

# North Pole fantasy stirs public imagination

By WILLIAM R. HUNT

Tampering with the polar environment is a difficult and dangerous business. Jules Verne's "Purchase of the North Pole or Earth Topsy Turvy," a book published in 1911, makes this clear.

In the 1890s, an American firm announced its intent to buy the North Pole at a government auction. There was some protest abroad at this news. How could the Yankees auction what they did not own? The Pole had not yet been discovered.

The Americans paid no attention to such mutterings. A company bid 2 cents an acre and gained whatever title the government could give.

Newspapers spoofed the transaction. The company had put out good money. No government subsidies. No public subscription. Yet, as far as anyone knew, the polar region consisted of icy, valueless seas.

The company stimulated further speculation on its folly by declaring its intent to mine rich coal fields at the Pole. Critics laughed until \$15,000,000 in stock was issued in \$100 shares, and Americans bought it up and cried for more. Mining stock speculation was all the rage.

Finally the company unveiled its plan. Their scientists, headed by J.T. Maston, had discovered a means to move the Pole. If the axis of the earth was displaced 23 degrees 8 minutes, the Pole would swing south to sunnier climes. With one stroke the problems of the Pole's isolation and its probable ice cover would vanish. The sun would melt the ice, and miners would gather up the coal. Nothing to it! Maston stated the solution nicely: "If man cannot get to the Pole, the Pole must come to man." No one could fault Maston's logic. Such basics were well understood.

Now newspapers praised the company's ingenuity, although it was not clear how the clever alteration of the earth would be effected. Numbers of readers wrote in suggestions.

After a time the public mood shifted from good-natured enthusiasm to apprehension. It became obvious that there might be disadvantages in altering the axis of the earth's rotation. Agitation

against the company grew, stimulated by disappointed foreign bidders for the Pole. A government commission demanded that company officials reveal their plans. They refused to say anything. Maston was arrested, but in the struggle with police, managed to eat pages from his notebook.

Police uncovered other papers disclosing a company scheme for firing huge cannons at the earth's axis to dislodge it. But where would the explosion take place? Other company executives disappeared mysteriously. Hysteria raged over the threatened disaster. At the Baltimore jail, where Maston was detained, prisoners tried to lynch him.

Meanwhile, in tropical Africa the company forged the greatest cannon ever devised by man. On the scheduled day, the massive armament, hidden deep in a mountain shaft, was fired toward the axis. Nothing happened. As it turned out, Maston had miscalculated the circumference of the earth, throwing all of his calculations off wildly.

Ridicule of those involved followed the fiasco, although the foreign slanders soon caused Americans to defend the audacious Pole tilters.

Of course, none of these events actually occurred except in the teeming imagination of novelist and science fictioner Jules Verne. He wrote his spoof at the peak of the world's excitement over the North Pole's discovery, as a sequel to a book describing an imaginary moon voyage. Probably the nearest thing to a realization of Verne's vision has been the Bering Strait dam proposal offered by a Soviet scientist some years ago. Even for the laudable goal of softening the polar climate, such schemes appear little more practical than Maston's pole tilting.

*(William R. Hunt is Professor of History. This article was written under an Alaska Humanities Forum grant to the Geophysical Institute of the University of Alaska.)*