

Emma Goes to the Arctic: An American Socialite's Trip on a Soviet Icebreaker, 1931

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Abstract

This article tells the story of Emma Burnham Dresser's 1931 voyage on the Soviet icebreaker *Malygin*. Emma was not interested in Marxism or social experimentation. Nor was she fleeing discrimination or religious persecution. Instead, she wanted an exotic experience; hence, Emma's story introduces a new kind of traveler to the scholarly literature on the history of tourism to the Soviet Union: the wealthy socialite looking for her latest adventure. By focusing on contemporary press coverage of the trip, we can also see how American interpretations of it differ from the narratives offered by Soviet media, and how Emma's actions defied American conceptions of the Arctic as a space where men went to prove their masculinity.

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Alison Rowley

Why did Americans visit the Soviet Union in the 1930s? Behind this deceptively simple question lie a host of answers. Scores of published travel accounts have explored the attraction that the USSR held for downtrodden workers drawn by the promises of socialism at a time when their economic prospects in the United States seemed dismal.¹ Similarly, much attention has been given to the courting of disaffected intellectuals and cultural figures keen to examine what progress might look like in a different societal model, of African-Americans who were undoubtedly interested in what was presented as a more racially-just society, and of Jews wishing to have a homeland that they could call their own.² Historian Julia Mickenberg's work has explained the appeal of the USSR for young American women who were interested in what she terms "a new era of female possibility," where not only did they have expanded educational and career opportunities, but more equal partnerships in their personal lives.³ Commonly left out of these narratives are the stories of mere adventure seekers – in other words, often wealthy Americans who had no desire to contemplate larger or deeper questions, but who were simply on the look out for their next thrill. Emma Burnham Dresser was one of them. By age and income level she simply did not resemble the vast

1. The most well-known of these accounts are undoubtedly John Scott's *Behind the Urals* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989); and John Littlepage (with Demaree Bess), *In Search of Soviet Gold* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1937). However, hundreds of other titles are listed in Harry Nerhood's annotated bibliography of English-language travel accounts; see Harry Nerhood, *To Russia and Return: An Annotated Bibliography of Travelers' English-Language Accounts of Russia from the Ninth Century to the Present* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1968). For a scholarly assessment of economic migrants, see Tim Tzouliadis, *The Forsaken: An American Tragedy in Stalin's Russia* (New York: Penguin Books, 2008).

2. See, for example: Joy Gleason Carew, *Blacks, Reds and Russians: Sojourners in Search of the Soviet Promise* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2008); Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment: Cultural Diplomacy and Western Visitors to the Soviet Union, 1921-1941* (Oxford: Oxford university Press, 2012); Meredith Roman, *Opposing Jim Crow: African Americans and the Soviet Indictment of U.S. Racism, 1928-1937* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2012); Liudmila Stern, *Western Intellectuals and the Soviet Union, 1920-1940* (London: Routledge, 2007); and Robert Weinberg, *Stalin's Forgotten Zion: Birobidzhan and the Making of a Soviet Jewish Homeland* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

3. Julia L. Mickenberg, *American Girls in Red Russia: Chasing the Soviet Dream* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017), 5.

majority of women drawn to have a look at the Soviet experiment. Moreover, while Emma's story tells readers little of significance about US-Soviet relations at the macro level, it does underscore that she – like thousands of other Americans – were not deterred by the lack of formal diplomatic relations between these two countries. They felt free to visit the Soviet Union once the requisite infrastructure for tourists had been established. However inconsequential their stories may seem to some readers, adding the narratives of adventure tourists like Emma to the overall tapestry is important because, without them, our knowledge of American tourism to the Soviet Union remains incomplete.

This article begins by outlining as much of Emma's life as possible, given that she left no private papers for an inquisitive historian to consult. Using public documents and contemporary newspaper articles, it is still possible to trace the main events such as her marriage and divorce, as well as many of her social activities, but there are undoubtedly gaps in what can be said. Next the article considers how Emma likely heard about the trip that she took in 1931. The establishment of Intourist in 1929 is pivotal here and attention will be paid to the ways in which potential travelers, particularly those who lived in the New York City area as Emma did, were courted by this new player in the tourism market. The final pages of the article are devoted to the trip itself as well as to the press coverage that Emma received for her exploits while visiting the Soviet Arctic. Telling Emma's story recasts the narrative of the *Malygin*'s voyage from one that almost exclusively emphasized scientific experiments since it shifts the focus to adventure tourism instead.⁴ Moreover, Emma's experiences also challenged prevailing gender norms – norms that assumed that, to quote scholar Jen Hill, “[e]xploring and mapping the Arctic was a self-conscious exercise in national masculine identity building.”⁵ Emma Burnham Dresser, who clearly lived life on her own terms, was not going to be put off by such notions. Instead, in 1931, this resolute woman boarded a Soviet icebreaker and set off for polar waters.

Who was Emma Burnham Dresser?

Emma Louise Burnham was born on 27 January 1869. She was the second of four children, and the only girl, born to Douglas W. & Hannah E. Burnham. The family was economically comfortable, with homes in wealthy enclaves in New York State. State census data from Emma's childhood shows that half a dozen servants lived with the family. On 20 November 1889, Emma married Daniel LeRoy Dresser at St. Luke's Episcopal Church in Matteawan, NY with her fiancé's sister Natalie serving as the maid of honor. The couple's two children, Susan Fish and Daniel LeRoy Jr., were born in 1890 and 1894, respectively.

4. Noted explorer Ivan Papanin's account of the voyage is typical of Soviet sources which barely mention the presence of any tourists on the *Malygin*. See I.D. Papanin, *Led i plamen* (Moscow: Politizdat, 1977). The same can be said for the article written by the expedition's leading scientist. See V.Iu. Vize, “The Voyage of the Icebreaker ‘Malygin’ to Zemlya Frantsa Iosifa in 1931,” *Trudy Articheskogo instituta*, 6 (1933): 1-12.

5. Jen Hill, *White Horizon: The Arctic in the Nineteenth-Century British Imagination* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008), 3.

Despite her comfortable upbringing, marrying LeRoy Dresser was likely considered a social step-up for Emma. Dresser, who was born in Newport, Rhode Island in 1862, had a notable pedigree, which included connections to the wealthy and distinguished Fish and Stuyvesant families, who were prominent in New York and surrounding areas. His parents died when he was a child. The same year that he married Emma, Dresser graduated from Columbia University's School of Mines and went into business.

While LeRoy Dresser got down to moneymaking, other things were expected of women when they moved in Emma's social circles. Apart from being able to manage multiple homes with servants, and ensure that moving between these residences went smoothly, the wives of very rich men were judged on their social skills.⁶ They needed to be gracious hostesses, lively conversationalists, and keen travelers. Their activities were noted in society columns on a regular basis. In the early years of her marriage, such notices show Emma attending dinner parties with her husband, traveling to Canada by private railway car when her brother Gordon chose to get married in Montreal, and christening a new yacht since she and LeRoy were keen members of the New York yachting community.⁷ On occasion, Emma apparently even joined the crew when her husband raced his vessel at Oyster Bay's Seawanhaka Corinthian Yacht Club.⁸ The club, on the eastern shore of Center Island opened in 1871, and two decades later boasted an elite membership that included Theodore Roosevelt and his cousin Emlen as well as other residents of what were known as the Gold Coast Estates.⁹ One column in *The New York Times* informed readers that the Dressers were among the New Yorkers who had ventured to Bermuda to escape the winter weather in 1897.¹⁰ Two years later, a notice in the society column of the *Newport Daily News* remarked that the Dressers had just "returned from a unique and remarkable trip to Idaho, where they shot big game and went through many experiences, such as do not often fall to the lot of men and women, particularly women."¹¹ Then, in 1902, letters held in the archives of the Theodore Roosevelt Center show Emma's husband corresponding with the President concerning possible hunting

6. Stephen Birmingham, *The Grandes Dames* (Guilford, CT: Lyons Press, 2016), 234.

7. See, for example, untitled noticed in the *New York Tribune*, 10 January 1901, 9; and "Launch of the Syce," *The Sun* (New York), 5 May 1897, 4.

8. "Hope Won a Good Race," *The New York Times*, 31 May 1896, 3.

9. John E. Hammond, *Oyster Bay* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2009), 123.

10. "Society", *The New York Times*, 14 March 1897, 10.

11. Untitled notice, *Newport Daily News*, 14 November 1899, 7.

trips in Mississippi and Tennessee, or near New Orleans.¹² These snippets of information reveal the Dressers to be a socially-engaged and adventurous couple whose activities, particularly concerning travel, were considered normal by ‘The 400’ and those on the fringes of this illustrious and extremely wealthy crowd, for journeys kept “one’s conversational reserves well-stocked,” and trips “to far-flung destinations...gave one something to talk about over cognacs, at intermissions, and in cigar-smoke-filled gentlemen’s clubs.”¹³

It should be noted that Emma never lost this love of exotic and adventurous travel, even after her marriage ended, which is apparent from the traces of her activities found in the press as well as the background information included in the newspapers articles that eventually discussed her trip on the Soviet icebreaker *Malygin*. In 1911, for instance, it was reported that Emma was keen to go up in a Curtiss biplane that was participating in Bar Harbor, Maine’s “Aviation Week” exhibition.¹⁴ In a later article, Emma was singled out because she “has sailed twice around the world and last winter [meaning in 1930] she flew over Asia Minor. While on a flying visit to Bagdad, the plane in which she was traveling encountered a severe sandstorm in the Arabian desert and was forced down.”¹⁵ In another column circulated by the Associated Press, readers were informed that Emma, who was described as “a world traveler and hunter,” had previously hunted both moose in Canada and big-horn sheep in America’s Rocky Mountains.¹⁶ Unfortunately, any personal records that might provide further details about these trips have not been preserved.

LeRoy’s Bankruptcy and Emma’s Divorce

It is an understatement to say that LeRoy’s financial failures had a drastic impact on Emma. After setting up a successful wholesale dry goods business, Dresser & Co., at the end of the 1890s, LeRoy continued to take on new business challenges. The biggest came in January 1902, when he became the founder director and president of the Trust Company of the Republic. Only a few months later, the bank got involved with the United States Shipbuilding Company

12. Letter from Daniel LeRoy Dresser to Theodore Roosevelt. Theodore Roosevelt Papers. Library of Congress Manuscript Division. <https://www.theodorerooseveltcenter.org/Research/Digital-Library/Record?libID=o38833>. Theodore Roosevelt Digital Library. Dickinson State University; Letter from Theodore Roosevelt to Daniel LeRoy Dresser. Theodore Roosevelt Papers. Library of Congress Manuscript Division. <https://www.theodorerooseveltcenter.org/Research/Digital-Library/Record?libID=o183078>. Theodore Roosevelt Digital Library. Dickinson State University; and Letter from Theodore Roosevelt to Daniel LeRoy Dresser. Theodore Roosevelt Papers. Library of Congress Manuscript Division. <https://www.theodorerooseveltcenter.org/Research/Digital-Library/Record?libID=o183058>. Theodore Roosevelt Digital Library. Dickinson State University.

13. Denise Kiernan, *The Last Castle: The Epic Story of Love, Loss, and American Royalty in the Nation’s Largest Home* (New York: Atria, 2019), 81.

14. “Society at Bar Harbor,” *The New York Times*, 6 September 1911, 9.

15. “Aged New York Woman Signs for Zeppelin Voyage,” *The Brainerd Daily Dispatch* (Brainerd, MN), 15 May 1931, 1.

16. “U.S. Woman Back from Arctic Tour,” *Evening Star* (Washington, DC), 24 August 1931, 16.

(USSC), which attempted to merge more than half a dozen large shipyards into one company. LeRoy, who was new to the field of bond underwriting and may not have fully understood all of the complexities of the financial dealings he was now involved in, authorized \$4.75 million in funds to USSC, but apparently without verifying the financial statements of the companies involved.¹⁷ When the USSC failed, it caused significant damage to the Trust Company and LeRoy's reputation. By early March 1903, Dresser & Co. also collapsed "with liabilities of \$1,250,000, nominal assets of \$750,000 and actual assets of \$500,000."¹⁸ LeRoy's bankruptcy was eventually discharged in March 1907, after he managed somehow to clear more than a million dollars worth of debt, but the scandal was front page news in American newspapers for months.¹⁹

Apart from the social stigma that the bankruptcy – particularly given its scale – brought, much of Emma's personal fortune was lost by her husband in his business dealings. When her father died in 1893, Emma inherited between \$250,000 and \$300,000, in other words enough money to live in a level of comfort that ordinary Americans could only dream of for the rest of her life. Now that financial security had crumbled, and Emma's marriage soon did as well. By 1906 the couple was living apart: Emma resided in Manhattan with the children, while LeRoy moved into rooms at the New York Yacht Club. Initially their troubles were kept secret, although Emma did file for separation via a Wall Street law firm. Rather than leave matters where they stood, however, LeRoy opted to answer by filing a notice concerning custody of their children; in other words, he suddenly wanted custody of the children he had walked out on months earlier and sought to prohibit Emma from taking them out of New York State.²⁰ This is the moment where the Dresser marital woes exploded into another full-fledged scandal. Emma's lawyer informed the press that LeRoy had abandoned his family on 1 September 1906, had not contributed a penny towards their support since then, and had dissipated his wife's financial assets in the years leading up to their split.²¹ Emma herself chimed in with some comments for the media. "My husband wrecked my fortune and then deserted me", she said before adding, "He left me practically destitute, and when I asked for his support, he retorted that he would never give me another cent. He failed to provide for our children, leaving them to seek the shelter of my relatives..."²²

In mid-January 1908, Emma quietly traveled to Sioux Falls, South Dakota to obtain a divorce from her husband. By the turn of the century, the divorce rate in the US had risen to one in twelve couples, but marital breakdowns, particularly when they involved affluent and socially prominent people, still garnered headlines in

17. Robert Hessen, *The Life of Charles M. Schwab* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1990), 147 and 156.

18. "Suicide Follows Ruin," *The Gazette* (Montreal), 22 July 1915, 9

19. *Ibid.*

20. "Dresser Fight Aired," *The Washington Post*, 23 June 1907, 13.

21. "Suit to Hold Dresser Children," *New York Tribune*, 26 June 1907, 8.

22. "He Got Everything," *Leavenworth Post* (Kansas), 2 July 1907, 3.

the nation's newspapers.²³ Emma made this trip because divorce in her home state was only granted on grounds of adultery, which did not apply in this instance; in South Dakota, on the other hand, Emma was able to file on the basis of desertion.²⁴ Sioux Falls, by this time, had become something of a Mecca to wealthy women looking to rid themselves of their spouses, so it would not have been difficult for Emma to learn how to navigate this option. In 1893, South Dakota altered its laws so that anyone seeking a divorce had to live there for six months in order to establish residency. However, as historian April White notes in her study of the "Divorce Colony" (as the city was known at the time): "It had been the general understanding among Sioux Falls lawyers that an address at one of the state's hotels or boarding houses was enough to establish residency."²⁵

Upon arrival, Emma checked into the Cataract Hotel and gave her name as Mrs. A.M.A. Stewart. However, she did not long remain at the hotel, preferring instead to move into "Wookiye Tipi" ("House of Peace"), a house purchased a few years earlier by Flora Bigelow Dodge when she too sought to divorce her husband and now a dwelling that Dodge lent to other socially prominent women looking to do the same. The house was situated in a quiet neighborhood on the outskirts of the city, and it offered the kind of accommodation that Emma was more used to, meaning a decent number of bedrooms, a bathroom and a kitchen with running water.²⁶ Emma passed the time in some rather surprising ways. She was said to mow her own lawn, for example.²⁷ In addition, newspapers after the divorce was granted positively revelled in informing their readers, that since LeRoy had spent her fortune in an effort to save his own financial affairs, Emma had been forced to sign up for typing and stenography courses in Sioux Falls in order to obtain some skills that could lead to a paying job.²⁸ While the narrative of the socialite fallen on hard times and victimized by her ex-husband dominated this vein of press coverage, the storyline also resembled the plot of many novels featuring the determined and sometimes plucky 'New Woman,' which were popular at the time. As scholar Martha Patterson puts it in her study of women in American fiction in the decades leading up to the start of the First World War: "Many New Women narratives emphasize how economic exigences forced their female protagonists to gain employment outside the home."²⁹ Perhaps this is how Emma, who must have had a hand in releasing the details of her studies to the media, wanted to cast her story and, although she was older than the New Women heroines, she certainly possessed many of their main characteristics, notably she was now "single, white,

23. Martha Patterson, *Beyond the Gibson Girl: Reimagining the American New Woman, 1895-1915* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005), 6.

24. "Mrs. Leroy Dresser is Given Divorce," *The South Bend Tribune*, 11 August 1908, 2.

25. April White, *The Divorce Colony: How Women Revolutionized Marriage and Found Freedom on the American Frontier* (New York: Hachette Books, 2022), 18.

26. White, *The Divorce*, 190.

27. Kiernan, *The Last Castle*, 183.

28. See, for example, "Mrs. Dresser to Pound the Keys," *The Minneapolis Journal*, 23 August 1908, 17.

29. Patterson, *Beyond the Gibson Girl*, 8.

affluent, politically and socially progressive, highly educated, and athletic.”³⁰

These speculations aside, what we do know is that Emma, who was represented at her hearing by South Dakota State Senator Alfred Kittredge, was granted her divorce on 11 August 1908. Word quickly spread across the country as newspaper after newspaper devoted attention to the matter. *The New York Times* even ran the story of the Dresser divorce on its front page.³¹ Despite what she said at the time of her divorce, however, there is no evidence Emma ever took a job to support herself and her children. Instead, it appears that she lived off her remaining financial assets, including more than \$200,000 raised via the sale of the family’s vacation house on Center Island Point, Oyster Bay.³² Emma did not have to share these monies with her ex-husband because, as she stated in an affidavit presented to the judge when she initially filed for separation from LeRoy, the home had been purchased with funds from her inheritance from her father.³³ Moreover, the 1910 US Federal Census lists Emma’s occupation as “own income;” she, Susan and Daniel Jr. were then residing with Emma’s mother in Manhattan, as they continued to do for a number of years.

Life After Divorce

After her divorce, Emma’s actions are harder to track since newspapers stopped by and large reporting on them. Instead, her daughter Susan Fish Dresser moved into the society page spotlight. In December 1908, Susan officially “came out” as a debutante at a reception hosted by her maternal grandmother. The latter also threw a party for her at famed Delmonico’s restaurant in New York a couple of months later.³⁴ These events were followed by a series of house parties at the Burnhams’ country residence in Fishkill Landing, NY. Susan continued to be mentioned in society columns in the years leading up to the First World War: for instance, in 1915 she volunteered to sell refreshments at a benefit for the Lenox Hill Settlement, and participated in a café dansant given under the auspices of the New York Association Opposed to Woman Suffrage.³⁵ A picture of a smartly-dressed Susan driving a motorcar was even used by newspapers when they reported on the death of her father.³⁶

LeRoy Dresser had never fully recovered from the scandal that ruined his business affairs. In December 1914, he married Marcia Walther, whom one

30. Patterson, *Beyond the Gibson Girl*, 27.

31. “Mrs. Leroy Dresser Obtains a Divorce,” *The New York Times*, 11 August 1908, 1.

32. “Will Keep Wolf From Door,” *The Los Angeles Times*, 3 July 1908, 12.

33. “Dresser Villa Sold,” *New York Tribune*, 3 July 1908, 1.

34. On these events, see “Many Receptions for Debutantes,” *The New York Times*, 13 December 1908, 13; and “Dance for Miss Dresser,” *The New York Times*, 2 February 1909, 9.

35. “Regular Circus at Sherry’s,” *The Sun* (New York), 14 January 1915, 9; and “Wears Odd Costume at ‘Fantastique’ Dance Given by Antisuffrage Women,” *The Washington Post*, 22 April 1915, 4.

36. For example, see “Miss Susan Fish Dresser, Daughter of Daniel Leroy Dresser,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 13 July 1915, 16.

newspaper described as “a pianist well known in musical circles.”³⁷ But the marriage did not relieve LeRoy’s apparent despair at not being able to rehabilitate his finances and establish a home with his new wife. On 10 July 1915, at the Columbia University clubhouse of the Delta Psi fraternity, he shot himself. His body was discovered by the clubhouse steward and Dresser’s lawyer, after the latter had received an alarming letter from LeRoy earlier in the day. When reporters reached out to Emma for comment, she spoke reasonably kindly about her former husband and his ongoing financial struggles. “He is dead. Really, there was nothing else left for him, I suppose”, she was quoted as saying, before ending with these words: “I am glad that he killed himself with the first shot.”³⁸ Emma attended LeRoy’s funeral with her children.

While his older sister Susan was living the life of a debutante, Emma’s son Daniel spent his teen years at boarding school. Notably, he attended Westminster School in Simsbury, CT in 1909-1910 and the Berkshire School in Sheffield, MA the following year. After finishing his education, Daniel eventually joined the American Expeditionary Force fighting in Europe during the First World War. He enlisted at the end of May 1917, and arrived in France as part of the 642d Aero Squadron in August 1917. The following year, his engagement to Betty Peale, a member of the Red Cross Ambulance Corps was announced, but it appears that the pair did not go through with the marriage.³⁹ Daniel suffered no injuries during his time in the military and he returned from overseas on 26 May 1919.

Emma also kept busy during the war years. She joined the Motor Squad of the National League for Woman’s Service (NLWS). Within weeks of the United States entering the First World War, the NLWS had established not only its national headquarters in New York City, but a host of branches across the country. Tens of thousands of women volunteered for service, with the Motor Corps attracting more applications than any other division since, to quote historian and author Bessie R. James, it “appealed because of its originality, its daring and, as many imagined, its romance.”⁴⁰ Given what we know about Emma Dresser, it is not surprising that she would gravitate to this branch of service. However, to be accepted, she had to meet certain criteria: notably, Emma needed to have two references, a certificate testifying to her health, and a driver’s license. She must have lied about her age – she was 48 at the time – because the upper age limit for applicants was 45.⁴¹ Members of the Motor Corps were required to keep their vehicles clean, and they were not only scheduled for regular shifts, but also had to be on call in case of emergencies. The only one of the latter that we know

37. “Brooklyn Girl Bride of D. Le Roy Dresser,” *Brooklyn Times Union*, 5 March 1915, 16.

38. “Banker Ends His Life,” *The Washington Post*, 11 July 1915, 1.

39. “Miss Peale Engaged,” *Harrisburg Telegraph*, 21 October 1918, 4. Two years after the engagement was announced, Betty Peale continued to appear in brief society column notices under her maiden name. Daniel Dresser eventually married Olga Nairn in Arizona in 1938.

40. Bessie R. James, *For God, For Country, For Home: The National League for Woman’s Service* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1920), 55.

41. James, *For God*, 56.

Emma was involved in came in November 1917, when Emma was one of three members of the NLWS who helped to save an injured horse that caused a traffic jam on New York's Madison Avenue.⁴² With that said, she must have continued to serve well into the following year because Emma was listed as "an aide" to Dr. Dorothy Smyley, the head of the Motor Corps, when the latter attended a parade which inaugurated a \$100,000 fund raising campaign for the Red Cross War Fund in May 1918.⁴³

We know little about Emma's activities in the 1920s. Mentions of her in social directories and newspapers were few and far between, which is not surprising given that after her divorce she could no longer count herself as a member of New York's most elite society. She reemerged briefly in December 1926 when her daughter Susan married Frederick Bull, a sportsman and businessman with interests in gold mining, who had only just divorced his first wife. Emma gave away the bride in what she told reporters was going to be "a very quiet home wedding."⁴⁴ Susan died a little over three years later – at the end of March 1929 – but, given a lack of published obituaries, it is impossible to ascertain her cause of death, or how Emma may have reacted to losing her child. In 1930, however, a glimpse into Emma's political views finally bubbles to the surface. That year, in early October to be precise, noted suffragette and founder of the Women's National Republican Club, Henrietta Wells Livermore launched a campaign to support Republican candidates in the upcoming state and local elections. Emma was appointed as one of the vice-chairmen of this campaign committee.⁴⁵ She continued to be active in the Women's National Republican Club after she returned from her Arctic trip in 1931, notably attending a luncheon at the end of October where Henrietta Livermore excoriated the well-to-do women in attendance for their political lethargy.⁴⁶ Unfortunately, none of these activities tells us what Emma thought about the Soviet experiment that she had just witnessed in such close detail; nor are her feelings concerning the political alternative that the USSR seemed to offer at this moment in time clear. Emma also did not know at this point that she had only a few months left to live.

The Trip

Having outlined as much as possible the main events and overall contours of Emma Burnham Dresser's life, it is fair to say that she remained a woman of some financial means, even as the Great Depression took root in the United States,

42. "Woman Captain Saves Life of Injured Horse," *The New York Times*, 11 November 1917, 6.

43. "12,000 Persons in the Parade Saturday Night," *Yonkers Statesman* (New York), 20 May 1918, 1.

44. "Bull, Divorced a Week, Today Will Wed Anew," *Daily News* (New York), 7 December 1926, 46.

45. "Mrs. Livermore Names Group," *Yonkers Statesman*, 10 October 1930, 10. On the history of the Women's National Republican Club, see "History," The Women's National Republican Club Inc., <http://www.wnrc.org/history.html> (accessed 2 July 2023).

46. "Political Lethargy of 'Comfortable' Women of County Rapped by Speaker," *The Daily Argus* (White Plains, NY), 23 October 1931, 8.

and that her apparently adventurous nature drove her to seek out thrilling travel opportunities. With those topics covered, it is time to look more closely at the trip she took in 1931. Despite the economic woes that affected much of the world at the end of the 1920s, the same era saw the Soviet government embrace the still lucrative international tourist trade and open its doors to thousands of foreigners in the decade prior to the start of the Second World War. The process began in 1928 when a partnership agreement was signed with noted travel company Thomas Cook, which allowed the firm, in conjunction with Cunard Line, to plan and book cruises that included the Soviet Union. Other shipping companies followed suit, meaning the Soviets soon had similar arrangements with Holland-America Line, Royal Mail Steam Packet, Hamburg-American and Canadian Pacific Steamship Line. Less than a year after its initial deal with Thomas Cook was inked, the Soviet government also ventured into the travel business itself by establishing Intourist (*Inostranyi turist*), a full-service travel agency, in April 1929.⁴⁷ The move was a successful one, with the Associated Press reporting in February 1930, “that last summer Russia was visited by 3000 foreigners, two-thirds of them being Americans.”⁴⁸ Even more travelers followed in 1931, the year Emma journeyed to the Arctic. U.S. government statistics show that more than 50,000 American tourists visited Northern Europe, including the USSR, that year.⁴⁹ Many of them likely would have been assisted by Intourist, which was put on an even firmer footing when the agency was chartered as a legal entity in the United States in 1931. Based in Manhattan, Intourist’s first office opened at 452 Fifth Avenue in New York City.

From there, Intourist launched vigorous multi-pronged advertising campaigns designed to court American travellers. It bought regular advertising in major metropolitan newspapers. It provided colourful promotional materials to travel agents across the US and offered visa processing services as part of its packages. For the New York market in particular, Intourist even branched out into radio programming. For example, in May 1931 – the month which coincided with the opening of the Soviet tourist season – Intourist bought airtime on local station WRNY 1,010 ke.⁵⁰ That year also happened to be one where Intourist promoted two special, one-of-a-kind adventure tours: an Old Turkestan tour that took visitors to Soviet Central Asia, and a 40-day Arctic tour. The latter was restricted to forty passengers, cost \$2500 per person, and offered the chance to be present when the Soviet icebreaker *Malygin* met the famed *Graf Zeppelin* dirigible at the North Pole. It was, of course, this second trip that Emma Dresser decided to take. Long a resident of New York City, Emma may simply have dropped into Intourist’s office to see what trips were on offer and stumbled across what surely

47. On the history of Intourist see, Shawn Salmon, “To the Land of the Future: A History of Intourist and Travel to the Soviet Union, 1929-1991,” PhD Dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 2008.

48. “Russian Tourist Crop,” *The Tampa Tribune*, 9 February 1930, 37.

49. The precise figure – 52,646 people – is given in F.W. Ogilvie, *The Tourist Movement: An Economic Study* (London: P.S. King & Son Lt., 1933), 210.

50. Samantha Kravitz, “The Business of Selling the Soviet Union: Intourist and the Wooing of American Travelers, 1929-1939,” MA Thesis, Concordia University, 2006, 67.

had to be considered the voyage of a lifetime, or perhaps she heard about the upcoming Arctic cruise on the radio. Certainly, with her previous record of big game hunting, Emma would have noticed, assuming that she came across them, that Intourist guidebooks from the early 1930s typically included special sections devoted to hunting.⁵¹ Unfortunately, it is impossible to know exactly what it was that triggered Emma's interest in this trip. All we can say for certain is that Emma could not wait to set sail on her latest adventure.

Long before she set foot on any ship, Emma's plans were already being discussed by the press, although the news stories distributed by the United Press network in mid-May 1931 erroneously said that she would be travelling on the *Graf Zeppelin* during its forthcoming summer cruise to the Arctic, rather than aboard the Soviet icebreaker *Malygin*, which was expected to rendezvous with the dirigible in the vicinity of the North Pole.⁵² The announcements made much of Emma's age – she was 61 years old by this time – and presented her as an adventurous soul who “has sailed twice around the world” as well as someone who handles unexpected setbacks – for instance when a severe sandstorm forced her plane to land in the Arabian desert during a previous trip to Asia Minor – well.⁵³ Emma herself reinforced this reputation, with her comment to reporters that she was taking along a high-powered rifle “just in case I happen to encounter a polar bear or a walrus.”⁵⁴ She notably did not offer any remarks suggesting that she was interested in politics, the remaking of Soviet society that was underway at this time, or gender relations. Likely these things did not particularly matter to Emma, whose life in the US was materially comfortable, whose travels around the world were not affected by the state of international relations, and who had no husband to restrain her desire to travel. Instead, Emma's focus remained squarely on the possibility of adventure. Hence, it is not surprising that Emma singled out creatures that were known for their ferocity when she spoke to reporters. The polar bear, in particular, had figured prominently in public conceptions of the dangers of the Arctic for decades since it was, as one historian put it, the only “Arctic mammal [that] could rival the popularity of the big game of Africa and Asia”.⁵⁵ Emma's prowess with her guns meant that she was frequently referred to as an “expert shot” in the newspapers, and not surprisingly hunting eventually featured

51 Kravitz, 78.

52. Interestingly, the only English-language scholarship exclusively focused on the *Malygin*'s 1931 voyage also contains factually inaccurate information. When discussing the foreign tourists on board, the article does not mention Emma, her son, or Elizabeth Patterson. Instead, the authors refer to “the indomitable American traveller Miss Louise Boyd.” Presumably, they mean Emma whose middle name was Louise and whose last name Burnham could perhaps be mistaken for Boyd. William Barr and Evelyn S. Baldwin, “The First Tourist Cruise in the Soviet Arctic,” *Arctic*, 33 No.4 (1980), 673.

53. “Aged New York Woman Signs for Zeppelin Voyage,” *The Brainerd Daily Dispatch* (Brainerd, MN), 15 May 1931, 1.

54. “N.Y. Woman Signs For Graf Pole Trip,” *The Evening Sun* (Baltimore), 15 May 1931, 41.

55. Robert G. David, *The Arctic in the British Imagination, 1818-1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 171.

in many of the stories that were published concerning Emma's 1931 trip.⁵⁶

While these early articles may have gotten parts of the story wrong, they were right in one regard: Emma was going to be accompanied on this 40-day voyage by her son Daniel, who by then was apparently working as an automotive engineer in Detroit. Nor in the end did the pair wind up being the only Americans on board when the *Malygin* departed from Arkhangel'sk on 19 July 1931. Elizabeth Patterson (née Chapin), whose husband Kenneth was a New York stockbroker, also signed on to the trip.⁵⁷ Born in Chicago, IL in 1896, Elizabeth and her family moved to New York when she was five. At seventeen, she came out in society as a debutante, but her life soon began to follow a less traditional path. She drove an ambulance for the American Motor Corps during the First World War. Elizabeth then got a job as an insurance broker; her career in that field eventually lasted more than thirty years. She married in 1927. By the time she boarded the *Malygin*, Patterson had already visited the Soviet Union twice, and she was said to own one of the best private collections of Russian icons – including icons that once belonged to the last Russian Emperor and his son – in the United States.⁵⁸ Despite the fact that she took a camera with her, and told the press that she intended to write about the trip once she returned, Patterson never did. Instead, she became an early devotee of Meher Baba, whom she met in November 1931.⁵⁹ She was instrumental in founding the Meher Spiritual Center in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina and spent many years working with the poor in India. In addition, over the course of her long life, she served as the director of Chapin Co. (a department store), and as director and vice-president of the property development company, Myrtle Beach Farms Inc. Like Emma, Patterson lived an unconventional life, and it is unfortunate that sources do not reveal what the two women thought of one another.

After taking a train from Moscow to Arkhangel'sk, the trio of Americans boarded the *Malygin*, and set sail at 1:30 pm on 19 July 1931. Conditions aboard the *Malygin* must have been spartan, even though this trip had been marketed to tourists. Unlike the luxury cruise ships that regularly plied routes in Scandinavian waters – and included stops in the Soviet Union in their itineraries – it is worth remembering that the *Malygin* was a working icebreaker. Built in 1912, the ship had 2800 horsepower, which meant it was considerably smaller (and less modern) than either *Krasin* or *Yermak*, the two other Soviet icebreakers then

56. "N.Y. Woman Signs For Graf Pole Trip," *The Evening Sun* (Baltimore), 15 May 1931, 41.

57. Concerning Elizabeth Patterson, see "N.Y. Society Women on Soviet Arctic Ship," *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 15 July, 1931, 2; "Wife of Ex-Omahan Man Aboard Maligin," *Omaha World-Herald*, 27 July 1931, 3; "Had Thrill on Icebreaker," *The Morning News* (Wilmington, DE), 11 September 1931, 5; "Elizabeth C. Patterson, Businesswoman, Dies," *The Charlotte Observer*, 7 December 1980, 22; and "Elizabeth Chapin Patterson 'Dilruba'," *Meher Baba's Life and Travels*, <https://www.meherbabatravels.com/his-close-ones/women/elizabeth-patterson-1/>. [Accessed 15 July 2023]

58. "Two Women Here Join Polar Venture," *The New York Times*, 15 July 1931, 21.

59. On Meher Baba, see Tom Hopkinson and Dorothy Hopkinson, *The Silent Messenger: The Life and Work of Meher Baba* (Winchester: Gollancz, 1974).

patrolling Arctic waters.⁶⁰ While Emma and her son offered few details about their experiences on board ship, apart from Emma telling reporters that they found everything “extremely interesting and entirely comfortable,” that may not have been the whole truth.⁶¹ Only a few days into the trip, the *Malygin*’s refrigerators broke down, which led to all of the perishable food on board spoiling.⁶² Suddenly, hunting took on a greater urgency, since it was no longer just for sport. By 23 July, the party had shot its first bear.⁶³

The much-hyped 27 July meeting between the Soviet icebreaker and the German dirigible proved to be more anti-climatic than dramatic. Passengers aboard the *Graf Zeppelin* spotted the *Malygin* a bit after 6 pm. Anchored in an open bay off Hooker Island, the ship was decorated with flags and pennants, and used its whistles to sound a welcome. The two vessels had to remain several hundred yards apart, however, since any stray sparks from *Malygin*’s smokestack could have set the *Graf Zeppelin* ablaze. Crews from both ships were soon frantically working to finish an exchange of mail that had been promised to postal collectors since the sale of these items was partially funding the *Graf Zeppelin*’s voyage.⁶⁴ Neither captain was keen to linger, so as Arthur Koestler – then a young journalist sending dispatches from the *Graf Zeppelin* – noted the “whole adventurous rendezvous had lasted exactly thirteen minutes.”⁶⁵ Neither Emma nor her son mentioned the rendezvous when they spoke to reporters in Moscow in August 1931.

This brief moment was followed by many uneventful days cruising through fields of ice at a slow pace owing to dense fog. Emma eventually tried her hand at hunting, killing a bear and several reindeer before her rifle jammed, something which broke her eyeglasses.⁶⁶ Once the ship reached Rudolf Island, the Dressers were party of a group that visited the camp established by American explorer Anthony Fiala in 1905. There they found a cache of canned food and other supplies, but many of the items were now damaged or had disintegrated. According to a story distributed by the Associate Press in August, at “the request of Fiala, who is a friend of the family, the Dressers are taking back to him his ship’s clock, which was found in his shack and which ran perfectly when it was thawed out, a

60. John McCannon, *Red Arctic: Polar Exploration and the Myth of the North in the Soviet Union, 1932-1939* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 38.

61. “U.S. Woman Back From Arctic Tour,” *Evening Star (Washington, DC)*, 24 August 1931, 16.

62. *Ibid.*

63. Papanin remembered that the bear was wounded by a German journalist and then finished off by “the American Dresser.” Papanin, *Led i plamen*, 75.

64. Douglas Botting, *Dr. Eckener’s Dream Machine: The Graf Zeppelin and the Dawn of Air Travel* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2001), 221-22.

65. Arthur Koestler, *Arrow in the Blue* (London: Collins with Hamish Hamilton Ltd., 1952), 296.

66. “Mother of Detroit Sorry to Quit Arctic,” *The Detroit Free Press*, 24 August 1931, 1.

telescope, three books and an umbrella.”⁶⁷ When Fiala was asked about the items a couple of months later, he indicated that he was not surprised Emma had found them for she had brought a chart showing the location of the cache with her on the trip. As he put it, “so once there it was presumably easy enough for her to find.”⁶⁸

While American newspapers made much of Emma’s activities, although it does not appear that reporters pressed her on political matters or socio-economic developments in the USSR, Soviet accounts of the voyage of the *Malygin* were considerably different. The trip fell at an interesting moment for the Soviet government. The adoption of the First Five-Year Plan at the end of the 1920s changed both the landscape of the country and the economic priorities of the regime. With the plan came a renewed interest in science, machinery, and flight. As a result, the late 1920s became, as historian Richard Stites has noted, a time when the “cult of the machine and image of an electrified nation saturated the arts as well as the political discourse...”⁶⁹ Moreover, this emphasis continued well into the 1930s with aviation and exploration garnering more and more coverage in Soviet media. Indeed, between 1933 and 1937, almost two-thirds of *Pravda*’s editorials on science and technology had to do with record-setting flights or geographic expeditions.⁷⁰

In 1931, each of the three most important Soviet newspapers – *Pravda*, *Izvestiia* and *Komsomol’skaia Pravda* – had a special correspondent aboard the icebreaker. It was their job to transmit a daily update via the ship’s radio; however, their work was initially hampered by stringent rules concerning the number of words that they could send.⁷¹ Updates from the first few days of the trip sometimes contained fewer than 50 words, meaning it was hard for the journalists to speak effusively about what was happening. However, these short items still managed to follow the current line and cast the voyage as one of scientific research and discovery by regularly mentioning scholars and experiments. For example, on 25 July 1931, *Pravda* informed its readers that systematic meteorological observations were being conducted under the supervision of Prof. Vize, one of the expedition’s most important scientists.⁷² A week later, *Komsomol’skaia Pravda*’s special correspondent, Mikhail Rozenfel’d wrote at some length about another professor on board the *Malygin* who was studying the flying capabilities of birds in the Arctic, as well as about the contribution that the northernmost radio

67. “Woman Kills Bear in Arctic Region,” *The Boston Globe*, 24 August 1931, 2. In his memoirs, Soviet explorer Ivan Papanin says that the recovered items were given to the Museum of the Arctic in Leningrad. See Papanin, *Led i plamen’*, 80. However, at least one US newspaper account said that the clock was stolen once the *Malygin* returned to Arkhangelsk. “Cache Find Stirs Fiala Hopes of New Expedition to Explore Arctic Wastes,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 9 October 1931, 47.

68. “Cache Find Stirs Fiala Hopes...,” 47.

69. Richard Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 169.

70. Jeffrey Brooks, *Thank You, Comrade Stalin!: Soviet Public Culture From Revolution to Cold War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 100.

71. Papanin, *Led i plamen’*, 75. As the voyage progressed, Soviet authorities increased the number of words each journalist was allowed to transmit each day.

72. “Reis ‘Malygina’,” *Pravda*, 25 July 1931, 4.

station in the region was providing in terms of weather data to Soviet scientists.⁷³ When Soviet newspapers did mention the foreigners sailing on the *Malygin*, they referred to them only by the generic collective noun “tourists.”⁷⁴ No details about nationality or gender were given. And, with the exception of General Umberto Nobile who joined the crew on the icebreaker in the hopes of finding evidence of what happened to some of his crew members lost when the airship *Italia* crashed in the Arctic in 1928, none of the tourists was mentioned by name. The same can be said about the retroactive accounts written by Ivan Papanin and Vladimir Vize. In other words, Soviet media and officials never viewed this trip via the lens of adventure tourism; instead, it was merely one of a series of scientific expeditions that the government engaged in in the 1920s and 1930s.

Passenger lists show that Emma and her son finally arrived back in New York when Holland-American line’s the *Statendam* docked on 3 October 1931. A final flurry of newspaper articles appeared and, yet again, they did not include anything that could be construed as political commentary. Instead, this time the articles singled out how close Emma had come to the North Pole while also noting that this was further north than any woman had previously been.⁷⁵ As one headline put it: “Trip Put Woman Near World Top.”⁷⁶ The emphasis on gender was not new, however. Time and again, when reporters discussed Emma’s trip to the Arctic, they used the word “woman” in their headlines, often accompanied by the words “Arctic” or “polar.” In that most desolate of regions, Emma was said to have found “thrills,” and to have engaged in behaviors that many people at the time likely would have associated more with men than women, as when she shot a bear.⁷⁷ It is worth remembering that for decades, most Americans, to quote historian Michael Robinson, would have said that voyaging to polar regions “had value in illustrating the good character of American men under terrible conditions.”⁷⁸ Yet, here was a woman – a former socialite, now in her sixties – treading much the same path as the men who came before her and serving as quite an advertisement for adventure tourism.

The trip on the *Malygin* served as a fitting last hurrah for Emma, who died after an operation at Doctors Hospital in Manhattan on 30 December 1931. She left what was for the day a considerable estate – valued at \$247,654 (net) and mostly in securities – to her son Daniel, but the press did not dwell at any great length on these financial matters, preferring instead to return to her most recent

73. “Kurs na sever,” *Komsomol’skaia Pravda*, 1 August 1931, 4.

74. For example, see “Radio s ledokola ‘Malygin’,” *Komsomol’skaia Pravda*, 31 July 1931, 4; and “‘Malygin’ derzhit kurs k zemle Rudol’fa,” *Komsomol’skaia Pravda*, 3 August 1931, 4.

75. See, for instance, “Woman, 62, Braves Arctic,” *Oakland Tribune*, 7 October 1931, 11.

76. “Trip Put woman Near World Top,” *The Spokesman Review* (Spokane), 18 October 1931, 22.

77. “Woman, 62, Finds Thrills in Arctic,” *The Morning News* (Wilmington, DE), 24 August 1931, 2.

78. Michael F. Robinson, *The Coldest Crucible: Arctic Exploration and American Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 6.

adventure when her death was mentioned.⁷⁹ That ensured that she remained “Emma Burnham Dresser, traveler and hunter, who made a trip on a Soviet icebreaker in 1931 at the age of 63 [sic] years to shoot polar bear and reindeer” in the eyes of the public.⁸⁰

Conclusion

Historians have long been fascinated by the travelers who visited the Soviet Union prior to the start of the Second World War and have offered an array of motivations for those trips. However, Emma Burnham Dresser did not go to the USSR because she believed in the social experiment that was happening within its borders. Nothing of what we know of her background indicates that she had even a passing interest in Marxism. Instead, what Emma did possess was a thirst for adventure, meaning her trip to the Arctic was a kind of capstone to a long list of exotic experiences that her continued wealth and social status had afforded her throughout her life. Even after a very public scandal led to financial ruin – at least from the perspective of New York’s ‘the 400’ – and her very public divorce closed many doors to this socialite, Emma continued to seek out new adventures that ordinary Americans could only read about in newspapers. Undoubtedly, she was not the sole adventurer to venture onto Soviet soil, or in this case waters, either. Commerce Department figures show the appeal of the USSR as a destination even in the worst years of the Depression: American expenditures on travel to the Soviet Union grew from roughly \$2 million in 1929 to \$10 million two years later.⁸¹ Indeed, the only destinations that saw growing demand from travelers in these years were the USSR and the British West Indies.⁸² Still, Emma’s trip stands out for its exoticism and it serves as a reminder that scholars must take a wide lens when they consider why Americans went to the Soviet Union in the 1930s or our knowledge of international tourism at this time will remain incomplete.

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79. “Mrs. E.B. Dresser Left \$247,654,” *The New York Times*, 12 June 1934, 28.

80. Ibid.

81. Figures quoted in Kravitz, *The Business of Selling*, 52.

82. Kravitz, *The Business of Selling*, 52.