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Twenty-seven years ago, in Baker Lake, this older woman told me an amazing tale. At the time, though I was fascinated, I had little or no understanding of the cultural backdrop to her story. Nor did I know that I'd be spending much of the next three decades recording oral histories from Inuit elders. But fortunately I wrote it down in detail, after listening with rapt attention while sitting at the kitchen table of a friend who translated for me. I remember the scene well, including the strong sweet tea and Joan's homemade pineapple upside-down cake. Last year Iquginnaq passed away, at age 97. Publishing her unadorned story now is my way to say thank you, to acknowledge her contribution, and to celebrate her remarkable life.

IQUGINNAQ

"A difficult life"

by David F. Pelly

Portrait: Bessie Iquginnaq Scottie,
Kazan River, *Portraits of the North*.
Pencil Drawing by Gerald Kuehl
www.portraitsofthenorth.com

Iquginnaq was born while her mother was out on the ice, fishing, on a winter day in 1912. When the labour pains demanded, mother walked up onto the tundra to give birth. Iquginnaq was the second daughter; there were no sons. In time, a third daughter was born, in their camp beside Yathkyed Lake, on the Kazan River, south of Baker Lake. Their father was a mean man. Their mother plotted to leave him. She was the fourth of his four wives, and therefore required to live, together with her three little daughters, in the porch of the iglu with the dogs. There was no light and no heat whatsoever.

Slowly, she collected together small pieces of wood and some frozen caribou skins, hoping to build a small *qamutik* (sled) for her two younger daughters who were too small to walk. A man who happened by understood what was going on and gave her two small *qamutiit*, which he had built as toys for his own children. Unfortunately, the mean father found them and put them on the fire, ruining the plan. But word of the mistreatment spread to other camps, and some time later two other men came to take the mother and three children away. They moved to the area of Aberdeen Lake, on the Thelon River, where Iquginnaq grew up.

Eventually a man in that region, a good hunter and a good husband took her as a wife. But life has its ups and downs, as Iquginnaq's experiences demonstrate so vividly. This husband was drowned during a hunting trip, leaving Iquginnaq sad and alone with two very young sons. She travelled into the area near Baker Lake, where by then there was a trading post, and was taken in by an older woman named Hilu.

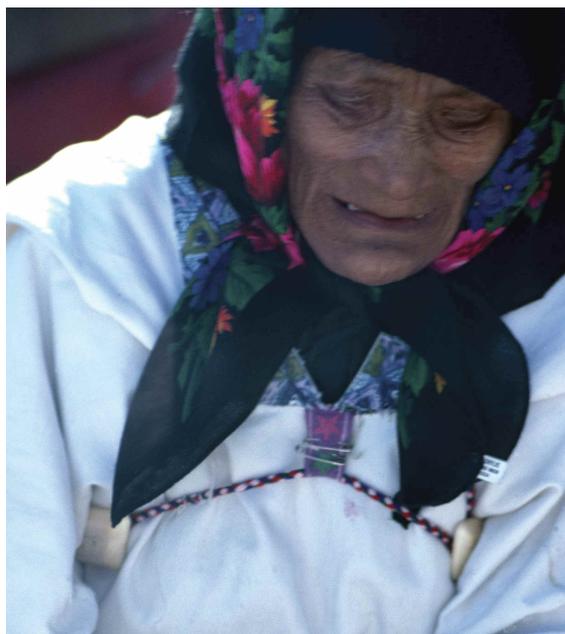
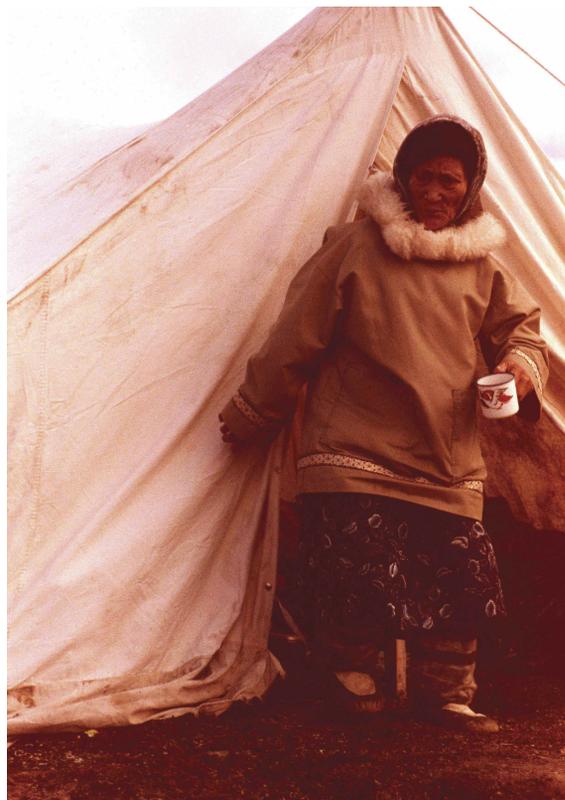
Iquginnaq "married" (not in the church) another man there, but he was mean, and she lasted no more than 10 days with him. On one occasion, when she had some chewing gum from the HBC trading post, her young son swallowed the gum instead of chewing it. The man called him stupid, took away the rest of the gum, and gave it to his dogs. Now *that* was stupid!

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A short while later, Iquginnaq took another husband, but he was very lazy. Her first husband had always said they must never go back to the area of the Paddleimiut, around Yathkyed Lake, because she had been so badly mistreated there. She remembered this, but frequently men from that area came into Baker Lake to trade, and when this man asked her to go back there with him, she went. Realizing she had made a big mistake, Iquginnaq became depressed and tried to kill herself with a rifle. She shot herself in the abdomen, and the bullet passed right through and out her back. In later life, she often gasped and regularly held her right side where the bullet emerged, but apart from that and an unusual gait when she walked, she was unimpeded by the bullet wound. For that, she credited a shaman who wrapped her in a caribou skin while the wound healed. In return, the shaman laid down certain conditions with his cure: she must never prepare caribou on the bone – it must always be removed from the bone before serving or cooking, and if she had another child, it must be named after a certain one of his spirits. She shot herself in mid-winter, and did not walk again until after the snow went away. For the rest of her life, she credited that shaman for saving her from death.

Shortly after this incident, she had a son by the third (lazy) husband. Her two previous sons had both died, so she was happy to have another boy. The baby was duly named after the shaman's helping spirit. And always, Iquginnaq was careful about not cooking meat with bones. But one day, somehow, a small piece of bone got into her cooking pot. Another woman in camp noticed it, and everyone became worried that something bad would happen. Perhaps, they thought, the little baby who was named for the shaman's spirit was going to suffer.

Then the shaman himself arrived in camp, and when he learned what had happened, he pointed a rifle at Iquginnaq and the baby. She held the baby to one side, thinking that would somehow protect it – she did not really understand how a rifle worked. The shaman did not injure either one.





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Iquinnaq using a flint to start the fire for a bannock-cooking contest during Hamlet Days in Baker Lake, 1983. She won.





Several members of the extended Scottie family during a brief visit in 1983 to their old camp at Ferguson Lake.

...SCOTTIE INSISTED AND THEN DECIDED TO LEAVE RIGHT AWAY. HE PACKED UP, LOADED HIS FREIGHTER CANOE, PHYSICALLY PICKED UP IQUGINNAQ AND PUT HER, WITH HER YOUNG SON (WHO LATER DIED) INTO THE CANOE, AND LEFT.

One day they were returning from trading at the HBC post. It was a long trip so the men were tired when they arrived at camp that night. This camp was beside the camp of a well-respected Inuk, nicknamed Scottie by the traders. Hilu, who was now living with Scottie, was happy to see Iquginnaq and invited her for tea in Scottie's tent, while the lazy husband went straight to sleep. Over tea, Scottie suggested many times that Iquginnaq should return with them to where they lived at Kaminuriak. Iquginnaq declined. But Scottie insisted and then decided to leave right away. He packed up, loaded his freighter canoe, physically picked up Iquginnaq and put her, with her young son (who later died) into the canoe, and left. He even took the tent of the other man, who was simply too tired to fight. And this is how Iquginnaq became Scottie's second wife, even though it was initially against her will.

Iquginnaq could not have a child as a result of the wounds left from the self-inflicted shooting. So Scottie went to the same shaman, who was known to be one of the best, as he had been a shaman since he was a very young boy. Scottie very much wanted to have children, and his first wife had not produced. The shaman arranged for them to have one son, which Iquginnaq gave birth to the next year, and who lives still today in Baker Lake, Joseph Scottie. Years later, when the first of his children was born (he now

has 10), his mother Iquginnaq helped with the delivery out on the land where they lived at the time.

About 1950, old Scottie and his growing family, which now included a total of four wives and more children, moved to Ferguson Lake where there was a mining camp, and several *qallunaat* working. Iquginnaq had never seen so many *qallunaat*. She remembered being invited to supper with the miners. They all went, most of Scottie's family, and sat at a long table with the men in the mining camp. She had never before used a knife and fork, or eaten from a plate. Scottie told her quietly to "take it easy" and not to make a scene. She was very careful, especially with the peas, which she found most difficult to balance on the fork. But hardest of all was to cut the meat with such a dull knife. One time, trying to cut some meat, she slipped and all the food from her plate went flying across the table. She was very embarrassed, and Scottie scolded her. But the other men didn't laugh.

This part of the story made Iquginnaq laugh so hard she had tears in her eyes. Her lined, weathered face shone with child-like delight as she thought back to those days many years ago before Scottie and his expansive family moved into Baker Lake. Finally, after a long silence, she concluded her story.

"It was a difficult life, but even with all the bad luck, I'm the only one of the three sisters to still survive." 

Regular contributor David Pelly (www.davidpelly.com) wishes to acknowledge the assistance he received, all those years ago, from Baker Lake resident Joan Scottie, to preserve this story.