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AN ARCTIC PARTNERSHIP: THE UNGALUYAT PROJECT

[Editor's Note: Over 1800 miles due north of Detroit, and a world away, is the isolated Inuit (Eskimo) community of Igloolik. (Inuit means "People" in the Eskimo language, Inuktitut, and is the term they use to define themselves.) Thirty years ago, this village was home to only a few people: a trader, a member of the Royal Canadian Police, and a French missionary. Gradually, the seasonally mobile Inuit settled permanently around this settlement as a school, health care facilities, and housing were made available. Nowadays, almost a thousand people call Igloolik home. This community and the nearby Ungaluyat archaeological site provide the setting for this issue's lead article. The Ungaluyat Project, conducted last summer, involved both Inuit and non-Inuit youth in a multi-cultural learning experience that combined the knowledge of the community's elders with the techniques of professional archaeology. The first part of the article is written by Josh Fitzhugh, a high school student participant in the project, who describes his personal experience working alongside his Inuit counterparts. The second part is written by project director Sue Rowley.]

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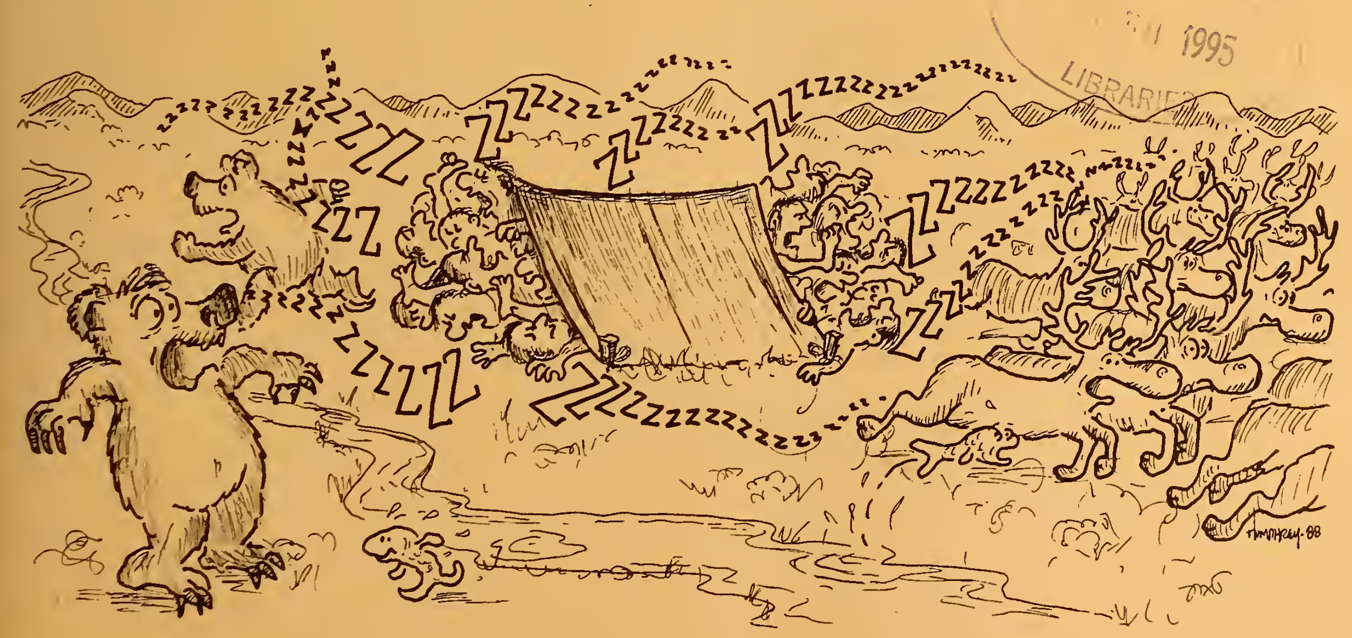

SPECIAL ISSUE: ARCHAEOLOGY AND THE HIGH SCHOOL

AN ARCTIC IMMERSION: A STUDENT'S JOURNAL

July 19. It is 28 degrees. 2:00 a.m. and the sunlight glows through the walls of the tent. I am lying here, contemplating life, as I sometimes do when I can't sleep. There is an elbow sticking in my ribs, a pair of boots under my head, and three or four sets of rather loud snores reverberating in my ears. One of six in the tent, I am wedged tightly between my two best friends--a large 21 year-old named Mike, who that spring had participated in a three-month dogsled trip from Igloolik to Greenland, and an affectionate 14 year-old named Dick, my "younger brother," who keeps snuggling up to me in his sleep. At least I am warm in my polar sleeping bag, and the caribou skins on which we lie serve both as cushion and insulation to protect us from the chill of the frozen ground. As the wind blows across the ice and past the flaps of our canvas tent, I think about the things I have done and the people I have met so far this summer.

This is the first time I have been to the Arctic. It is a completely different world from what I had ever experienced. The tundra here is totally flat as all the hills were crushed by massive glaciers that retreated only a few thousand years ago. This flatness runs for miles with nothing to break the uniformity. There are no trees. In fact, there is nothing that stands higher than two or three inches; the growing season, July through mid-September, is far too short for all but the most hardy grasses and dwarf willows, a shrub that spreads in a mat along the ground.

Our camp here at Ungaluyat, where we are digging a 150 year-old Inuit house, is nothing more than a line of seven tents on the gravel beach. Twenty of us, including nine Inuit teenagers and myself, live in these seven tents. Every morning we wake up and stagger to the cook tent, where we eat an oatmeal or fish breakfast. At 9:00 a.m., Sue Rowley, the leader of this archeological excavation, makes radio contact with John Macdonald, the director of the Canadian Government's research laboratory in Igloolik. Then we all walk up to the site to start our day's work.

Sue has divided the house into two meter by two meter squares, and each of us has been assigned a square to dig. In these squares we uncover jade drilltips, ivory harpoon heads, snow knives, bone needles, intricately carved combs, and many other beautiful artifacts. This excavation is one of the two jobs we must do. The other is to sieve the dirt beside the road, because in that dirt we find the artifacts from many old sites that were destroyed when the road was made. Sieving duty is miserable work, especially on cold or windy days when our fingers stiffen and the dirt from the sieve blows into our eyes.

After work we all troop back to the cook tent and start getting dinner ready. Some of us go out on the ice to fill the enormous water barrel by jumping across the cracks of open water where the tide pressures have melted the ice. We usually come back with our pant legs soaking and our hands raw from carrying the heavy water jug. After dinner a few of the Inuit boys usually go out to hunt for seals or ducks. I usually go back to the tent to read or else I play aerobie [similar to frisbee]. When the hunters come back, we often start playing Crazy Eights, a wild card game in which the loser must do something really unpleasant, such as emptying the honey bucket (the outhouse) or walking around the camp barefoot, a particularly trying experience as the ground up here is very cold and the stony beach is very sharp. Sometimes, we go icepan hopping in the bright evening sunshine. This game consists of running as quickly as possible (so as not to fall into the

icy water) across the mash of small icepans that float in the open cracks where the ice sheet has begun to break up. We try to find the most difficult and challenging routes, often using pieces of ice that will only support one's weight for a fraction of a second. One must expect to get at least one's feet wet; I, being a little less experienced and a little more foolhardy, have fallen in completely a few times.

Usually around midnight or 1:00 a.m., we all go back to our tents, squeeze ourselves into the one-foot gap not occupied by someone else, and read a little bit before resigning ourselves to another night of sardine sleep.

Life up here in the Arctic, however, is not as carefree as I have described it. These Inuit kids, with whom I am working, playing, sleeping, and eating, have to face realities most of the people I know will never have to face. One of the two girls on our team was due to have her first baby early in February. She was only sixteen--a year younger than I. Her uncle committed suicide during the summer. He was only sixteen as well. Once I overheard the kids talking about the Inuit Youth Camp where we were all to go in late July. This is not a camp as we think of camp. The Inuit kids don't go there to have fun. They go to talk about the problems they as a people are facing, and they as a people must solve. They were saying that there was going to be a police officer at the camp, so that they couldn't do any drugs while he was there.

Serious problems are an everpresent undercurrent of life in the Arctic. Yet they are only symptoms of a much larger process. The culture and lifestyle of the Inuit have been changing rapidly in the last twenty years. The Inuit have been gradually leaving their old subsistence way of life in favor of the flashier and easier Western culture. They have lost many of their hunting and survival skills, yet they have not been adequately trained to "make it" in white society. So many of them feel frustrated and lost and resort to

" SIEVING DUTY IS MISERABLE WORK... ESPECIALLY ON COLD OR WINDY DAYS."

suicide or drugs to solve their problems. In my experience with these Inuit teenagers, I have slowly become aware that these kids have to deal every day with horrors that I might never face in my entire life: suicide, drug and alcohol abuse, teenage pregnancy, and unemployment. Their old culture is disappearing, and a new stable culture has not yet emerged. For these Inuit kids, it is a time of great difficulty, of many stresses and sorrows, and of unknown futures.

Josh Fitzhugh
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THE UNGALUYAT PROJECT: THE DIRECTOR'S VIEW

Sometimes Inuit express the view that archaeology is just another way we outsiders have of taking away their culture. Archaeologists, they say, come to the Arctic in the summer, excavate a site, and then, like geese, fly south in the fall. The artifacts they take with them are never seen nor heard of again. This impression of archaeology formed in the 1970's as young Inuit realized that the old people, those who still remember life in snow houses and tents, dog teams, and the time before Christianity, are dying and with them Inuit knowledge of their past. This problem is being exacerbated by the educational system that, until recently, served to draw students away from their families, the traditional source of learning, thus increasing the generation gap.

Last summer's project was conceived as a way of addressing Inuit concerns about archaeology and the loss of their heritage. It was planned as a community based project combining archaeological fieldwork with Inuit oral history. Our aim was to provide a unique learning experience by exposing the students (Inuit and non-Inuit) to both traditional Inuit and professional archeological knowledge of the past. A secondary aim was to show the community what archaeologists do from excavation to exhibition. My role as an archaeologist was to introduce the students to archaeology and to teach them to excavate while several Inuit elders identified the artifacts and taught us what the site looked like when it was occupied.

Preliminary research for a suitable location pointed to the community of Igloolik, a hamlet of almost 1000 people and the nearby site of Ungaluyat. The Ungaluyat site is vast. Within an area 500 meters long by 60 meters wide are the remains of 14 stone houses and a circular stone meeting place. In 1823, Ungaluyat was visited by two British Naval captains and their crew. Although the site was deserted, they learned that the local Inuit had only recently removed to their winter sod and whale bone houses several miles away. The Englishmen described the strange constructions at Ungaluyat as large tent rings with walls of stone over five feet high. This evidence was later corroborated by the present inhabitants of Igloolik Island. This site was selected for our project for several reasons, the recent age of the site being the most important. This meant that the elders could describe and identify the finds. One woman we met had even lived in a similar structure! Other reasons included the site's proximity to the local community, as well as to the main summer camp, and the endangered nature of the site because of road construction.

Our operations were divided into two phases, excavation and laboratory work. Four Inuit students were hired for the entire period while an additional five were employed during the excavation. Community elders assisted in both phases, three actually camping with us in the field. My

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("Arctic" continued from p. 4)

parents, three local volunteers, and Josh Fitzhugh completed the field crew.

Bringing the Past to Life

We excavated at Ungaluyat for two hectic weeks, during which time I gained a great deal of respect for teachers. The most difficult task involved explaining why archaeologists dig so slowly and record everything they find. The elders and students had all dug at sites before for their own interest. Archaeological sites are very visible in the north where vegetation is slow growing, and people often dig around in the old sites to see what they can find. In fact, there is evidence that this is part of an old learning technique used by the elders to describe objects' uses to youngsters. I had to explain that we wanted to learn as much as possible about the people who lived in the home we were digging. At first the students were skeptical, but later, when we could see where people slept, where the men made tools, and where the women sat sewing and playing with their children, they understood that we were bringing their past to life again.

In the evenings we would visit the elders in their tents and ask their assistance in identifying finds. The students were genuinely surprised at the degree of concordance between my identifications and those of the elders. At other times they saw that not only did I have a lot to learn but that I regarded myself as a student of the elders.

Students Share Their Knowledge

One problem excavators face is boredom. After a while everything except a really stunning find becomes routine. We were fortunte because nearly everyday some curious person on his or her way to summer camping grounds would stop by to visit. This provided the students with a break and an opportunity to describe the project and their role in it. Often they learned new informaton about the site from these visitors. Other visitors included a local television crew, who made a program on our work, and three high school student reporters who were running a summer newspaper.

When the excavation was completed, we returned to town where the artifacts were cleaned, checked against field notes, and labelled. Several inconsistencies and one major problem highlighted the need for the double and triple cross-checking system we had instituted and led to helpful discussions about scientific techniques. We then asked the elders to help us learn about the artifacts. Some of the questions we asked were: What was this object used for? What is its correct Inuktitut name? Have you ever used one or seen one used? Where did the raw materials for the stone tools come from? Once we gathered this information, the students created an exhibition of 50 objects for the community and the school. The students wrote captions in Inuktitut and English (see example below) and illustrated the exhibit with drawings to explain the uses of objects and with photographs of us at work on the site. In two days, over twenty percent of the local population visited the display.

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These are ivory birds (tingmiujat) that the kids used to play with. When a man couldn't go hunting or if he didn't have a kayak he would make toys for his kids or tools.

Project Support

The project was fortunate to receive support and cooperation from many sources. In the spring we secured the support of the Igloolik Community Council and the Inuit Taperisat of Canada (similar to the National

Congress of American Indians). Funding came from three sources: the Challenge '87 program of the Canadian Government, the Prince of Wales Northern Heritage Centre, and the Northern Heritage Society. Logistic support was donated by the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development who run a research laboratory in the community.

Only time will tell whether the project was truly successful. We all had fun and the exchange of information among the students, elders, and myself was immense. I probably learned the most of all. When the summer was at an end, one Inuit student decided to return to school and retake Grade 8 (she had dropped out half-way through the year) and another, who had been unemployed for eight months, enrolled in a training program on Inuit land claims. Future plans for me include a continuation of this project and perhaps an expansion into other communities.

Sue Rowley
Anthropologist
Smithsonian Institution