



Fort Chesterfield alongside the bank at Wager Inlet, 1925.

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UKKUSIKSALIK

T H E H B C A R R I V E S , 1 9 2 5

by David F. Pelly

“**W**e went to Ukkusiksalik. Toota and Jimmy Thom, Iqungajuq and Niaqukituq, and Iqungajuq’s brothers. They started building the Hudson’s Bay post. Iqungajuq’s mother went along too. My mother was Toota. My real father was Jimmy Thom. I have heard that my real father left when I was a year old. My Inuit [adopted] father was Iqungajuq.”

These reminiscent words come from the youngest member, Tuinnaq Kanayuk Bruce, of the group that arrived in Wager Bay in 1925. She was less than a year old at the time. Today, she is 86, living in Coral Harbour with her husband of 65 years, Mikitok Bruce. Much of what we know of the history of the HBC post at Ukkusiksalik has been recorded for us by Mrs. Bruce.

The Hudson’s Bay Company’s schooner *Fort Chesterfield* sailed into Wager Bay in September 1925, looking for a suitable site to establish a new trading post. Jimmy Thom, the HBC manager assigned to the new post, travelled with this group of Inuit from Repulse Bay to Wager Bay by smaller boat, where they met the *Fort Chesterfield*. On the shores of a small lake above the reversing falls at the head of the inlet, they built the future trading post, beside Tasiujaq (named Ford Lake by the HBC), at the western extremity of Wager Bay, called Ukkusiksalik in Inuktitut.

It was a time of expansion for the HBC. Posts were already operating at Baker Lake, to the south, and at both Chesterfield Inlet and Repulse Bay along the Hudson Bay coast. The people who lived around Ukkusiksalik were certainly well aware of this access to trade goods. The new post at Tasiujaq was not principally for them, however. The HBC had in mind to attract the people from farther inland, the country near the Back River, extending down to the river mouth in Chantrey Inlet. By coincidence, this area around the Back River's mouth was also known by Inuit as Ukkusiksalik. And the connection between the two Ukkusiksaliks was already well established as a traditional hunting route.

When the schooner sailed a week later, leaving Jimmy Thom in charge of the new post, with the assistance of Sam Voisey as clerk, along with Iqungajuq and his brothers, the post journal records that the house was boarded up all but the roof, and the store was floored. With the incentive offered by the arrival of winter's first snowfall that week, construction moved along quickly. As hospitable as Tasiujaq may seem today, in the autumn of 1925 it must have felt the most desolate place on Earth to the early traders.

Their story is recorded in detail in the daily entries to the post journal; the mundane routine, the good humour, the pain, and the joy are all there. The five-room, uninsulated house in which the two traders lived was 30' x 18', the nearby store slightly smaller. Around them were the tents or iglus, depending on the season, of the few Inuit families who attached themselves to the post.



A view across the lake at Tasiujaq.

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EVEN AS THE TRADERS SETTLED INTO ROUTINE OVER THAT FIRST WINTER OF 1925-26, MINDFUL OF THEIR ULTIMATE PURPOSE IN ESTABLISHING THE NEW POST, THEY WERE NOT LONG IN LAYING PLANS FOR A TRIP TOWARD THE BACK RIVER COUNTRY. WITH IQUNGAJUQ LEADING THE WAY, THE SMALL PARTY LOADED UP TWO SLEDS AND SET OUT OVERLAND IN EARLY FEBRUARY 1926.

Even as the traders settled into routine over that first winter of 1925-26, mindful of their ultimate purpose in establishing the new post, they were not long in laying plans for a trip toward the Back River country. With Iqungajuq leading the way, the small party loaded up two sleds and set out overland in early February 1926. They were gone just over a month, but eventually found some camps near the mouth of the Hayes River, just to the east of the Back River. Here, with Iqungajuq's assistance, they announced the establishment of a new trading post just five days away.

Back at Tasiujaq, on March 16, 1926, the trader wrote in the post journal: "Sik-Sak and Keemalliauckjo arrived in p.m. Keemalliauckjo is the first of the natives from Hayes River," adjacent to the mouth of the Back River, on the Arctic coast, 250 km to the northwest of Tasiujaq. This is the first recorded instance of Inuit from that distant heartland of undeveloped territory — as seen from the HBC perspective — traveling the long established route down to Ukkusiksalik in order to trade their fox skins.

Although, of course, Mrs. Bruce does not remember that first winter when Jimmy Thom was manager, she does remember some of the later managers and clerks. Her mother worked for many of them as cook and housekeeper. As a little girl nicknamed Tuinnaq, a derivative from the word for "looks like a doll," she had free run of the house and store, although initially her family lived in a tent on a slight rise behind the buildings. "I used to come through here for a bath — the white man would give me a bath," recalled Mrs. Bruce standing in the kitchen door of the traders' house. Much of the contents of that house were familiar to her, although she found many things had been displaced, when she visited it 70 years later in 1996.

Standing outside her childhood home, Tuinnaq Kanayuk Bruce pointed across the water to the east, to a giant boulder overlooking the bay where a young man, Amitnaq, laid the dead body of one of his dogs, a measure of respect for his late father and the dogs that had carried him and his mother to safety at Tasiujaq after his father's death. Just south of that, along the hillside, is another grave, where Samson Ipkarnaq buried his young wife within a year of the post's establishment, before the couple had been together long enough to produce any children. Then Mrs. Bruce turned to look toward the north end of a ridge lying alongside the post, where a pile of large stones stood out against the horizon — her grandmother Arnagruk's grave. Iqungajuq and his brothers entombed their mother there, protected from marauding animals by the huge stones. The grave is still evident today.

She has a lot of happy memories too. Mrs. Bruce described visitors, Inuit from far away, walking into the post during the summer. She recalled people coming overland to trade fox skins. "I remember people came from Back River, those people with those wooden sunglasses that they made. I was wondering what kind of people they were, because that was the first time I saw people like that. They seemed different people. Their dialect was different from ours. How they dressed was different from us."

Growing up at Tasiujaq was a happy experience for her. "When we were children, we would fish for those small ugly fish that come out from under the rocks. We used to look for sik-siks [ground squirrels] and pick berries. We never used to be bored, even though there weren't that many people living in the area." And some special events stick in her mind. "I remember when they used to have square dances. Tommy Taqugaq was really good at the accordion. Even though he had an injured arm, he was really good at playing accordion." She recalls one Christmas when, for some reason, her family was not at the post but was camped at Tinittuqtuq out in the main body of the inlet. But the post manager did not forget her — "I remember when it was Christmas, the Bay manager sent me a little doll and candies with the doll." Nevertheless, she often wishes she knew more of what happened during those years at Tasiujaq. It was all recorded, she remembers, in a diary kept by her father Iqungajuq, but that diary has been lost.

Life at the post beside Tasiujaq consisted mainly of the fox trade for the next few years. A new manager and clerk arrived almost every summer on the annual supply ship and the expanding family of Iqungajuq became an ever more permanent fixture. By the early 1930s, that family consisted of Iqungajuq, his two wives Niaqukituq and Toota, and all the children: two girls Avaqsaq and Tuinnaq, and three boys Napayok, Tatty and Tattuinee.



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Tuinnaq Kanayuk Bruce and Mikitok Bruce crossing Wager Bay on a Peterhead boat in 1996, en route to Tasiujaq. "I remember those hills," she said as she looked across the water toward the shores of Ukkusiksalik, which she last saw in 1945.

The post journals are a telling mix of comments on engines, the first airplanes, and the introduction of short-wave radios, with observations on fish, caribou and seals caught, the weather, and the local people. Almost without knowing, the journal-keepers left us a vivid picture of their life and a record of historic detail that increases its impact with the passing of time.

December 3rd, 1928: *Slightly overcast — no wind. Samson off to traps in a.m. Sicsak in with some fish. Men hauling water and feeding dogs. At office work.*

November 4th, 1929: *Visibility very poor today — cold northwest wind changing to north towards evening. J. Spence [clerk] with natives Dick & Sutoni left this morning to set some traps up by Kauminalook. Self employed compiling records from Outfit 256 and making out last month's forms. Lamps have to be lighted at four o'clock. The last few days are really the first winter days we have had, frost showing on windows and doors and generally feeling wintry, especially when one wakes up in the morning.*

December 25th, 1929: *Dull and overcast, calm, snowing a little. Had all the natives in tonight, gave them a feed and presents, after which they enjoyed themselves dancing for the rest of the evening. The music was supplied by native Tommy on a five dollar accordion. Everyone enjoyed themselves. Ipooyauak and Erukshuk, being Back's River natives and as Dick would say "First time see'em Christmas" were greatly amused and no doubt it made an effect upon them.*

January 13th, 1931: *Keeluk has now had a young wife bestowed upon him, she is Samson's wife's eldest girl and needless to say Keeluk is all tickled up the back — and elsewhere, I suppose.*



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LIFE AT THE POST BESIDE TASIUJAQ CONSISTED MAINLY OF THE FOX TRADE FOR THE NEXT FEW YEARS. A NEW MANAGER AND CLERK ARRIVED ALMOST EVERY SUMMER ON THE ANNUAL SUPPLY SHIP AND THE EXPANDING FAMILY OF IQUNGAJUQ BECAME AN EVER MORE PERMANENT FIXTURE.

As 1932 passes, the journal notes that the local Inuit have been without food much of the time, and that only one, Samson Ipkarraq, has come into the post to trade. Foxes are scarce. Spirits are low.

January 4th, 1933: Natives Deaf Johnny, Angatingweak, Sutoxi, & Nowya arrived at post this evening and they all were in a sorry plight with frost-bite, hunger & tiredness. The majority of their dogs had died on them through lack of food and they had but seven dogs amongst them when they arrived here. None of these natives had any [fox] fur [to trade].

January 7th, 1933: Gave the natives a dance tonight to cheer them up, as they all seem very downhearted & miserable owing to the scarcity of fur.

March 27th, 1933: Still no signs of any natives arriving, so I guess they are getting very little fur.

April 4th, 1933: It is time some natives were showing up to trade. They must be getting very little fur, if such is the case the longer they stay away the better.

April 9th, 1933: Native Tommy & wife arrived in A.M. He had 1 fox. Wager Inlet this year is beyond the pale. It is enough to make any self-respecting trader feel like a rest cure patient at a Health Spa.

May 10th, 1933: Natives Arngnawa & Nowya with wives and family arrived at post tonight 12 P.M. They bring in the same story, which we have been hearing all winter – absolutely no fur in the country.

May 31st, 1933: This brings to a close Outfit 263, one of the poorest fur years since this post was established, and it is with absolutely no regrets from either member of staff that we write 'finis' to this most disastrous outfit.

Top left: Tuinnaq Kanayuk Bruce standing in the doorway of the old warehouse and store at the HBC post, Tasiujaq. "I used to live here with all my family. Now I'm the only one here representing that whole family. I felt fine until I walked up to the place where we used to have our tent — the whole family, they were all there — and I couldn't hold my tears back. This place is no longer in the same condition as when we were here, but at least I am able to see it again, as none of them are."

Bottom left: Hudson's Bay Co. establishing in Wager Inlet, 1925.

Below: Tuinnaq Kanayuk Bruce and Mikitok Bruce (foreground) with their extended family gathered beside the old trading post at Tasiujaq, 1996. It was during this week in 1996 that Mrs. Bruce's memories of life at the old HBC post were recorded.




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This “disastrous outfit” produced only \$1,216.22 profit, barely half of the previous year’s profit. It is not surprising then, that the decision was made by HBC superiors to withdraw the staff from Wager Inlet. What is surprising is that no record of that decision has survived in the journal. The last complete entry is on Saturday, August 26th, 1933. The next day’s entry seems to have been interrupted in midstream, after only the usual opening line about the weather. Did the summer supply ship come into view just as the manager, W.A. Heslop, was catching up his journal? Did he run out to meet it, only to learn that he was being transferred? The ship’s log of the *Fort Severn* notes her arrival in Tasiujaq at the Wager Bay Post at 11:56 am on the 28th, whereupon she “commenced loading Wager supplies” which process finished on the 30th in time for the ship to sail at 12:45 pm, with the manager and his journal embarked.

Mrs. Bruce recalls the day clearly. “When my family and I were at Qamanaluk fishing, some people came to us and asked Iqungajuq if he could take over. That ship came to Tasiujaq and those people came to us in their little boat. He really didn’t want to take over, but they told him as long as you write down everything that is sold — they persuaded him. Iqungajuq didn’t want to take over because he didn’t know what to do.”

* * *

Iqungajuq did take charge, with remarkable success. The story of the HBC post at Tasiujaq, after the withdrawal of the *qallunaat* traders, will continue in the next issue of *above&beyond*. 

All of the above excerpts from the Post Journals are from the Hudson’s Bay Company Archives B492 a/1 to a/10.

Long-time contributor David Pelly (www.davidpelly.com) wishes to acknowledge the assistance of Tuinnaq Kanayuk Bruce, as well as her daughters Manitok and Leonie, in the gathering of material for this story.



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MRS. BRUCE RECALLS THE DAY CLEARLY. “WHEN MY FAMILY AND I WERE AT QAMANALUK FISHING, SOME PEOPLE CAME TO US AND ASKED IQUNGAJUQ IF HE COULD TAKE OVER. THAT SHIP CAME TO TASIUJAQ AND THOSE PEOPLE CAME TO US IN THEIR LITTLE BOAT. HE REALLY DIDN’T WANT TO TAKE OVER, BUT THEY TOLD HIM AS LONG AS YOU WRITE DOWN EVERYTHING THAT IS SOLD....