

Jim Netsiapik Kilabuk (1902-1985)

Umanakjuak, an island named for its likeness to a heart, is off the southwest coast of Cumberland Sound, Baffin Island, near the entry from Davis Strait. The English, Scottish and American whalers, who called it Blacklead Island, made it one of their shore bases and later shared it with missionaries and traders.

During the winter of 1913-14, the Reverend A.L. Fleming, a missionary of the Church of England in Canada, made a census of the Inuit of the region. His list includes Netsiapik and his wife, Unarpik, who lived at that time in a qammaq, a wood, stone and sod winter house. Jim Kilabuk was the youngest of their three children and was estimated by Fleming to be seven years old. The police disc lists, compiled later, show Kilabuk's birthday as occurring in August 1902.

Throughout the second half of the nineteenth century the Inuit of Cumberland Sound were drawn into a close working relationship with the whalers who sought the bowhead whales in or near Cumberland Sound. It was a partnership that brought decimation by disease to the Inuit and starvation, beyond the usual degree, when the long season of whaling from the floe edge conflicted with the traditional seasonal cycle. Although the chase and the harpooning of the great whales was a challenge and a thrill to the Inuit, much of the work of towing, flensing and rendering was heavy and dirty. The large try-pots that still sit on the islands are a reminder of those times.

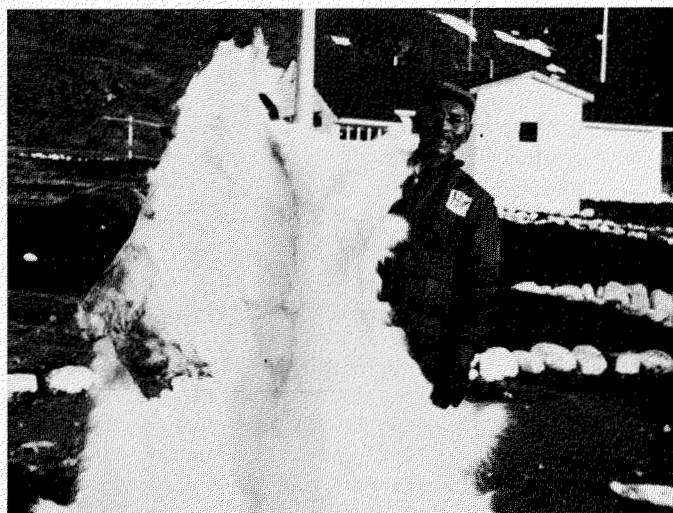
The Inuit were not well paid for their efforts, but they did receive lumber, sewing machines, accordions, wooden boats, canvas, guns, tobacco, molasses and other goods. The children of Inuit mothers and Qallunaat (Inuktitut for people not Inuit) whalers were absorbed into the Inuit community, along with new music, words and religion. By 1900 the bowhead whales were scarce, and whale products were no longer in great demand. Two decades later the whaling ships had gone, but the Inuit continued the hunt with whaleboats, harpoon guns and hand weapons into the 1920s. Kilabuk and his contemporaries were part of the dramatic whaling era, of the relatively tranquil fur-trading era that followed and of the first years of drastic change beginning in the 1960s.

Pangnirtung, with its benchland by a fiord and named after the bull caribou that used to congregate there, was chosen as the site for a new Hudson's Bay Company post in 1921. In 1922 the police (RCMP) established a post there, and in 1928 the Anglican mission was moved from Umanakjuak to Pangnirtung. The Anglican hospital was begun in 1930. Kilabuk and his wife, Alooki, moved to Pangnirtung, and there he served as assistant to, and mentor for, a series of Hudson's Bay Company managers. His many duties, and often those of his family, included interpreting and mediating when sealskins and fox furs were traded over the counter, using the brass Company tokens, and supervising the preparation of beluga and narwhal skins and oil after the communal whale hunts that continued until the early 1960s. At ship time he organized the off-loading of supplies and the loading of the year's produce, involving every man, woman and child available.

The three Qallunaat establishments at Pangnirtung — mission, police and trader — served about 20 Inuit camp communities, some over 100 kilometres away by boat or dog team. Aircraft were rare until the closing years of the fur trade era, and the Company ships, coming once a year, were the only link with

the world beyond Baffin Island other than radio and until the federal government introduced its own patrol vessel.

When the supply ship arrived and as it left, Kilabuk would fire a salute with the small iron cannon that stood between the store and the sea, overlooking the fiord. After ramming wadding onto the charge of black powder (which he swore by as a remedy for various ailments), he would touch off the charge and the cannon would boom out. The sound reverberated back and forth between the cliffs on both sides of the fiord, while the ship's siren answered, and every dog, baby and seagull in the vicinity added to the hullabaloo. At those times and on other important occasions, Kilabuk would wear the uniform presented to him by the Company, of naval style with peaked cap and brass buttons.

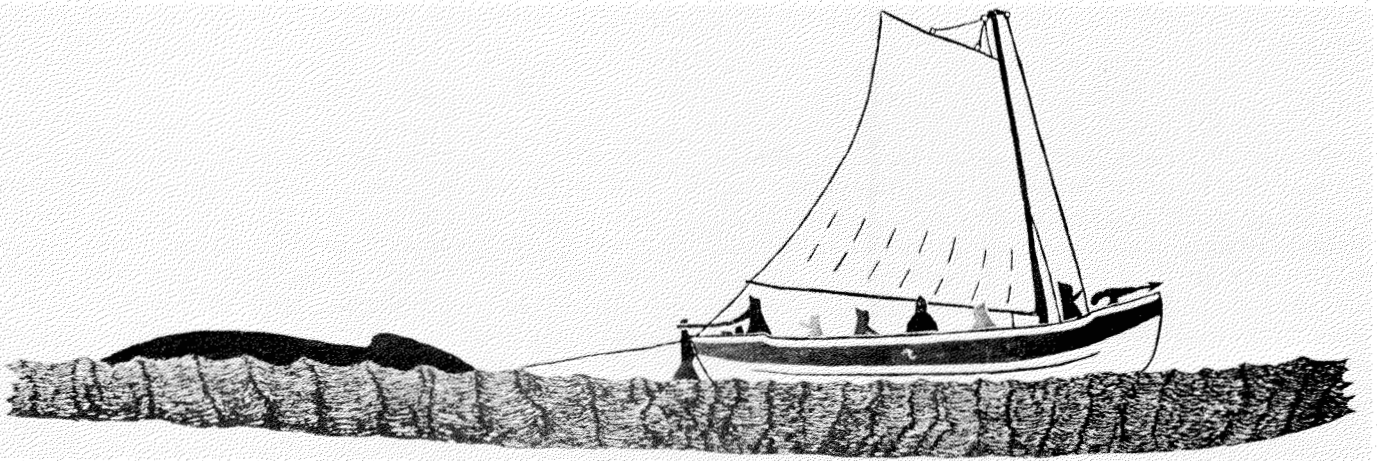


Kilabuk holding up a polar bear skin.

The third era of change for the people of Cumberland Sound, and for all Inuit, is hard to label. It is characterized by urbanization, rapid communication and an ever-accelerating technical change common to much of the world. The year 1960 approximately marks the transition from the stern but sane days of the fur trade to the frantic present.

I first met Kilabuk in the early spring of 1962, when I arrived with my family to become the first government administrator of the region to Pangnirtung, and by definition to be an instrument of changes, good and bad. Just before our arrival, an epidemic had killed off several hundred sled dogs around Cumberland Sound, and over half of the camp people had come into Pangnirtung for assistance. Before long, an epidemic of measles laid low all Inuit in the community, the majority of them living in tents at the time. To add to the natural disasters, the presence of federal government — other than the police — with its schools, houses, power plants, etc., brought about a redistribution of roles and powers within the Qallunaat population and disturbed the balance worked out over 40 years or more between the Inuit and the three older institutions, the Company, the church and the RCMP. It was a difficult and delicate time for all concerned.

Kilabuk was the ideal person to handle the welter of emergencies, innovations and sensitivities. From my first day, he and his



Headed for Home, a stonecut by Tommy Novakeel and Solomon Karpik. (From Catalogue of Pangnirtung Prints, 1977, published by the Pangnirtung Eskimo Co-operative.)

friend Etooangat, who was employed by the Department of Health and Welfare, gave me help and encouragement. They taught me the local dialect, explained the complexities of Inuit kinship and camp affiliations and described the now-disrupted seasonal economy. They spent much unrewarded time arranging and attending meetings, dealing with community problems and advising me and other Qallunaat on our various plans. Their patience, humour and diplomacy had been finely tuned during decades of handling transient employers, and these qualities, together with their knowledge, contributed immensely to the peace and progress of all.

The kind of English spoken by Kilabuk, while adequate for most daily purposes, was as far from perfect as my knowledge of Inuktitut. In addition, he used to end his statements in English with a long "uum" sound, as if agreeing with himself. I caught the habit from him, and my wife had a hard time keeping a straight face as we would "uum" our way through a conversation. More than anyone else I knew, he used the old Cumberland Sound (Inuktitut) expression "armilak," meaning "yes indeed." Among many remembered incidents, I recall that he showed me how to read the snow blowing off Mount Duval, heralding one of the terrible glacial winds that occasionally sweep down on Pangnirtung.

Early in 1964 my superiors in Ottawa asked whether the Inuit of the Pangnirtung region would adopt surnames, which, though not part of the Inuit tradition, would be more dignifying than the

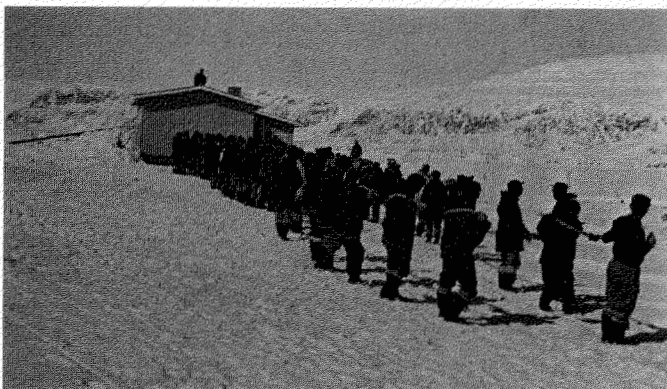
disc numbers then in use. Moreover, surnames would fit in better with general Canadian practice. Kilabuk and a few other elders accepted the proposal and agreed to seek the cooperation of all heads of Inuit families. The idea was adopted with surprisingly little opposition, and everyone had chosen a surname within a few weeks. We formed a small group, including Kilabuk, to decide upon a standard spelling for the names and the resulting list was sent off to Ottawa. The Inuit of Cumberland Sound thus became the first in the Northwest Territories to convert to surnames en masse.

Kilabuk kept himself well informed on a wide range of things. He had the only windmill-powered generator in the community and listened regularly to the radio news, particularly those broadcasts in Inuktitut from Nuuk, Greenland, in a dialect that he had learned to follow. One evening he came to visit, quite excited, and told me how he had just learned from Greenland radio about the launching of the Soviet *Sputnik 2*.

After 40 years of service — perhaps a record — with the Hudson's Bay Company, Kilabuk retired but remained active in the affairs of the fast-growing community and of the region. He was a central figure in all the major social and economic events of the "government era" — such as the decision to send students to the vocational training centre at Churchill, Manitoba, the construction and administration of rental housing, the first federal election, the formation of the arts and crafts cooperative, the Kekerten Historic Park and the Auyuittuq National Park Reserve.

I visited him in hospital in Iqaluit shortly before his death in 1985. His wife, Alooki, has followed him, leaving a large family that has gained respect within the hunting culture, in the field of modern technology and in government. One son, Ipilee, has for several terms been a member of the Legislative Assembly of the Northwest Territories.

For most of his life, Kilabuk worked to bring about understanding and harmony between Inuit and Qallunaat in his home region. He was an able pilot through the ebb, flow and turbulence of cultural change and is remembered by many with gratitude and affection.



Eighty men, including Kilabuk, hauling a house on large skids to a new site during the dog epidemic in 1962.

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