

Remembering Herbert Aġiyġaq Anungazuk



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Iñupiaq Anthropologist, Hunter and Bowhead Whaler

PRESENTED BY:

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Good evening. My name is Carol Zane Jolles. Tonight I am privileged to speak in memory of my friend and colleague, Herbert Aġiyġaq Anungazuk. His wife Lena is here tonight, and I am grateful for her presence. I first met Herbert at the National Park Service, Alaska Regional Office in Anchorage. We met because his younger brother, George, had married my good friend Edna Apatiki of Gambell. George and Edna told me to introduce myself to Herbert, if I got a chance, and so, in 1992, I did.

Herbert Anungazuk was a fluent Iñupiaq speaker and a gifted translator and interpreter. He had an extensive knowledge of his homeland that embraced an entire range of subjects from ethnography to ethnobotany to the natural history of the Seward Peninsula. So many times a research project depended on his mastery of the intricacies of the Iñupiaq language and his encyclopedic knowledge of Iñupiaq history and culture. His knowledge and understanding added depth, dimension and meaning to the research of many Arctic social science projects and certainly to the work we did together. In Wales and on Little Diomed Island, he and I documented social and economic changes. We learned that what once was known as traditional knowledge itself was changing. This added to Herbert's often-expressed fear that the identity, the culture and even the lands of Iñupiaq people might disappear.

As I reflected on Herbert's passing, I realized that wherever Herbert worked and whenever he spoke or wrote, he always honored the land of his birth, his place on the land, his reverence for the hunting way of life and the elders whose knowledge, generosity and teaching gave his life meaning. It was this message he strived to pass on. I hope to convince you that Herbert Anungazuk's life story itself should not fade from memory. Tonight, I will try to place his life and the work we did in context for you.

We began work together in 1997. In late July, we flew to Gambell to interview hunters about whaling traditions. Herbert was a whaler himself, and in

Gambell he was among whalers of his own age group. Many, like Job Koonooka and Branson Tungiyon, were his friends. His interviews in Gambell were a stunning reminder of how important whaling is to Yupik and Iñupiaq people.

The interviews give voice to the deep feeling, power and spirit of the whaling experience, something not so likely to occur with non-Native interviewers. In Gambell, he also interviewed Elder Anders Apassingok, noted for taking many whales in his long life. I think Herbert got carried away that day. Anders later laughed with delight as he told me that he really enjoyed that interview with Herbert. Herbert, he said, had done all the talking, and Anders was paid for the interview.

Our next stop was Little Diomed Island where tribal manager Chuck Menadelook invited us to join him in his very small house.

As the lone woman, I slept on the sofa, Herbert slept on the floor in front of the sofa, and Chuck slept in his own bed. Now, that was the easy part. Chuck and Herbert were both chain smokers, and that one-room house was so smoke filled that the atmosphere was like a dark fog. With no privacy to change clothes and no way to wash them, since the village water tank was almost empty, smoke wafted from our clothing in clouds whenever we went outside.

In thoughtful Iñupiaq fashion, Herbert had brought food to Chuck. It fed the three of us and the elders we interviewed in Chuck's house as well. The shelves of the village store were empty. On this trip, most important for Herbert, I think, were our interviews with elders. Those elders are now all gone. There was Charlie Iyapana, who died in October that same year, Oscar Ahkinga and Moses and Ruth Milligrock.

Often Herbert quoted Moses's and Ruth's words to us in his speeches. Moses said, "Everything sink; everything sink. Our names, our history are sinking into the ground." And, then, added, "Dangerous parts on this island are recent. Large boulders slid [over] there. Rolled down, all the way to the beach. Maybe you won't see Diomed no more, pretty soon." And from Ruth: "Our land is getting old; like an old woman, she is changing."

Herbert and I got to know each other on that trip, and we continued to work together for the next 13 years.

But let's go back a little further. Herbert was born in 1945, in Kinjigin or

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Wales, possibly in a sod house. The village history and his own family history are filled with tragic stories. In October of 1900, the village was overwhelmed by measles and flu. A visitor to Wales that year wrote to her family, "Almost one-fifth of the people [here] have died...hardly any Eskimos over fifty years old and only a few under five are left." [Lopp, 2001] But, the 1918 influenza epidemic that swept the world after World War I was the most terrible. In Herbert's words:

"The generation of my father never had time to mend themselves from the grief of death, suffered from diseases so deadly that, even today, we have yet to recover to our original numbers." [Anungazuk, 1998]

His father, who survived the epidemic as a child, later told him that his grandfather had been an umialik, "a man of status." Little was said of that time, so even this description of a grandfather he never knew was treasured. Of Herbert's own childhood, he said:

"I remember the birds ever ... so many of them when I hunted with the weapons of a child... [Anungazuk, 2005]. The water was covered in their numbers, red as the flowers of summer on the mountain... the red phalarope were our prey of choice... there were so many... Today, these birds return yearly, but now... only a few return home in... spring to show us they remain a part of the land, as we are..." [Anungazuk, 2003].

Herbert's early education as a hunter was one that was always with him. The elders instilled in him a deep desire to learn the ways of his people that became a driving force in his life. Like many Native Alaskans, though, he was sent away from home as a teenager to attend high school in Sitka, Alaska. Afterward he attended Haskell Institute, a vocational school in Kansas for Native youth. I always wondered why Herbert never mentioned Haskell, but then I learned that

he earned a certificate in plumbing. I have to say that Herbert did not like plumbing much. Last on his "to-do" list at home was probably fixing the water heater, which always seemed to be on the blink.

In 1967, soon after graduating, Herbert entered the Army and went to the war fields of Vietnam. He described a single day in 1968 this way:

"We set an ambush position in what turned out to be an unmarked graveyard in the jungle in the dark of the night. The smell was there, and we did not see the maggots until daylight revealed them. I remember the still[ness] and the submerged bridges very well, as I realized that while we were walking into the dark toward an ambush position that it was my birthday. It was July 16, 1968, and I had survived at least 100 days of war. I was now 23 years old." [Anungazuk, no date (a)].

He later said that no day ever passed when he was not reminded of that deadly time [*Ibid*].

I believe that Herbert's education by the elders and his years in the army, fighting for his country, shaped the man he became.

He returned to Wales after Vietnam and spoke with pride and humility of being striker on the whaling boat in 1970 that took the first bowhead whale in Wales in more than 20 years. I know little of those years, except that he was a hunter and sometimes taught Iñupiaq culture classes in the Ki igin School.

Herbert married Lena Riley of Unalakleet in 1985, and by 1987 he had begun work with the National Park Service. Herbert and Lena settled permanently in Anchorage in 1991. Over the years, Herbert was asked to join many social science research projects because of his knowledge. The elders had taught well. In addition, for him, each opportunity to work with an elder while on a research project was another gift from those who were generous enough to continue his lifelong education and preparation for his own elderhood.

If you were to have asked Herbert, "Who are you?" I believe he would have answered, "I am an Iñupiaq, a Kijikmiu. And, I am an American." To be a

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Kinikmiu was to be a person of the tundra, of the ice and of the sea. It was to be a hunter even if he no longer hunted. Of this he said:

It is astounding to be a whaler; and, to take a whale or a white bear home to the people is a feat that is remembered by everyone. I take great pride in being a descendant of my ancestors. I take great pride in being a hunter.” [Anungazuk, no date (b)]

In his heart he was always a Kinikmiu. Almost until the day he died, when someone died in Wales, Herbert purchased the wood for the cross, carved it with the name of the deceased and sent the cross to Wales to mark the grave. Often he did this as he sat on the sofa in his living room, watching videos of Iñupiaq dancers or of America’s contemporary war history.

And Herbert was always an American soldier, veteran of a war that never left his mind. He gave the names of two of his fallen brothers-in-arms to his own sons, returning their names and spirits to the living world, bringing them in the Iñupiaq way into the present.

For most of the years Herbert and I worked together, we tried to preserve community history and culture, and with it, Iñupiaq identity, driven by a shared sense that time was running out. He said, poignantly:

So much of what I have seen as a child will never be seen or experienced by my grandchildren, by my great-grandchildren. A lot only remains in the memories of my generation, and my generation must learn to tell our descendants how it was, as our descendants too, are descendants of the ancient hunter.” [Anungazuk, 2003].

Herbert is gone now, but the work of documenting that he was so much a part of continues.

In Diomed, the first step so many years ago was to walk from home to home with a large, empty island map. Every name that surfaced was added. Young hunters gathered excitedly over early versions of the map. Names they had

heard in the confusing flow of elder hunters’ Iñupiaq conversations suddenly joined the landscape over which they had floated. Patrick Omiak [who is here tonight] and Arthur Ahkinga worked tirelessly to develop spellings of place names, a reminder that place names carry with them a sacred trust and that “getting the words right” is important.

In Wales we worked especially with Elders Pete Sereadlook and Faye Ongtawasruk. In 2008, as global awareness of climate change sharpened, and the group of elders grew ever smaller, we moved to the next stage. We began verification of place name maps. This is where our project is today. One of Herbert’s colleagues from the National Park Service will accompany me to Wales in a few days. Winton Weyapuk, Jr. and Sean Komonaseak of Wales will join the work team. As always, the elders will be our teachers.

What Herbert held in his heart as his mission to his people will guide us as we work to finish place name maps and other educational materials that will make their way back into classrooms and onto the walls of offices and homes in Wales and Diomed and Nome. And, it is hoped that Herbert Anungazuk’s story will endure into the next generations.

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