

# The 1936 Swedish-Icelandic Vatnajokull Expedition/Mail (Synopsis)

**Exhibit purpose:** The purpose of this One-Frame Exhibit is to showcase the story of “The 1936 Swedish-Icelandic Vatnajokull Expedition/Mail.

**Exhibit Plan:** The exhibit plan will be to present mail from the expedition to enlighten the viewer about: Vatnajokull; the expedition; it’s participants; their accomplishments; and Vatnajokull’s first Post Office, Postmaster and mail.

**Exhibit Importance:** The **importance** of the exhibit becomes clear when one considers the accomplishments of the expedition and the brave men who undertook it’s mission and dedicated their lives to the field of Science.

**Exhibit Background:** The expedition took place during May and June 1936. Expedition participants were:

**Hans Wilhelmsson Ahlmann** (Swedish Scientist and Polar Explorer);

**Jon Eythorsson** (Icelandic Meteorologist, Polar Explorer and expedition Postmaster);

**Carl Mannerfelt (Calle); Sigurdur Thorarinsson (Skallagrim)** (Students of Geography from the Stockholm Geophysical Institute);

**Mac Lilliehook** (Icelander, Ski-expert and distinguished dog sled driver);

**Jon of Laug** (Icelander, escort or “altnuligman”).

Vatnajokull is the largest glacier in Europe and covers about 8 percent of Iceland.

The **mission of the expedition** was **to study the life and nature of the glacier (i.e. the rate of accumulation; ablation and movement)**. Basically, to study “**Global Warming**” long before it became the significant topic it is today. These brave men faced **the everyday challenges and obstacles of a glacier expedition under extreme weather conditions requiring an enormous physical and psychological exertion**. These individuals went on to have very successful careers in Science. (Mannerfelt and Thorarinsson have International Science awards named after them.)

The **1936 Vatnajokull Post Office was only in existence for 8 weeks** and very little of the mail has come to light. The **Icelandic Postmaster Sigurdur Baldvinsson** being interested in the expedition bestowed upon **Jon Eythorsson** (the joint expedition leader with Hans Wilhelmsson Ahlmann) **the duties of Postmaster and “presented him with stamps, a special rubber stamp for cancellation purposes, mail-bag and satchel.”** Land Of Fire and Ice by Hans Wilhelmsson Ahlmann (Page 111)

Information about the amount of mail sent from Vatnajokull during the 1936 expedition is very limited. What is known is that:

1. Just as the expedition was preparing to depart, they hastily had some cachet covers printed depicting themselves and their sleds setting out onto the glacier, in hopes that Philatelists would be interested in them and help raise funds for the expedition.
2. All known covers and canceled stamps have one of the following cancel dates: **May 22, 1936; June 1, 1936 or June 14, 1936.**
3. Ahlmann’s only reference to the number of letters sent is: “Jon Eythorsson now spent the whole day with his rubber stamp and sent off as registered mail all the letters that we, and particularly Calle, had produced. There were over 100 of them, and when that was done we had only about 150 of our special envelopes left.” Land of Fire and Ice by Hans Wilhelmsson Ahlmann (Page 111)

4. Once Postmaster Jon Eythorsson prepared the letters for mailing they were then taken down the mountainside to the lowlands and forwarded from there by mounted postman.
5. Covers exist on both the Expedition cachet envelopes and plain envelopes.
6. It would appear that the "special expedition" cachet covers were delivered to the participants during the expedition, because all known covers cancelled on the first date are on various plain envelopes and the covers cancelled on the latter two dates are all on the "special expedition" cachet covers.

**Exhibit Challenges:** Finding covers or stamps with the 1936 Vatnajökull cancel. In 25 years of collecting Icelandic Philatelic material, the exhibitor has never seen the cancel on a stamp off cover or piece. Two expedition cancels on piece are included in this exhibit. Exhibitor is aware of only **8** additional covers with the 1936 "**Vatnajökull**" **cancel** not shown in the exhibit.

**Expedition findings:** Studies carried out by this expedition demonstrated that Vatnajökull receives significantly more precipitation and produces more meltwater than most glaciers elsewhere in the world. This means that the water cycle on the south side of Vatnajökull is extremely rapid, and far greater than in most other glacial systems in the world. The central part of Hoffellsjökull was shown by other measurements to achieve a sliding speed of about two meters per day.

**Resource:** Land of Fire and Ice by Hans Wilhelmsson Ahlmann (1938)

The Glaciers of Iceland: A Historical, Cultural and Scientific Overview  
by Helgi Björnsson