



“It looks different from my dream,” said Nick Sikkuark, as he stood on an island off the Arctic coast of the Queen Maud Gulf, looking up the valley of Kutgajuk, the Simpson River. Sikkuark and his brothers, Tony Manernaluk and Louis Anakanerk, were returning to their “homeland,” the place they left almost 50 years ago, a place they had only dreamed of through all those years. Now, while it looked familiar, it was also mysterious, not exactly as they had pictured it. Nonetheless, the spirit of the place drew them back in the summer of 1999.

**Nick
Sikkuark**

**Tony
Manernaluk**

**Louis
Anakanerk**

In early summer, 1950, while living near the river mouth, both of their parents died within a month, first Elizabeth Qigguk and then Vital Avingak, both about 50 at the time. Sikkuark, the youngest son, had just turned 7. His brothers were slightly older. Suddenly it fell to the oldest brother, Philip Nimiqtaqtuq, just 20, to look after his family. “It was not as easy as when my father was alive,” remem-

bered Sikkuark, “but we were okay. There were some difficult times.”

Although Avingak had lived there for many years, it was a remote location; few others even travelled through. At the time, and for some years beforehand, there were just three families living in the immediate area, and they were all closely related: Avingak’s, Angutitaruruq’s and Aliqammiq’s. It was not, however, a sedentary life, far from it. In late summer, the family divided its effort; some stayed by the river to harvest the char run, and others went inland to put a supply of caribou meat into caches. That was also the time to get the skins necessary for winter clothing. During the winter, often the whole family travelled south, inland, sometimes as far as the Back River, in search of caribou. “There were not as many caribou around back then,” remembered Manernaluk. Sometimes the dog-team made several trips back and forth, ferrying meat out to the coast. In April, the focus shifted onto the sea ice, where the men went



Going Home to Kutgajuk

by David F. Pelly

out to the seals' breathing holes to ensure a supply of oil for the qulliq (oil lamp) and sealskins for waterproof kamiit (boots). Memories of all this had receded for the three men now gazing at Kutgajuk from a distance, but they were about to come flooding back.

Embarking on such a trip is not to be taken lightly. And for these men there were particular traditions to be respected. "We have to do it the Inuit way," said Sikkuark. "The Inuit ways, the spiritual ways, are really strong," added Manernaluk. To do otherwise, they warned, could bring ill fortune. One of these "spiritual ways" dictated that as they travelled along the coast by boat, they needed to go right past their homeland initially; it would have been inappropriate to go directly to it. Accordingly we had arranged to meet at the mouth of the next river, Pittuqiq, marked on the maps as the Pitok River.

To reach that point, I had crossed the heart of the Queen Maud Sanctuary, following the valley of Pittuqiq, "the short cut," so called because it offers

such a direct, straight course across this vast tract of empty land. It was undoubtedly the deepest wilderness that I, or any of the others with me, have ever seen. The whole trip took us nearly five weeks by canoe. One stretch in the middle felt like the most remote place on Earth. For ten days of travel, traversing approximately 120 kilometres midway between Garry Lake and the Arctic Ocean, we saw no sign of any former human presence, not even old archaeological sites. Not until we reached a point about 50 kilometres from the coast did it once again become obvious that hunters had previously used the land. In that same swath of wild country, we saw huge numbers of caribou, often several thousand at a time. The flow of animals from east to west continued to cross our path for four or five days, perhaps as many as 100,000 all together. The land was defined by the caribou trails worn into its surface. Noteworthy, however, was the absence of any sign of former hunting: no hunting blinds, no meat caches, no caribou drives, no evidence

**The
Mouth of the
Simpson River,
Kutgajuk.**

of old camps. "There were not as many caribou around back then," as Manernaluk later explained.

By the time we reached the coast, the land had imbued me with a personal sense of connection to the place that Sikkuark and his brothers called home. At the river mouth, Sikkuark, Manernaluk and Anakanerk arrived with fresh caribou meat, big smiles, and tired faces, after a strenuous boat trip from Gjoa Haven. For the next week, they told stories and explored their past, both on the ground and in their thoughts.

Late one evening, inside the tent, the tired travellers sat around the stove, steaming cups of tea in hand, fresh bannock cooking, the aromas of camp life filling the air. Outside, a voice sang softly in Inuktitut through the darkness, the actual words lost in the wind, the tune nevertheless embracing those listening from within the tent's warmth. "He's happy," said Sikkuark, smiling, referring to his older brother outside. They were "home."

Early in 1950, as the men recalled, their father Avingak "had to go" as a guide with a Roman Catholic missionary, travelling from their camp at Kutgajuk east and north to the area of Taloyoak. He did not want to go, they said, because he had not returned to that area since leaving many years before with his wife Qigguk, who was from there. Inuit tradition would have required him to return for a visit not long after their departure, if ever he was to go back. But he had not, and now it was too late. He told his family that, though he must go with the priest, it would surely bring misfortune upon their home at Kutgajuk. A few months later both he and his wife died, leaving their orphaned children behind.

As we sit in camp, it is no surprise then that these three men hold some trepidation in their hearts about returning to their homeland almost fifty years after leaving. They are determined though, that if they abide by the "spiritual ways," they and their families will be safe. "I thought about this visit for many years," said Anakanerk, "but I think if we follow the Inuit traditions, it will be okay, nothing will happen to our family." And so we approach Kutgajuk with deep respect. When the boat lands on the river bank, the men step out one at a time, walk slowly a few steps, then bend to their knees and kiss the ground, to say thank you for their return. "You are my land," said Sikkuark emotionally.

They bear gifts for the land. "Every year, in the spring, we went by dog-team to the trading post at Perry River for supplies like tea, tobacco, bullets," said Manernaluk. "We knew there would be no more after that for several

months. I remember, the summer before our parents died, we went upriver for fishing and caribou hunting. Before we left our camp, they put all our winter clothing in a stone cache. I knew it would be a long summer with no tea or tobacco, so I hid some tea and tobacco in with the winter clothing. When we came back after the summer, everyone was really happy to find that tea and tobacco. They really thanked me. So that's what I'm going to give to the land: some tea and tobacco." The other brothers had other ideas, but the motive was shared by all three, asking the spirit of Kutgajuk to be kind to their families.

Search though they may, in the limited time available, they could not find their old camp nor their par-



ents' graves. The land welcomed them, but the spirits guarded some of its secrets, at least for now. Many years had passed since their

last departure, and there was an inescapable sense that the brothers needed more time to feel really at home in Kutgajuk again.

Manernaluk stayed only a year after his parents' death. While at the Perry River post the next spring with his oldest brother, they met some men from Garry Lake who took Manernaluk, now 14, back with them so he could live and work with Father Buliard, an Oblate priest who had established an outpost mission there. Together they travelled thousands of miles by dog-team, visiting people in their scattered camps.

In the spring of 1954, Sikkuark and Anakanerk were taken seal hunting by their older brother, far out onto the ice of the Queen Maud Gulf. There they met an uncle, Nookkout, their mother's brother, and gave him the news that Qigguk and Avingak had died four years previously. Nookkout decided the two younger boys, now 11 and 12, should stay with him and his family. Over the spring and summer, they moved slowly east, toward King William Island. The next Christmas the two young boys completed one major phase of their lives and began another, when they travelled by dog-team into Gjoa Haven. There they were adopted by Father Henry, another of the early Oblate missionaries working along the Arctic coast. They grew up in his care.

A long time passed from that Christmas until the day Sikkuark stood on an island looking once again at

his homeland, and feeling that "it looks different from my dream." What became apparent to everyone during the visit in 1999 to Kutgajuk is that still more time is needed. The brothers have vowed they will return again, and express confidence that the land will welcome them even more fully the next time, and reveal to them the deeper secrets of their past. 

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The deep wilderness of the Queen Maud Sanctuary