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Contacts between American Whalers and the Copper Eskimos

It has often been maintained that the Copper Eskimos did not have contacts with white men between the early eighties and the first decade of the twentieth century. The earliest recent encounters are generally believed to have occurred in 1902, when David Hanbury conducted explorations on the mainland near Coronation Gulf, and in 1905-06 and 1907-08, when Christian Klengenberg and Captain William Mogg respectively wintered on the schooner *Olga* at Victoria Island.¹ Stefansson described a whaler's harpoon found by the Eskimos in a dead whale that was stranded in Coronation Gulf,² but he believed there had been no direct contacts on Victoria Island before Klengenberg's meeting.⁵

Evidence does exist, however, to indicate that American whalers encountered Copper Eskimos during the last decade of the nineteenth century. Captain Hartson Bodfish, who was master of several whaling and trading vessels in the western Canadian Arctic, reported having made contact with these Eskimos long before any explorers had reached the area.⁶ These encounters may have begun as early as 1891 because, in the spring of that year, Bodfish, after wintering at Herschel Island, wrote to his mother: "Just as soon as we can get out we are going, and are bound to that undiscovered country that lies to the eastward of us."⁸ In 1898, while wintering in Langton Bay near Cape Parry in the steam bark *Beluga*, he noted in the ship's log that one of his native hunters had left the ship in the March to look for other Eskimos, and returned several weeks later with a group of them, and added: "They report seeing lots of seals and whales as they came along the coast in the neighborhood of Dolphin and Union Straits." Bodfish's ethnographic collection, in the Cleveland Museum of Natural History, contains at least one Copper Eskimo artifact, an *ulu*.

The ethnographic collection of Captain Horace P. Smith, at the Old Dartmouth Historical Society Whaling Museum, also suggests an early encounter because it contains a musk-ox horn ladle with a copper rivet in the handle; this piece is similar to other ladles collected from the Copper Eskimos,^{3,9} and Smith's only voyage in the Canadian Arctic took place between 1892 and 1894, when he twice wintered the steam bark *Narwhal* at Herschel Island.

There is also the possibility of other meetings. The whalers, ranging from their main base at Herschel Island, covered the entire coasts of Amundsen Gulf and most of Banks Island in their search for the diminishing numbers of bowhead whales. For instance, in the winter of 1895-96, the steam barks *Baleana* and *Grampus* were at the northern end of Cape Parry in Baleana Bay, and in the winter of 1897-98, the *Baleana*, *Narwhal* and steam bark *Beluga* stayed in Langton Bay. These vessels were thus in good position for early summer cruises in eastern Amundsen Gulf.

Other ships went farther: on Banks Island the steam brig *Jeannette* reached to near Mercy Bay via the west coast in 1899,¹⁰ and several ships at other times reached Cape Prince Alfred;^{7,11,12} Captain Stephen Cottle took the steam bark *Belvedere* to the north end of Prince of Wales Strait in 1905;¹³ and landings or anchorings are known to have occurred on southern Banks Island^{4,14,15} and on the coast of Victoria Island.^{5,16} By 1897 at the latest, whalers had cruised to the mouth of Dolphin and Union Strait, and probably farther, to the mouth of Coppermine River,^{17,18}. In 1897, a naturalist at Point Barrow, interviewing shipwrecked whalers recorded, "Mr. Joslin and Mr. Lopez say that they have seen walrus on Pelly Island and Cape Bathurst but that the natives about the Coppermine River never saw any."¹⁷

Stefansson did not know of any such encounters with Copper Eskimos; but he began to record his data only in 1906, by which time the whaling industry was moribund and only a few of the earlier whalers still sailed to the Arctic.

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