

“NEVER SAY DIE” REMEMBERING THE HISTORY OF HEALTH AND HEALING IN AKLAVIK

BY ELIZABETH COOPER, BA, MA

My name is Elizabeth and I am from Winnipeg, Manitoba.

In November 2009 I came to Inuvik and Aklavik for a visit to speak with Elders and to try to learn some answers to my questions. I was lucky because there are so many kind Elders in Aklavik and Inuvik and people were able to talk to me and tell me stories about their lives and their thoughts.

For my University project to complete my masters degree, I had to write a very long (more than 100 page) report on a special topic. I wanted to learn about what Aklavik was like when there were hospitals in Aklavik. I wanted to learn what it was like when the Roman Catholic mission and the Anglican mission were in Aklavik. I wanted to learn what it was like and how people felt when Inuvik opened. Why did people stay in Aklavik? Why did people move to Inuvik? What was life like in those days? This is a summary of some of the things I wrote about.

When I was in Inuvik lots of people helped introduce me to Elders, especially local staff at the Inuvik Research Centre, Aurora Research Institute. I went to the Holiday Craft sale and bought some beautiful items. I really enjoyed going to the Christmas Concert at the Roman Catholic Church (everyone called it the RC church for short) and a turkey dinner at the Anglican Church and playing my fiddle with the Girl Guide group holiday caroling. In Aklavik, Dorothy Erigaktoak helped me with my interviews. She was so nice and helpful.

When I came back to Winnipeg after visiting in Aklavik and Inuvik I spent time reading through Archive materials like old letters from some of the nurses who worked at the hospitals in the Mackenzie Delta. I read letters that Anglican missionaries like Reverend Shephard, Bishop Flemming, Reverend Sittichinli and Reverend Umiok wrote. I also spent time reading some articles about Aklavik and Inuvik in the Toronto Star.

I am so thankful for everything that I learned when I was in Aklavik. I am happy that I had a chance to listen to so many wise people share stories with me, to play music, to learn about the old days and to hope for happiness in the years to come.

IMPORTANT DATES IN AKLAVIK

- 1912 Hudson's Bay Company arrived in Aklavik
- 1919 Anglican Mission (All Saints) opened
- 1922 RCMP arrived
- 1924 RC mission arrived
- 1926 All Saints and RC Hospitals opened
- 1940's-1960's TB epidemic
- 1949 Federal Day School opened
- 1958-1961 Aklavik "closed" and Inuvik opened
- 1959 RC Hospital closed
- 1961 All Saints Hospital closed
- People did not leave
- 1979 Granted Hamlet status



RADIO

How people communicate is very important. Today people use the internet, radio, TV and telephone. Back in the 1950's, the radio was very important. Often it was the only way that people could communicate with each other, especially with family camping on the land.

Church was broadcast on the radio, songs were sung, the news was read. There was an opportunity for people to go on the radio and send messages to family and friends. If someone had visited family at the hospital, the person would go on the radio and give an update to the family. If someone was planning on passing through another community, this message would be shared too. Messages would be in Gwitch'in, Inuvialuit, English and French. Anyone could go on the radio.

CAMP

During the early part of the twentieth century, most of the people who lived in Aklavik were from the south. Some had even come from Europe, just to work in Aklavik. Gwitch'in and Inuvialuit, even those who worked in town, often lived outside Aklavik.

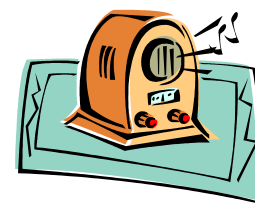
People would camp through the year. Even though living in town is nice with houses and stores, living in camps was nice too. The cold didn't seem to be as cold, there was always something to do and people took care of each other more than they do today. If someone was sick, people would take care of the person. If an elder needed water, children would get

Nurses would gather around the radio in the hospital waiting to hear news from England. Both Gwitch'in and Inuvialuit Elders told stories about family members who would climb up trees when they were on the land so that they could get a better radio signal. The radio was very important, and helped people maintain a sense of community.

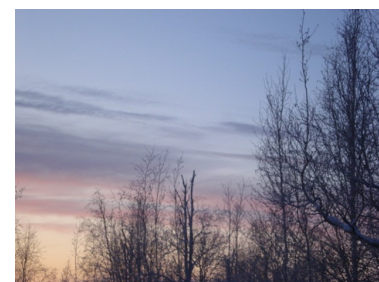
Radio is still important. It is a way that people know what is happening in Aklavik, it is a way to send out messages, and of course, my favourite memory from Aklavik was playing Bingo by the radio—even though I didn't win.

water. Food from successful hunting was always shared when the hunter came home.

Many Elders thought that it was better when people lived on the land because they were closer. People took care of each other. People spoke their language. People knew more about their culture and their language. Religion was more important and life seemed better. People didn't worry about all the things they worry about now. People didn't get sick as often and people made sure that they took care of other people, whether they were family, friends or strangers.



"Life was on the land [...]
Learning everything there. It's a different kind of learning, it's a different kind of living."
- Sadie Whitbread



TRAVELING

Because people lived on the land and had to travel a lot to do things like hunt, collect plants, trade furs, get supplies from Aklavik and visit with other camps, the way that people traveled was very important.

In the 1920's people traveled by dog-sled. Lots of people would have more than twenty dogs. Dogs were taught to be helpers. When a hunter was alone, dogs kept the hunter company. If someone was injured, the dogs would return to camp to get help.

Dogs knew the way to good hunting grounds, knew where to step on the ice when it was not frozen solid. Dogs could even be taught to help with fishing by pulling the other end of the net to bring in the fish.

Bombardiers replaced dog teams and skidoos replaced bombardiers. In a lot of ways skidoos are easier than dogs and do not need to be taken care of the same way. Buying gas is easier than making sure that you catch

enough fish to feed your dog-team.

Some Elders worry that skidoos, trucks and cars are leading to more deaths and accidents than dog teams. They can go faster, travel further in a short time and they are heavier and go through the ice easier. The way that people travel, many Elders said, is the biggest change that they saw in the 20th century.



I went dog sledding one afternoon. I was not very good. I fell off almost every time the dogs went around a corner and then I had to chase them. I think the dogs thought this was really funny.

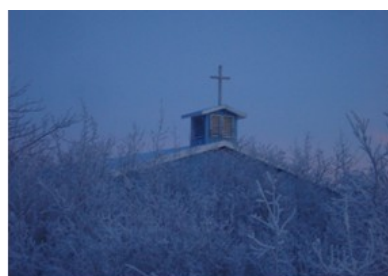
MISSION CHURCHES

By the 1920's, many people were already Christian. There were two churches in Aklavik, the Catholic Church (Immaculate Conception) and the Anglican Church (All Saints).

Many people worked for the missions. Often the difference between the two religions was often hard to figure out, especially since a lot of the things they did and said were the same. What was clear was the fact that there was competition between some of the missionaries and perhaps, competition between the children in the schools (both churches had a school).

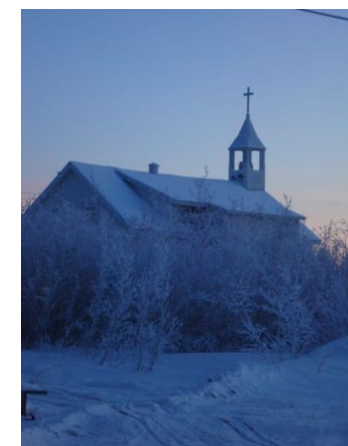
Elizabeth Greenland told me a story about her mother. The Catholic church had a bell tower, the Anglican Church

did not. One day her mother heard the bell ringing and decided to go to church. She put on her snowshoes and ran to mass. When she got there the Catholic priest saw her and asked her what she was doing. He spoke Gwitch'in and said to her, that she isn't Catholic, what is she doing in the Church. "I thought we all go pray to one God" she said. And so he took her and said, 'you're right, you're right', so he brought her to good place to sit."



All Saints Church in Aklavik (above)

Immaculate Conception (RC) Church (left)



**"And that's
true, eh! True,
we pray to one
God."**

**-Elizabeth
Greenland**

THE HOSPITALS

All Saints (Anglican) Hospital	Immaculate Conception (Roman Catholic) Hospital
Opened in 1926 Spoke English Received both government funding and support through the mission Prior to the TB epidemic, 1 nurse In the 1940's paid local staff \$1/day Treated TB, Accidents, Childbirth, Minor surgeries Burned down in 1936 and was replaced by a larger facility Closed in 1961	Opened in 1926 Spoke French Received both government funding and support through the mission Prior to the TB epidemic, 2 nurses In the 1940's paid local staff \$2/day Treated TB, Accidents, Childbirth, Minor surgeries Extra wing and a covered walkway added in the early 1940's. Closed in 1958

In 1925, there were two hospitals in Aklavik. The Anglican hospital was called All Saints Hospital. The Roman Catholic hospital was called Immaculate Conception, but most people called it the RC hospital for short. In the early 20th century, in places around the world, Anglican and Catholic missions were setting up hospitals. Missionaries thought that it would be good to be able to provide health-care for people in their congregations. The hospitals often did not have a lot of medicine, and they weren't very big. There were very few differences between the RC hospital and All Saints Hospital in Aklavik. Until the hospitals closed, Many people still chose to go to Gwitch'in and Inuvialuit who knew about traditional medicine instead of going to the hospitals.

WHY DID PEOPLE GO TO THE HOSPITAL?

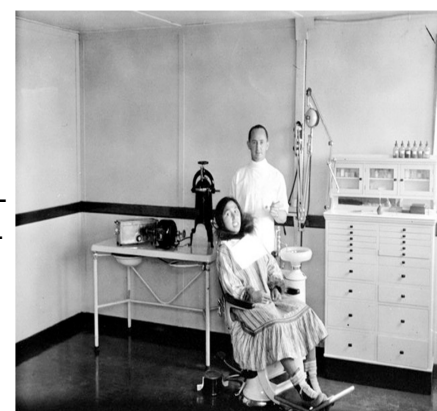
Why did people go to the hospitals in Aklavik, especially if people lived on the land? A lot of time people would go to the hospital to have babies, they would go to the hospital if it was closer than going to a traditional healer for injuries like dog-bites or cuts. They would go to the hospital for gun-shot injuries and when the dentist came to have their teeth fixed.

One of the main reasons people went to the hospital was for help if they had TB. There was a government rule that anyone with TB had to stay in the hospital until they were better. In the spring, everyone had x-rays to see if they had TB. If someone had TB, the person had to go to the hospital. Some peo-

ple who were really sick were sent to Edmonton for treatment. A lot of time people didn't want to go to the hospital, but they didn't want to make their families sick, so they would go or would send their children.

It was a very difficult time for people, especially for children because they could not see their parents or families. Sometimes people were in the hospital for many many years.

“Native people never stay in town all the time, they were always out on the land so nobody got sick. Maybe few people got sick but not like *today*, you know? “
-Annie B Gordon.



NWT Archives

CHILD BIRTH

Before there were hospitals babies were usually born on the land in tents. Children would go outside to play while their mom had a new baby and only come inside when called in to meet their new brother or sister. People told me stories about babies being born in the bush, in tents and even in canoes...

Mary Kendi told me about her son. When he was asked where he was born (meaning Aklavik or Inuvik) he answered "in the middle of rhubarb, I was born right there." In the 1940's more women started to have babies in hospitals. Having babies in the hospital was very different from having babies on the land. Even though a midwife and other family could be in the hospital

with the new mom, a lot of the time the only person helping was a nurse.

The new mom had a baby on a bed in a building instead of squatting in a tent and often there were lots of other women having babies in the same room as you.

After a baby was born people would stay a few days. I was told that it was a chance to rest before going home and getting back to work.

The very last part of the hospital that closed in All Saints Hospital was the delivery room.



WORKING AT THE HOSPITALS

The hospitals had lots of jobs. The jobs for the people from the south were different than the jobs Inuvialuit and Gwitch'in had. The RC hospital paid more money than All Saints hospital. Probably because Catholic nuns worked for free, but the nurses at All Saints were paid to work at the hospitals.

need to know to work in hospitals. It was hard though because you had to have finished more school and sometimes it was difficult to go to school, especially when the schools didn't go all the way through grade 10, but that was the level you needed to study to be a nurse and not simply a nurses assistant.

"So what I do is take little steps and learn to give myself pats on the back and feel good about things I've done today"

-Sadie Whitbread



NWT Archives

Some girls were trained to be nurses or nursing assistants. They were given a place to stay and worked hard to learn things that they would

Most of the time people worked in the kitchen, cooked food, cleaned up, worked in laundry, cut wood, brought in water and fixed things that needed to be fixed. Working at the hospitals was pretty good because you got to help people.

BUILDING EAST-3 OR INUVIK AS IT IS CALLED TODAY

In 1957, Inuvik was called East 3. A lot of Gwitch'in and Inuvialuit moved to East 3 to help build the new community. Gwitch'in and Inuvialuit lived in tents on the edge of town while they helped to build Inuvik. Often men were the ones who moved to Inuvik while women stayed in Aklavik.

The first jobs that people had was to clear the land and make room for buildings. The next job helping to build the airport, the hospital, schools, other buildings and houses. As Inuvik grew, there started to be jobs for women.

Women worked in factories, they worked at the schools and hospitals, at the post-office, in housekeeping, doing embroidery and other jobs that came up.

Sometimes it was hard for Gwitch'in and Inuvialuit to get jobs because people had to have

really good reading, writing and typing skills.

Inuvik was exciting, there was lots to do in town. But fishing and hunting wasn't very good and people often didn't make enough money to

really support their families. Many people were starving because there simply was not enough food to eat. The bar was close to the office where people got their paychecks, there were other activities to do in town that cost money. It was a very difficult move for many people, so a lot of the time people moved back to Aklavik.



The photo above is in the NWT archives. It was taken in Inuvik in 1956.

STAYING IN AKLAVIK

When the government tried to close Aklavik, many people refused to go. The motto became “Never Say Die”. The flag has the two red stripes from the Canadian flag, a muskrat and bible in the middle of a code of arms and the saying “Never Say Die” under it. Even though people tried to close their town and make them move, people stood up for their rights and Aklavik is still standing today.

People stayed in Aklavik. Gwitch'in and Inuvialuit were not asked if they wanted to move. They were not told why Inuvik was going to be built, and they were not asked where they thought the best place to live would be. If people had been asked, they would have suggested by the mountains.



When Gwitch'in and Inuvialuit asked some of the southerners why they had to move, people were told that the biggest problem was flooding. Inuvik is not in an area that floods as much as Aklavik. The funny thing is that when the water in Inuvik rises, it is flowing so fast that it does more property damage than flooding in Aklavik. Most people lived on the land. Jack Goose said “Everybody was in the bush anyway.” People still hunted and fished, only going into town for supplies. Even though the government thought people should move they didn't want to. Aklavik and the area around Aklavik was, and still is, home.

CHRISTMAS IN THE OLD DAYS (~1920-1945)

I visited in December, so a lot of Elders told me about Christmas when they were growing up. It wasn't like it is now. There weren't lights everywhere or plastic Santas or Christmas trees. It was about God and about religion.



People would come from all around to go to Christmas church services and then stay in town for a while. Mothers would work hard for a long time before Christmas sewing a new outfit for each member of their family. Children would get new parkas, new mitts and new shoes; Sometimes people would make extra mitts or socks. These would be taken to the Church and given to people who didn't have presents. Some-

times they would even be sent to people who lived further north.

Presents that people got for Christmas were always useful. The churches also gave presents to the children, often small toys that had been sent from the south. Children couldn't have their presents until after church, and sometimes it was really hard to wait until the services were over for the excitement of gifts and dancing to begin.

The most exciting part of Christmas was the party. There was singing, dancing, food, no alcohol and lots of friends. The party would go through the night. Navy boys, RCMP, missionaries and nurses could come to the dance if they wanted, but most of the time it was just Inuvialuit and Gwitch'in who danced for days and days, celebrating the joys of the season.

OTHER THINGS I WAS TOLD...

No one knows what the future will bring. There have been so many changes in the lives of the Elders I spoke with. For the most part, they say, change has been good.

People worry about the health of people living in the Delta. With more and more people getting sick with cancer, diabetes and heart problems, people are not sure what health will look like in the future.

Elders are also worried about families, especially children who have parents who drink or do drugs. Families and community have always been important and Elders worry that this might be changing. It is important to listen to what Elders have to say. They have seen a lot and know a lot. Sometimes people worry that their knowledge is not being taken seriously. Asking to hear stories and bringing children to hear the sto-

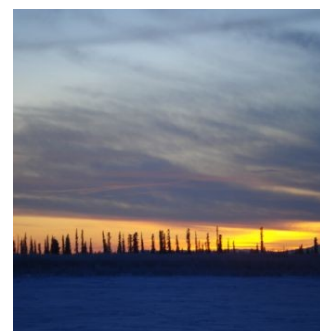
ries, I was told, is a good place to start. That is how they learned.

People worry about language. It is good to be able to speak English, but part of being Gwitch'in and Inuvialuit involves speaking those languages too. It helps you to know where you come from. There are some things in traditional languages that cannot be translated.

People worry about the land. It is important to try to keep it safe and clean. Take care of it, for the animals and for your children.

Be happy, healthy and always remember where you came from.

**NEVER
SAY DIE!**



THANK YOU!!!

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Photographs:

Most of the photographs were from pictures I took during my visit.

Three photos were from the NWT Archives.

The photo of a woman at the dentist

Credit: Fleming/NWT Archives/n-1979-050-0076 .

Caption “All Saints Hospital, Aklavik. Early 1930’s. Lady in a dentist’s chair.

The photo of people working in the hospital

Credit: Finnie/NWT Archives/n-1979-063-0071

Caption: Dr. L.D. Livingston performing an operation at the Anglican hospital. 1939

The photo of the family in Inuvik.

Credit: NWT Archives N-1992-192-0157/Curtis L. Merrill

Caption: An Inuvialuit family at East Three, circa 1956

PEOPLE I WOULD LIKE TO THANK

I would like to thank and honour the people in both Aklavik and Inuvik for their help and support with this project.

I would especially like to thank the Elders who were kind enough to let me interview them. Some of the Elders wanted to remain anonymous, and I respect that and thank them. You know who you are. For the Elders I can name, I would like to thank Ruth Albert, Barbra Allen, Annie, Arnold Archie, Rosie Archie, Peter Benoit, Emma Dyck, Jack Goose, Annie Gordon, Elizabeth Greenland, Mary Kendi, Maureen Morfitt, Persis, Clara Phillips and Sadie Whitbread.

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