

Natkusiak (ca. 1885-1947)

Few Inuit have displayed the same wanderlust and indefatigable spirit of exploration as the Alaskan Inupiat Natkusiak. As Vilhjalmur Stefansson's primary guide and travelling companion on the noted explorer's two major arctic expeditions, the Stefansson-Anderson Expedition of 1908-12 and the Canadian Arctic Expedition of 1913-18, Natkusiak logged thousands of miles by foot, ship, and dog sled.

While Stefansson provides few details of Natkusiak's personal life, his voluminous works do contain frequent passages of praise for his companion. In Stefansson's first major publication, *My Life with the Eskimo* (1913), the author compliments Natkusiak as one of the best Eskimo hunters he has ever known (p. 151), as an individual with the spirit of an adventurer and investigator (p. 155), and as an extremely competent man in everything that concerns making a living in the Arctic (p. 339). In September 1911, when Anderson brought news that Natkusiak had temporarily left the service of the Stefansson-Anderson Expedition, Stefansson wrote: "This was a very disappointing piece of news, for in all my long travels and in everything of difficulty which I had had to undertake in the past three years, Natkusiak had always been my mainstay and in many cases the only man on whom I could rely" (p. 339).

Natkusiak, also known as Billy Banksland, was born in Port Clarence, Alaska, in the mid-1880s. Although a precise date for Natkusiak's birth is lacking, even from his surviving offspring, the anthropologist Diamond Jenness estimated his age to be approximately 30 in the winter of 1913 (Jenness, 1957:140). Port Clarence had recently become a major stop-over point for the San Francisco-based steam whaling fleet heading north into the Beaufort Sea (Ray, 1984:300). In addition to taking on supplies of coal, these whalers hired native seamstresses and hunters to accompany them.

Little is known concerning Natkusiak's early life. Even his oldest surviving children who were interviewed in the community of Holman, Northwest Territories, for this biography could provide few details about his early life in Alaska. They identify his father as Nanguina and his mother as Samayuk.

Natkusiak started to work for Stefansson in 1908 at the beginning of Stefansson's second expedition to the Arctic: the 1908-12 Stefansson-Anderson Expedition funded by the American Museum of Natural History. Prior to this, Natkusiak had been employed by Captain George Leavitt of the steam whaler *Narwhal*, one of many whalers that wintered over at Herschel Island and plied the summer waters of the Beaufort Sea in search of bowhead whales. The *Narwhal* had wintered at Herschel Island in 1906-07, where Stefansson, at the time working for the Anglo-American Polar Expedition (also known as the Leffingwell-Mikkelsen Arctic Expedition), had made Leavitt's acquaintance (Stefansson, 1913:54, 254). In all probability, Stefansson met Natkusiak at this time as well.

Stefansson states that it was during the late summer and early fall of 1908 that he "formed a tie" with Natkusiak, who turned out to be a "student of Eskimo dialects" (Stefansson, 1964:104). During the winter of 1908-09, Stefansson was in Barrow, Alaska, perfecting his language skills with Natkusiak's help. Natkusiak continued to work for the duration of the Stefansson-Anderson Expedition, leaving only for a brief



Natkusiak with his favorite dog. Reprinted with permission from *The Friendly Arctic*.

period to work as a son-in-law to Kutukak and his family at Liverpool Bay. Natkusiak eventually returned to the expedition after the death of his wife at Baillie Island from an epidemic. Natkusiak had apparently grown tired of his association with the Baillie Islanders and decided to return to the expedition (Stefansson, 1913:360). Natkusiak was Stefansson's only travelling companion when the two men sledged in 1911 to Victoria Island, where they contacted the Kangiryarmiut of Prince Albert Sound, a group of people who had only recently been discovered by the free trader Christian Klengenber aboard the *Olga* when it wintered on the western coast of Victoria Island in 1907-08.

At one point during the Stefansson-Anderson Expedition, Natkusiak saved the lives of Stefansson, Anderson, and another Inuit travelling companion. The four men had settled down one night in an abandoned snow house, which they heated with a primus stove. Since there was no ventilation in the snow house, Anderson and Tannaumirk soon passed out.

Natkusiak was also affected but was able to stagger against the door to break the snow blocks, thus allowing fresh air to enter (Hunt, 1986:52).

The Stefansson-Anderson Expedition was followed by the well-known Canadian Arctic Expedition of 1913-18, one of the largest multidisciplinary arctic expeditions ever sponsored by the Canadian government. The expedition was divided into a southern party based at Bernard Harbor and a northern party based at Cape Kellet on Banks Island. The northern party, which included Natkusiak and a number of other Inuit guides, was responsible for collecting scientific data from the regions north of Coronation Gulf.

During this expedition Natkusiak made the acquaintance of anthropologist Diamond Jenness, the official ethnologist for the expedition. Jenness also did linguistic work with Natkusiak and considered him to be more adventurous and self-reliant than other Inuit he had met. While members of the expedition were in winter quarters at Camden Bay, Alaska, in 1913, Natkusiak spent most of the winter by himself at an isolated trapping camp miles from his nearest neighbor. During a visit to his camp later that winter, Jenness expressed surprise over the fact that Natkusiak was able to cook his own food, patch his boots, sew rips in his clothing, and maintain his dwelling without the assistance of a wife. Jenness speculated at the time that it was Natkusiak's incredible wanderlust that accounted for his "celibacy" (Jenness, 1957:142).

During the Canadian Arctic Expedition, Stefansson and Natkusiak, usually travelling together but occasionally separately, wandered extensively throughout the northern regions of Copper Inuit territory, making repeated contacts with the Copper Inuit of Prince Albert Sound, Minto Inlet, and Banks Island. (See Stefansson, 1922, for a detailed description of the Canadian Arctic Expedition.)

One of the other Inuit guides of the northern part was Freeman Alingnak, who was accompanied by his wife, Minnie Kuninana, and an adopted daughter, Ikiuna, a girl of approximately 10 or 12 years of age in 1916 whose father was an unknown black whalerman. According to one of Natkusiak's daughters, Agnes Nanogak Goose, Natkusiak took Ikiuna (also known as Topsy) as a wife sometime during their stay on Melville Island. After two earlier "marriages" (the first ended with the death of Natkusiak's wife as a result of an epidemic and the second, to a Coppermine woman, Kaodloak, ended in a separation), this marriage would see Natkusiak through the rest of his life and result in a large number of children.

At the end of the Canadian Arctic Expedition, Natkusiak received one of the expedition's schooners, the *North Star*, as payment for services rendered. Natkusiak, Ikiuna, and a number of other Inuit who had worked for the expedition remained on Banks Island for four winters trapping white foxes. When the party left Banks Island in 1921, they had managed to catch approximately 1000 white foxes, an impressive number given the high prices offered for furs in the 1920s.

Natkusiak and his fellow trappers had thus established the productivity of Banks Island as a trapping area. This discovery eventually resulted in a migration of trappers from the mainland to Banks Island when competition from white trappers and a noticeable decrease in fur-bearing populations on the mainland forced many of these trappers to look elsewhere for new trapping areas. Natkusiak's discovery, which also accounts for his nickname Billy Banksland, was instrumental in leading to the formation of the Banks Island schooner fleet and the colonization of Banks Island, with temporary winter

trapping camps as people from the Delta crossed over to the island with their schooners in fall in order to spend the winter trapping there.

Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, the Banks Island schooner fleet increased in size and even started exploiting trapping areas on Victoria Island, where the western Inuit trappers came into repeated contact with the Copper Inuit of northwestern Victoria Island (see Usher, 1971, for a detailed description of the colonization of Banks Island).

For a time after returning from Banks Island, Natkusiak lived at Baillie Island. Natkusiak's oldest surviving son, Jimmy Memorana, was adopted at about this time, when a flu epidemic killed Jimmy's parents along with a large number of other people. Jimmy remembers that Natkusiak had a great number of material possessions, including an impressive arsenal of firearms that he had inherited from the Canadian Arctic Expedition. It was at about this time that the *North Star* was wrecked in a storm at Baillie Island.

Around 1932-33, Natkusiak moved his family to Banks Island for the winter. The following spring, ice prevented their return to the mainland, so Natkusiak decided to sail to Victoria Island aboard Fred Bennet Ningasik's schooner, the *Shamrock*.

Since Natkusiak had travelled all over much of western Victoria Island, he knew the land almost as intimately as the Copper Inuit themselves. Natkusiak ended up spending the winter of 1933-34 at Ulukhaktok, which would later become the permanent settlement site of Holman. Two other ships, the *Blue Fox* and the *Shamrock*, wintered at this location as well.

In the spring, Natkusiak and his family travelled north to Walker Bay (the location of the closest trading posts, the Hudson's Bay Company post and the Canalaska Trading Company post) aboard David Pirktuqana's schooner, the *Sea Otter*. During this time, Natkusiak appears to have divided his time between Walker Bay, Tuktoyaktuk, and Banks Island. When Natkusiak's daughter Mary Nerlek married David Bernhardt, Natkusiak and his family started to spend more time travelling aboard Bernhardt's ship, the *Okpik*. For a time, Natkusiak lived at Walker Bay, where he worked for the Canalaska post. Natkusiak's children report that he had a job up there but cannot recollect how long they stayed.

George Burnham, a Hudson's Bay Company clerk who worked at the Walker Bay HBC store (Fort Collinson) during the winter of 1934-35, states that Natkusiak was a frequent visitor to the post during the winter of 1935. In his published memoirs, Burnham states:

Another of our regulars was Billie Banksland who was somewhat taller than the usual Inuit. He had worked with the Stefansson expedition of 1914-1917 [*sic*] and was very well known and highly respected all along the coast. One of his favorite tricks on meeting someone "new" was to dress up in a complete outfit of polar bear skin, sneak up behind the unsuspecting stranger and grab him with a big bear hug. Naturally, the visitor would look down to see who or what was holding him and all he would see would be what appeared to be the feet of a bear — imagine his surprise and shock! Billie would then release his captive and burst into loud laughter accompanied by whoever else was present [Burnham, 1986:129-130].

Others have noted Natkusiak's fine sense of humor: Diamond Jenness commented that Natkusiak "was a cheerful fellow who always seemed easy to get along with, rather happy-go-lucky indeed, with a twinkle always lurking in his dark brown eyes" (Jenness, 1957:142). At one point, Natkusiak admitted to Jenness that he had posed as a great magician while travelling

among the Copper Inuit during the Stefansson-Anderson Expedition. "He would light his pipe with a little stick (match), inhale the smoke, and after a pause blow it out through his nostrils, telling his audience that there was fire inside his body" (Jenness, 1957:142).

Around 1937, Natkusiak moved his family down to Ulukhaktok, which he had decided would be a desirable place to live. Two years later, in 1939, the Hudson's Bay Company post relocated its store to the same location, and a Roman Catholic mission was built the same year. By this time, Natkusiak was quite elderly and was no longer as active in hunting and trapping. His oldest son, Jimmy Memorana, lived at the Roman Catholic Mission but helped in supporting his parents and siblings.

Natkusiak died around 1947 and was buried in the community graveyard in Holman. Natkusiak is survived by a large number of descendants, including several of the largest families in the community. Five of Natkusiak's seven children are still alive today. Three of them remain in the community of Holman: Jimmy Memorana, a respected elder and hunter; Agnes Nanogak Goose, an internationally recognized artist; and Alec Banksland, also a well-known artist and printer. Natkusiak's children and grandchildren obviously take great

pride in their ancestor's accomplishments, feeling also that he perhaps has never received the recognition due him as an Inuit explorer.

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