

Ikey Angotisiak Bolt (1894-1981)

The arrival of the Canadian Arctic Expedition (1913-1918) was of profound influence in exposing the Copper Eskimo of Coronation Gulf and Victoria Island to the culture, lifestyle, and technology of Caucasian North America. And Ikey Bolt was one of the most outstanding members of that party. He was an Alaskan Eskimo who, far from his native land, made his home among these people and built a reputation for integrity and community service that will not easily be forgotten.

Ikey Bolt was born in Point Hope, Alaska, on 19 January 1894, in a whale-hunting culture that provided him with stories of the hunt with which he would regale his listeners all his life. Recruited in his late teens as an interpreter for the Canadian Arctic Expedition, he made his initial trip to Canada. Although he was principally assigned to assist Dr. R.M. Anderson, he was quite familiar with other expedition members.

A contemporary saga of those years was the trading ventures of Charlie Klengenberg, a Danish entrepreneur who was the first white trader in the Coronation Gulf-Victoria Island region. His report on the native people of the area, in fact, initiated Vilhjalmur Stefansson's interests. With his Alaskan wife, Unalena, Klengenberg raised a large family, of which Etna was the eldest daughter. Years after the conclusion of the Canadian Arctic Expedition in 1924, Etna Klengenberg married Ikey Bolt at Herschel Island.

Serving as traders in the Klengenberg "empire" of small posts, Ikey and Etna settled at Rhymer Point on southwest Victoria Island. A lifelong member of the Anglican Church, Ikey was invited by Bishop Stringer to assist the newly-arrived Anglican missionary, the Reverend J. Harold Webster. With this appointment began a long ministry as Catechist in the Anglican Church and regular Church services in remoter settlements, as well as in the Coppermine area, where Ikey Bolt spent his later years.

During his life, he served as an ice-pilot for supply ships, first serving the Canalaska Trading Company and then the Hudson's Bay Company. While serving as interpreter with the Canadian Arctic Expedition, Ikey Bolt began to lose the sight of one eye, which he blamed on an accidental spotting of the sun through a telescope. Yet he put his handicap into healthy perspective: with only one eye functioning, he believed that he was forever immune to seasickness. Accordingly, he saw himself as a "natural" for this work as an ice-pilot.

By the late 1940s, the Bolts had moved to Coppermine where Ikey trapped in winter and worked the ships during summer. But as the Government of Canada increased its interest and investment in the North — initially through schools and nursing stations — bilingual native people were in special demand. Accordingly, Ikey was employed as caretaker and interpreter for the first Federal School at Coppermine, a task which included operating a highly unpredictable diesel plant. Recognition for his services culminated in his being awarded the Coronation Medal in 1953, which he proudly wore in the following year as he acted as interpreter for Prince Philip, the Duke of Edinburgh, on his Royal Visit.

Ikey and Etna Bolt had one daughter of their own, but she died early in life. They did, however, raise an adopted family who are today raising their own families; the name of Bolt is numbered among the leading families in Coppermine.

The best appreciation of Ikey Bolt's contribution to the region can only be understood in the context of the times. Here is a native Alaskan whose people had been long exposed to the influence of southerners in the traumatic whaling era, a period of mixed blessings if ever there was one. In joining the Canadian Arctic Expedition he made contact with a people who were literally just emerging from the Stone Age, a people who had no steady contact with explorers until the Canadian Arctic Expedition arrived. They hunted with harpoons and with bows and arrows, and they had no recourse to any products of southern technology except for bits of iron traded with distant neighbours who had obtained them from abandoned ships. The introduction of a different way of life — new methods of trapping animals to be exchanged for trade goods — had all the potential for cultural devastation and the erosion of even the best of their indigenous philosophy. But the presence and influence of natives who had themselves survived similar upheavals and yet maintained a strong sense of spiritual and cultural values made a profound difference.

The people of the Arctic today owe an immense debt to all the Ikey Bolts of the North, and especially to the man who inspired this profile.

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