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# UKKUSIKSALIK

AN HBC POST WITH AN INUK AS MANAGER, 1933-45

by David F. Pelly

The first installment in this story of the HBC post at the head of Ukkusiksalik (Wager Bay), from its founding in 1925 until the permanent departure of the *Qallunaat* managers in 1933, appeared in the last issue of *above & beyond*. As that era ended, Iqungajuq (aka Wager Dick), together with his family, took over management of the post at Tasiujaq, the lake at the head of Wager Bay. 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. We pick up the story from there.

O

n Sunday, November 6, 1927, an entry in the post journal records the arrival of a child. In itself, that seems insignificant enough. But, as the history of Ukkusiksalik unfolds, that child became a central player.

*-10 Clear with decrease in wind. The wind blew so strong last night that driven snow was forced thru' the window frames of both bedrooms and kitchen. Also a pile of lumber flooring was scattered about like matches. During the early hours of the morning native Dick's wife Tootah gave birth to a boy. The boy was called Tatty. [HBCA B492 a/3]*

Robert Tatty's father was W.E. "Buster" Brown, post manager for the outfit year 1926-27. When the last of the *Qallunaat* managers left in the summer of 1933, Tatty was not quite yet six years old. Nevertheless, he recalled this event quite clearly, even though he was a young boy, "not old enough to work yet. I remember when the manager left. He asked my father to take over the post. I remember the little open putt-putt boat the manager came to get us in from our camp down the lake. We moved into the small HBC house [actually the warehouse originally] then."

His older sister, Tuinnaq Kanayuk Bruce, also recalls the day. "Iqungajuq didn't want to take over because he didn't know what to do. When my family and I were at



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**Iqungajuq, aka Wager Dick or Native Dick, manager of the HBC Post at Ukkusiksalik for 1933-45, and the adoptive father of Tuinnaq Kanayuk Bruce and Robert Tatty.**

**Tuinnaq Kanayuk Bruce, during her 1996 visit to the old Post where she grew up.**



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HIS OLDER SISTER, TUINNAQ KANAYUK BRUCE, ALSO RECALLS THE DAY. "IQUNGAJUQ DIDN'T WANT TO TAKE OVER BECAUSE HE DIDN'T KNOW WHAT TO DO. WHEN MY FAMILY AND I WERE AT QAMANAALUK FISHING, SOME PEOPLE CAME TO US AND ASKED IQUNGAJUQ IF HE COULD TAKE OVER. 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."

Qamanaaluk fishing, some people came to us and asked Iqungajuq if he could take over. 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 was familiar with the post operation, having been there since its construction in 1925, but to be the manager was an unexpected challenge. The more so because, with the withdrawal of *Qallunaat* managers, the HBC also ceased the annual visit of a supply ship, and left it to Iqungajuq to fetch his own trade goods from Chesterfield Inlet or Repulse Bay, the two closest HBC trading posts.

"When that [supply] ship stopped going to Ukkusiksalik," continued Mrs. Bruce, "Iqungajuq used to go to Chesterfield by Peterhead boat to get supplies for the store. One time he went to Repulse Bay by dog team to get more supplies for the store. I don't remember how many times he went to Repulse Bay or Chesterfield Inlet to get more supplies." On these occasions, it was left to Tuinnaq to operate the trading post, to conduct the trade, even though she was no more than a young teenager.

"We used small pieces of wood [HBC tokens], used them as money. I would write down in Inuktitut things that were sold or traded. I really didn't like trading because some people weren't happy. Some people would bundle up the fox fur and I wouldn't realize that they had rips or holes in them if they were all bundled up like that. The main things they wanted to get were bullets, flour, tobacco, lard, tea, things like that. They weren't expensive at that time. I learned to write and read by myself. When I was a little girl, I had memorized a song, a chorus, and someone gave me words to that song and I started reading it [in syllabics] by what I had memorized. I learned to read by myself."

Iqungajuq served in this position as ad hoc manager of the Tasiujaq post most ably, with the help of his whole family. All his inventory and trading records were carefully written in Inuktitut syllabics. The Company provided him with trading supplies and (later) some coal to heat his house in return for his service. He managed to turn a profit with very little support from his remote supervisors, who were duly impressed. A small commission on his trading profits was left to accumulate for him at the Repulse Bay post. Once or twice a year he would make the trek out to this closest point of civilization to deliver the fox skins he had collected from other hunters, and to restock his outfit. Tatty, a young boy quickly learning to be a man, frequently made these trips with his father. "When my father and I went out — hunting, or trapping, or to Repulse — we left my two older sisters in charge of the trading."

Hunters came to the post in summer, by foot from inland or by sail from down the inlet, to get bullets, tea and tobacco on credit, which they would pay back in skins during the coming winter. All winter long, occasional hunters came by dog team to turn in their fox skins. "It was a happy time when lots of people came," recalled Tatty.

In the early 1940s, HBC trader Bill Robinson made a spring trip from the Repulse Bay post to visit Iqungajuq at Tasiujaq. His observations offer another perspective on life at the post with an Inuit manager. "The warehouse consisted of one huge room with a back porch. It resembled an immense igloo with a snow tunnel entrance. At one end of the room two double beds were placed end to end. Dick and his family seated themselves on one bed while his brother and family sat on the other. Individual caribou-hide sleeping bags were placed on the bare mattresses, marking each member's allotted spot on this giant substitute snow bench. An overturned packing box and a wooden bench along one wall completed the furnishings in the room. A Primus stove and seal-oil lamp shared the surface of the packing box. Other than the seal-oil lamp, no heating arrangements existed. This was Dick's summer quarters. During the cold days of winter the families lived in a couple of cozy igloos."

Since the departure of a Company manager in 1933, Iqungajuq had turned the Ukkusiksalik post at Tasiujaq into a small but consistently profitable operation. He was a man who could find his way simultaneously in two different worlds. He took his responsibilities to the Company seriously, kept his records straight, and never provided a problem for his distant supervisors in Repulse Bay. Yet he maintained the values and traditions of his own heritage within his family structure. He was admired by all who came to know him.



© COURTESY OF THE TATTY FAMILY

Robert Tatty.

In his annual report dated May 31, 1944, at the close of Outfit 274, Repulse Bay manager D. Drysdale summed up the state of the Wager Bay trade and the valuable contribution made by Iqungajuq.

*Dick will not be here with his results till August or early part of September. Last year it was September 22nd before he got here, so he is liable to be just as late this year, since his boat engine is in very bad repair, and he has to sail most of the time.*

*Dick brought me an Inventory of his stock taken sometime in February. He thought he would get another fifty foxes at the most from Back River natives in the later part of April or early in May. I sincerely hope he managed to get them, but I am doubtful as fur seems to be pretty scarce this year. I always stress the point about debts, and no doubt he has often been told about this. He is a pretty careful old fellow and I am sure doing best he can. And no doubt when fur is scarce he has a hard time saying NO to anyone who comes to ask for a few pounds of tobacco or tea.*

*Last fall he had a very narrow escape somewhere in Wager Bay, got caught in a very bad gale, which wrecked his old motor boat, and he had a very hard time keeping the Peterhead off the rocks. But he says the Peterhead is still in sailing condition — but says the bottom is getting pretty soft and won't stand a rough sea.*

These proved to be prophetic words.

In the meanwhile, it was time for Tatty, nearly 18, to have a wife. Accordingly, in March of 1945, on one of their re-supply trips by dog team to Repulse Bay, Iqungajuq and Tatty picked up his betrothed from Anaruaq's camp. "I was pretty young," recalled an elderly Annie Tatty, who was 15, just a month shy of her 16th birthday, at that time. "It would be pretty young for *Qallunaat*, but Inuit used to get married young. Inuit



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HUNTERS CAME TO THE POST IN SUMMER, BY FOOT FROM INLAND OR BY SAIL FROM DOWN THE INLET, TO GET BULLETS, TEA AND TOBACCO ON CREDIT, WHICH THEY WOULD PAY BACK IN SKINS DURING THE COMING WINTER. ALL WINTER LONG, OCCASIONAL HUNTERS CAME BY DOG TEAM TO TURN IN THEIR FOX SKINS. "IT WAS A HAPPY TIME WHEN LOTS OF PEOPLE CAME," RECALLED TATTY.



© COURTESY OF THE TATTY FAMILY  
Robert Tatty at the old HBC Post in 1978-79.

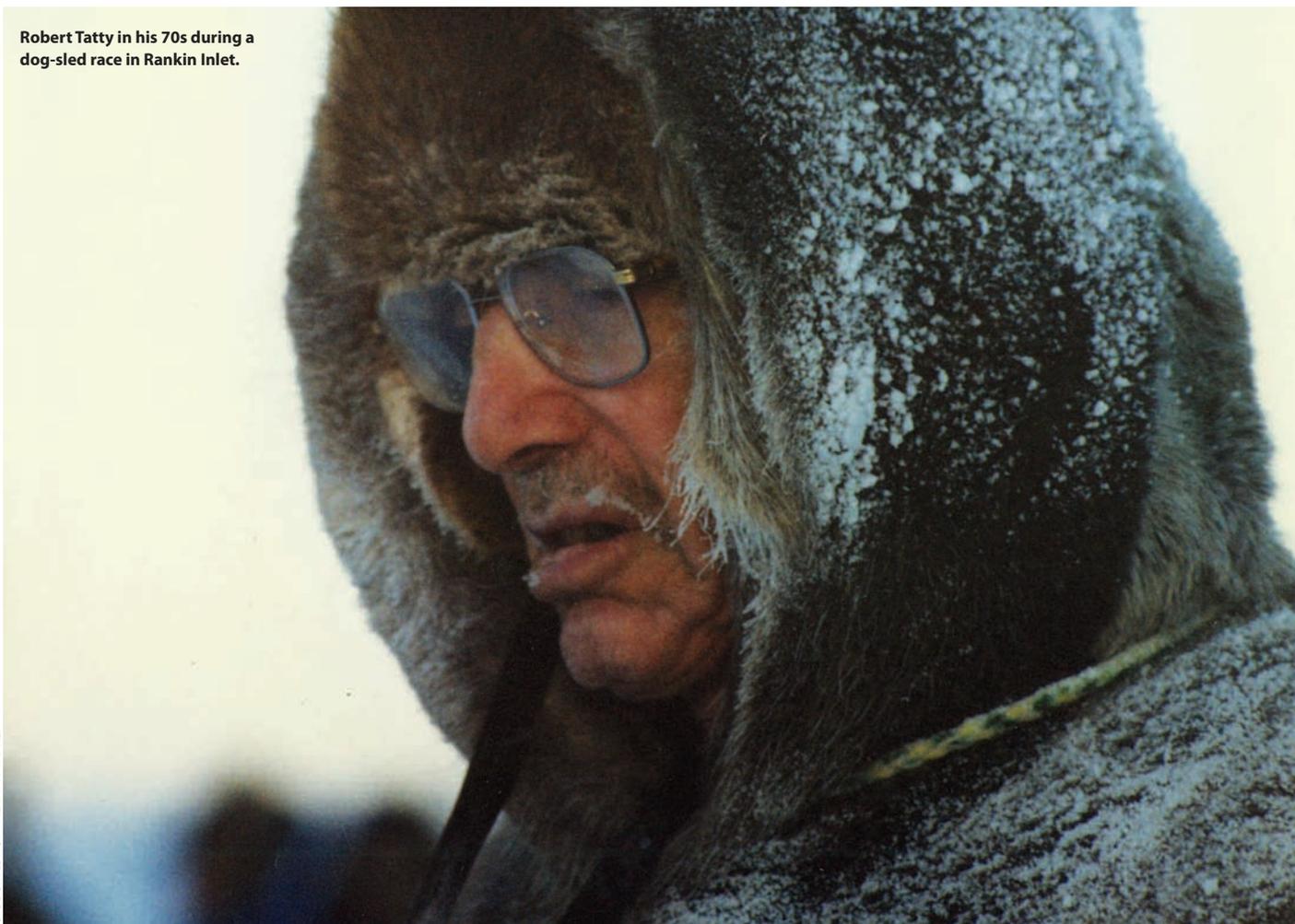
used to make plans who is who that will marry.” Annie’s adopted parents (her mother died in childbirth), Joseph Kakak and Paula Angnaujuq, had not shared their plan with her. She grew up in Ukkusiksalik, near Piqsimaniq, and had visited the post at Tasiujaq on a number of occasions. She remembered seeing Iqungajuq, and Tuinnaq, and even Tatty. But “I did not know he was my future husband.” So in the spring of 1945, as best she could, she settled into her new life with Tatty’s family at Tasiujaq. “I was uncomfortable, because I never have been without my parents before and I was homesick for quite a while. They treated me very well, but I did not want to leave my father and mother.”

That summer, the whole family set out by boat from Tasiujaq for Repulse Bay, to get the year’s supplies. The HBC had promised that a new boat for Iqungajuq would come in on the annual supply ship from down south — reason enough, it seems, for the whole family to make the trip. The ship was late. They waited patiently in Repulse Bay. That trading post too was nearly out of supplies. Finally the ship arrived, with supplies but no new boat for Iqungajuq. The family had no choice but to head home in the old, rotting boat. As Annie Tatty recalls it, “our boat was not hard wood. The side of the boat was peeling off and it started cracking. Also we did not have a motor.” Travel conditions were less than ideal. It was already September; sea ice was forming.

“We tried to go back to Wager in the old boat, loaded with our supplies, but it was already freezing and the ice severely damaged the boat,” recalled Robert Tatty 40 years later. “We tried to axe a way through the ice. But eventually it was frozen in and we had to abandon it.” They were about half way down Roes Welcome Sound toward the inlet, at a place Inuit call Umijjarvik.

His older sister, Tuinnaq Kanayuk Bruce was also there. “The ice was scraping on the sides of the boat. My parents got scared so we landed on shore. Our boat wasn’t

Robert Tatty in his 70s during a dog-sled race in Rankin Inlet.



© COURTESY OF THE TATTY FAMILY

wrecked. We came to the beach before it really got wrecked. We got our supplies on land. We had to put our tents in that area where we beached and we spent the winter there. It was already icing up. The ice was getting thick. It was really cold. When we got to shore Iqungajuq built a house with ice blocks. It was really nice to live in that ice house for a while because we could see through [the walls]. But when winter came, we built an iglu and moved into it.” The ice house became the trading post, with walls the height of a man, the boat’s sail spread over as a roof, and the supplies neatly piled inside. That incident changed the course of history. The family had planned to stay at Tasiujaq, thinking that Tatty would take over as manager of the store. But Iqungajuq simply resumed his trading from a new location.

“We had more business there than before at Tasiujaq,” recalled Tatty. “There was a lot of fox that year. But that was the end of the HBC in Ukkusiksalik. During that winter I went back to the old post to do an inventory and to pick up the remaining supplies.”

“We had left our dog team in Ukkusiksalik,” recalled his sister, Mrs. Bruce. “Agulaq was going to look after them. But he was too old to look after them properly. Siudluq, when we were going to Repulse Bay, he left for Chesterfield Inlet at the same time. If Siudluq had looked after the dogs instead of Agulaq, they would have survived. Tatty went back to Tasiujaq [from Umiijarvik] that winter. He was quite young then. He was riding with Angutinguaq on one dog team. He was planning to get [our] dogs and come back [to Umiijarvik] and get the family and then go back to Tasiujaq. But the dogs weren’t being fed, so they starved. We didn’t have a dog team any more because they starved. I think they brought a few things but not that many, because it was winter and it was quite far from where we were camping [at Umiijarvik].” For lack of a dog team, the family never returned to Tasiujaq. And so the colourful history of the HBC post at Tasiujaq, a uniquely remote post with an Inuk as manager for 12 years, came to an end. Fortunately, the stories of the lives which unfolded in those buildings are preserved.

## Epilogue

Robert Tatty’s connection to the old post at Tasiujaq endured for the rest of his life. For two years in the late 1970s, he returned there to live, with his family, to ensure the connection endured. His story, with that of his wife of 65 years, Annie Tatty, will be featured in an upcoming edition of *above & beyond*. 

*Long-time contributor David Pelly (www.davidpelly.com) wishes to acknowledge the assistance of the family of the late Robert Tatty (1927-2009) in the preparation and illustration of this article.*



The buildings of the old HBC Post as they appeared in 1996.

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