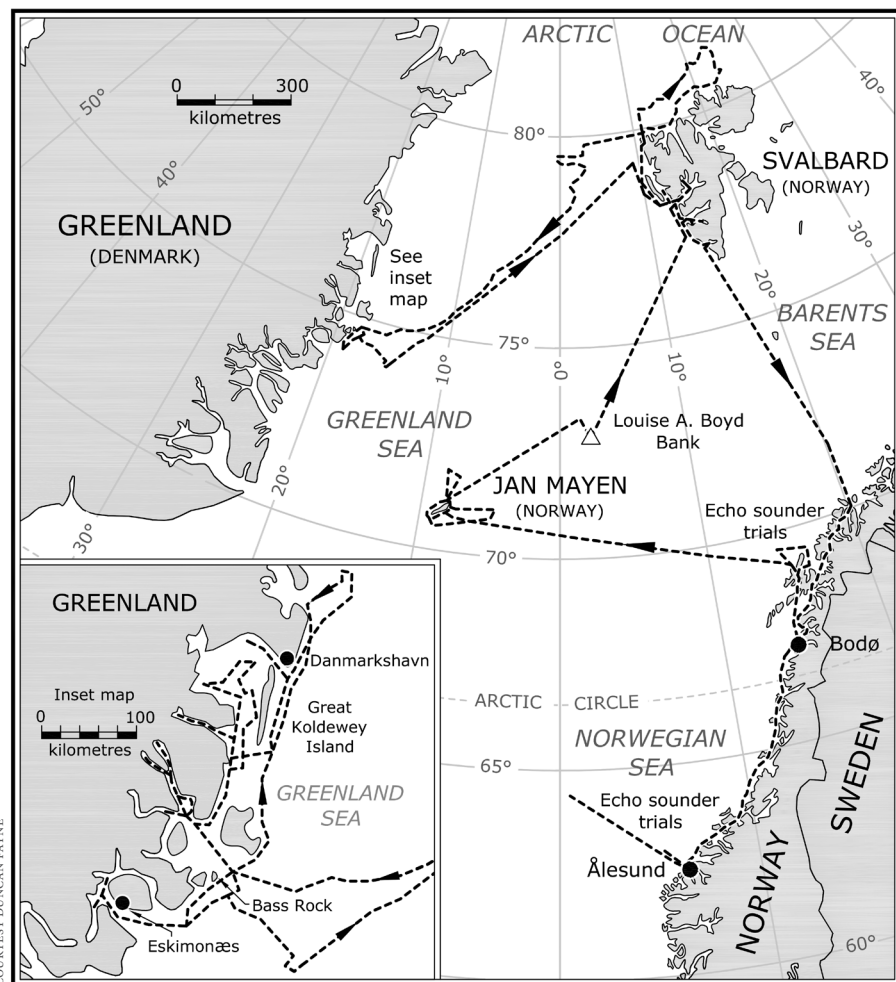
The ship had performed admirably and was Boyd's first choice for her next voyage to East Greenland two years later. Her skills as an expedition leader and polar explorer were now finely honed. She formed a collegial relationship with president of the American Geographical Society (AGS) Isaiah Bowman, and this organization played a significant role in her professional life. Bowman acted as her mentor, as he had for many of her polar colleagues, and she benefitted from learning from senior AGS cartographers and surveyors. Boyd was skilled at identifying and forming partnerships with established scientists, who could help her become the best explorer she could be. By this time, Boyd was known and had earned the respect of her peers, including Vilhjalmur Stefansson, Hubert Wilkins, Robert Bartlett, Lauge Koch, and Adolf Hoel.

The 1933 Louise Arner Boyd Expedition to East Greenland was broader in scope



NORSK POLARINSTITUTT NPO2478, PHOTO BY OSCAR BANG

Louise Boyd aboard the Veslekari with members of the expedition crew.



in that she invited a surveyor, geologist, physiographer, and botanist to come along. She generously provided a unique opportunity to early-career scientists, who benefitted professionally from their involvement with this voyage. She continued this practice for each of her successive expeditions. It was during this expedition that she worked with Captain Johan Olsen, a soft-spoken, respected Norwegian ice master, and his loyal crew. Although neither was fluent in the other's language, Olsen and Boyd got along famously, and she would sail with him on three successive expeditions. She never married or had children, so the relationships she developed with her captains and the crew were of vital importance to her. In between voyages, she kept in regular contact with many of those who had sailed with her on *Veslekari* and brought generous gifts for their families whenever she visited Norway.

Her final trips to East Greenland aboard *Veslekari* took place in 1937 and 1938. These expeditions were designed as a unit and focused on her previous investigations of glacial recession and hydrographic work. Another objective was to see how far north they could get along

Route of the 1938 expedition.

the coast, and these two expeditions confirmed her reputation as a formidable polar explorer. A 1937 *New York Times* article referred to her as “the only woman polar explorer... whose Arctic explorations in the last ten years have rivaled those conducted by men.”

One of the hallmarks of her four *Veslekari* expeditions was the use of cutting-edge technology. Hers were some of the earliest

Arctic expeditions outfitted with a photo-theodolite used in terrestrial photogrammetry. Boyd was fascinated with this branch of science, which collected data about the environment through the use of measuring and interpreting photographic images. She also took a variety of different cameras with her to ensure that the photographic record she obtained would be as comprehensive as possible.



COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR

Louise Boyd signing the Fliers and Explorers Globe at the American Geographical Society office in 1938.

On all my expeditions my photography of coastal features in panorama and in detail, as well as of ice conditions, was an almost continuous process from either ship or motor dory; and while on shore I took every opportunity to take my cameras up on to high ground from which I could get wide and distant views that often afforded an understanding of the topography in no other way so easily obtained. My work took me long days and many miles into the land away from our base on the ship or from camp sites inland, in order to make as complete a photographic coverage as I possibly could.

Other equipment included a recently developed self-recording echo-sounder, used to collect data on ocean depths, that was subsequently used in the Norwegian Sea, Greenland Sea, and in North East Greenland. Following refinements, it became known as the “Veslekari Model” and became an invaluable tool for the Norwegian fishing fleet in locating masses of fish. This was the first Norwegian vessel to be outfitted with such a device.

Veslekari underway, unknown date.



NORSK POLARINSTITUTT NFO39399, PHOTO BY ENGINES

In the summer of 1938, Boyd travelled further north in *Veslekari* than she had ever been before, reaching Lat. 77 degrees 50 minutes North Long. 17 degrees 10 minutes West along the East Greenland coast. Travelling through large and small fjords, Boyd and her team conducted field-work around the clock. No one was more energetic or eager to work than Louise Arner Boyd herself, much to the annoyance of the scientists onboard, who expressed a desire for a less rigorous approach to field-work. She believed in the scientific work

they were engaged in and felt a deep sense of connection to the land.

We found open water and made the eastern entrance of Franz Josef Fiord. I was now in familiar country, and it was with renewed pleasure that I looked forward to seeing once more the 120-odd miles of this fiord's winding waterways. This was my third visit, but repeated visits increase rather than diminish the

thrill that one experiences at the grandeur of the fiord, the magnificence of its towering walls and snow-covered mountains borders with summits rising to from 7,000 to 11,000 feet.³

Following the conclusion of the 1938 expedition, Louise Boyd returned to the United States, where she met with universal acclaim. While many awards and honors were bestowed upon her over the course of her lifetime, receiving the Cullum



³ *The Coast of Northeast Greenland* by Louise A. Boyd. American Geographical Society Special Publ. No. 30. New York, 1948. p.30.

Geographical Medal from the American Geographical Society in 1938 had special significance for her. First awarded in 1896, it was presented to “those who distinguish themselves by geographical discoveries, or in the advancement of geographical science.” She was only the second woman in history to receive this honor.

A few years later, Boyd hoped to hire *Veslekari* again and return to Greenland, but world events intervened. *Veslekari* remained in active use as an expedition ship, sealer, and fishing vessel for several more

decades. Boyd maintained contact with her old captain, Johan Olsen, and several crew members until her death. She was distraught by the news that *Veslekari* was wrecked off the coast of Newfoundland, Canada, in April 1961; she could not bring herself to attend the christening of the new vessel of the same name, despite being invited to attend as a special guest. Her relationship with this ship had been too personal. Nevertheless, Louise Arner Boyd’s Arctic adventures were not over yet—her most daring expedition aiding

the American effort during World War II was still on the horizon. ⚓

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COURTESY UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN MILWAUKEE, LOUISE ARNER BOYD COLLECTION

Veslekari at Ice Fjord, Northeast Greenland National Park. Photo by Louise Arner Boyd.