

Simon Paneak

A well-known and distinguished Eskimo, Simon Paneak, who has been foremost a guide and instructor of scholars in interior arctic Alaska, died in September 1975.

Simon Paneak extended a hospitality and guidance to scientists that enabled them to become acquainted with conditions and life in the arctic mountains of Alaska, where without his aid and that of his family and many Eskimo friends, especially in the Nunamiut village of Anaktuvuk Pass, existence alone would have been most difficult for the visitors.

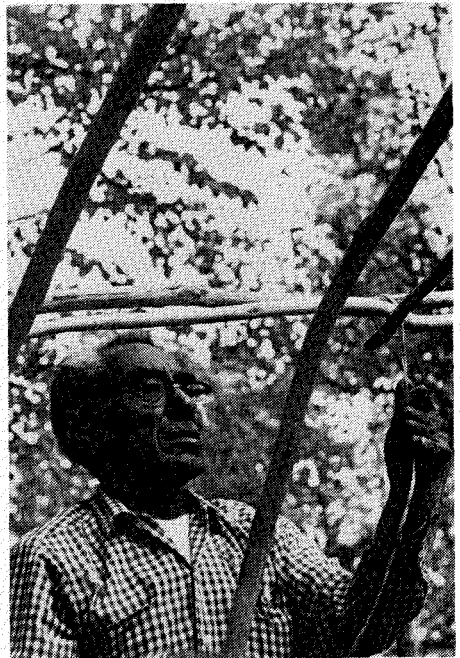
Simon was born in 1900 in the Killik Valley of the central Brooks Range. His parents were still children, when in 1884, the explorer Stoney was the first white man to visit with the Nunamiut near the southern end of Chandler Lake. Stoney left a can containing, we may suppose, a record of his journey overland from the Kobuk River, assuring the local Nunamiut that damage to it would bring down punishment from above. Afterward the children dared to kick the can and, as they expected, nothing happened.

After the late nineteen twenties, the few mountain Eskimos who previously had commonly visited the eastern arctic coast for trade in summer, remained on the coast for some ten years. During this time, Simon worked with Jack Smith, the trader, where he learned that the strange sounding talk of white men could be intelligible. He also learned that written accounts of transactions on trade could accurately preserve records of dealings on credit. Numbers and dates characterized his observations and provided exact communication from his remarkable memory. This accuracy of memory fixed the position and appearance of geographical features, so that he could sketch maps free-hand of coasts and streams that he had not seen for years.

In the nineteen thirties, the trade value of furs rapidly declined. A few Nunamiut families on the coast decided to return to the mountains. It was said that the men longed for their preferred diet of caribou meat, but also that the women wanted again the clear air and bright prospects of the mountains. For the next ten years, five or six families subsisted as hunters, moving their camps among the headwater valleys of the central part of the Brooks Range.

When the U.S. Navy set about exploration of the Naval Petroleum Reserve No. 4 in 1912, Sigurd Wien of the family long concerned with aviation in Alaska, and later president of the Wien Alaska Airlines, engaged Simon's assistance in laying out the

Site of Umiat, on the Colville River, for an interior post for explorational drilling. Simon, like many Nunamiut, had travelled over miles of arctic Alaska and was well known in its Eskimo villages. It was natural that when the Arctic Research Laboratory was established at Barrow, Alaska, in 1947, Wien, together with Tom Brower, merchant of Barrow, and provider of specimens and records of many of the birds of arctic Alaska, should solicit the cooperation of Simon Paneak in order to establish biological connections from the rather well known arctic coast, through the biologically unexplored mountains of arctic Alaska, into the forested interior of the Koyukuk and Yukon valleys.



The shelter and guidance that Simon, his family and Nunamiut friends afforded enabled visiting scientists to go easily for direct study into the mountain valleys. With his knowledge of conditions and life in the mountains he was able to act as an instructor in the ways of arctic life. Over many years he kept journals accurately reporting phenomena that marked the seasonal cycles of birds and other animals. Their recorded observations covered what Simon saw and what he learned from reports by his friends. It was the pleasant old custom of an Eskimo village to enjoy social discussion of natural phenomena, present and past. Simon knew the nature of these phenomena, and he discreetly evaluated the perspicuity and

accuracy of all accounts in order to make his compilation of the observations of the village elders and children both comprehensive and significant.

Having an exceptional memory and being a highly intelligent social person, Simon was a source of accounts of the history of Nunamiut people through several generations past. History before that time merged into realistic tradition sustained by observations of ancient dwelling sites and records of ancient ways in artefacts of wood, bone and stone. In his childhood, practical use of the ancient implements was still familiar, and Simon could reconstruct the ways of life in the ancient families and small villages with delightful vividness. His stories have been important sources of accounts of the social anthropology of the inland Eskimos. His understanding of ancient ways enabled him to guide archaeologists to sites productive of artefacts revealing the prehistory of men in the Arctic over some 5,000 years.

Simon's influence in anthropology, biology, and geology has affected scores of scientists. Their personal recollections of his aid and instruction in the ways of arctic life bear witness to his contribution to science. The agreeable memories of his genial society testify to the fact that pursuit of scientific information offers a social enterprise in which strangers with a formal education can communicate most agreeably with native residents who are not educated by conventions foreign to their locality, but who are wise in knowledge and appreciation of their own country.

Simon collaborated with the writer of this tribute in publishing three articles on the avifauna of arctic Alaska, and was acknowledged as an important source of information in over a dozen other works in the same and related fields.

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