

# That Was Then; This is Now...

by Moki Kokoris

Spin your globes to view Canada, more specifically to the region directly west of Greenland. This territory is currently known as Nunavut. Now, zoom in on Baffin Island, and then further in to Foxe Basin along its western coastline. Tucked into the northern corner of the bay, to the right of the Melville Peninsula and near the entrance to the Northwest Passage, lies a small island named Igloolik (or Iglulik). The Inuktitut name “Igloolik” means “there is a house here” — from “iglu,” meaning house or building, referring not to snow igloos, but to the original sod houses of the area. The residents are called Iglulingmiut (~miut, meaning “people of”). Other Inuit from neighboring Aivilingmiut and Turnunirmiut populations also live here, the majority of them still following their traditional lifestyles.

Evidence from artifacts gathered at Igloolik’s numerous archaeological sites shows that the island has been inhabited for at least 4,000 years. The first known European contact with the community came in 1822 when two Royal Navy exploration vessels, HMS Fury and HMS Hecla, both under the command of Captain William Edward Parry, wintered at the small island.

In 1867 and 1868, American explorer, Charles Francis

Hall, stopped there during his search for survivors of the lost Franklin Expedition, and in 1921, Igloolik was visited by a member of Knud Rasmussen’s fifth Thule Expedition. The first permanent presence by southerners came with the establishment of a Roman Catholic mission in the 1930s. By the end of that decade, Hudson’s Bay Company — the oldest commercial corporation in North America, and at one time Canada’s largest private landowner — had also set up a post on the island.

As remote as this small island may be, Igloolik is an active and popular place. Today it proudly boasts the Igloolik Research Centre, commonly known as “the mushroom.” As part of the polar continental-shelf research



Artcirq perform the “Trampoline” at Igloolik Point, 2005.

Photo by Antoine, courtesy of Artcirq Productions © 2010



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Town of Igloolik.

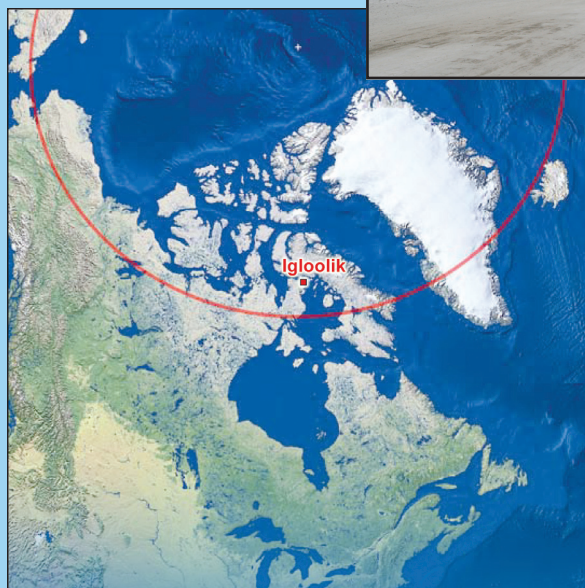
program of Natural Resources Canada, this facility is used for environmental monitoring programs, studies of traditional Inuit technology and knowledge, and support for visiting scientists.

Igloolik is also now home to a real “Hollywood North,” Isuma Productions, which has produced a number of award-winning features and documentaries, among them *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen*. Igloolik Isuma Productions, Inc. is Canada’s first Inuit independent production company and is 75% Inuit-owned. The

first aboriginal-language Canadian feature movie, *Atanarjuat* (“The Fast Runner”), released in 2001, was a \$1.96 million historical thriller based on an Igloolik legend of love, jealousy, murder and revenge. Filmmaking in Igloolik contributed \$1 million to the local economy, creating more than sixty part-time and twenty full-time jobs in this isolated and underemployed community.

One of the more unexpected and intriguing recent developments in Igloolik is its now famous circus, Artcirq. In December 2009, the troupe presented three shows at COP-15 in Copenhagen, and in February 2010, six members of Artcirq represented Nunavut in performances at the 2010 Olympic Winter Games in Vancouver, British Columbia. Artcirq has even performed in places as far away as Timbuktu, Mali, replacing snow with sand at the Festival au Désert, as it traveled from temperatures as low as -58.0° F up to 104° F. Polar nomad to desert nomad, cultures collided and melded, introducing one’s traditional lifestyle to the other’s. Just before Artcirq were to go onstage, they placed a block of ice at the edge of the platform and vowed to perform for as long as it took the ice to melt.

Unlike most circuses that are established solely to provide entertainment for their audiences, Artcirq’s inspiration has very serious roots. In the Arctic, the impacts of a changing environment, and shifting lifestyles commonly induce in many inhabitants a lack of purpose and a pervasive sense of hopelessness and loss. Not possessing the tools and skills with which to remedy these conditions,



Map of Nunavut showing location of Igloolik above the Arctic Circle.

Photo courtesy of Artcirq Productions © 2010



many Igloolik teenagers suffer from serious depression. The consequences are all too often tragic. Government statistics from the late 1990s show that between four and six young adults committed suicide in Igloolik every year, a rate seven times higher than in Montreal. In the summer of 1998, two young men took their lives, once again shattering this small island community of 1500 residents, and leaving the inhabitants wondering what

came to give a show at Ataguttaaluk High School at the end of the school year, and stayed three additional weeks to do workshops with the community. With little more than an accordion, juggling objects, a unicycle, fire, and some costumes and colorful hair, the performers fascinated their young audience, who enthusiastically enjoyed their first experience with the bold and comic spirit of the circus.

*Polar nomad to desert nomad, cultures collided and melded, introducing one's traditional lifestyle to the other's.*

they could do to stop the miserable trend.

Following this tragedy, it became clear that concrete actions had to be taken to provide children and teenagers with a vehicle for creative self-expression and communication. Initiated by the artist collective *Isuma Productions*, a group was formed with a mission of suicide prevention, using theatre arts as its medium. It was named *Inuusiq*, which means "life" in Inuktitut.

Guillaume Ittuksarjuat Saladin, a Québécois who had spent the first 15 summers of his life on the island, himself a member of *Inuusiq*, had returned to Igloolik to complete his thesis and prepare for entry into the National Circus School in Montreal. Inspired by *Clowns Without Borders*, an organization that sends clowns to third world countries and war zones to work with children, Saladin proposed that the budding youth theatre group combine cultural activism with the teaching of circus skills.

Invited by *Inuusiq*, six performers from the National Circus School of Montreal



Artcirq performance of the "Polar Bear" at the Alianait Festival, 2007.



ARTCIRQ promotional poster. (Graphics and photo courtesy of Artcirq Productions © 2010)

Over the course of these three weeks, *Inuusiq* brought the Montrealers together with young Inuit and elders from Igloolik for an expedition across Baffin Island, the purpose of which was to present its show and share its message with local youth in other communities. During this journey, the young expedition members learned more about their own land, were exposed to traditional Inuit ways of life, and even explored Baffin Island's east coast.

Begun as a noble yet simple project in innovative social occupational therapy, the *Inuusiq* youth drama group evolved into a community-based multimedia company, now known as the *Artcirq Inuit Performance Collective*. Le Cirque du Soleil sponsors the purchase of Artcirq's circus accessories. With Saladin as its Artistic Director, Artcirq is composed of more than 30 members, including actors, musicians, jugglers, contortionists, hand-to-hand flyers and indigenous throat-singers, all of whom are deeply involved in the cultural life of Igloolik. The group's achievements have led to the creation of its own Artcirq Channel and to *Isuma.tv*, which is now accessible to everyone on the Internet.



Igloolik children in performance standby, 2006.

The addition of video-making to Artcirq's projects allows the Inuit to overcome their geographical isolation, thereby establishing a coherent bond between their ancestral ways and the realities of a contemporary world.

As word of Artcirq's successes spreads, the troupe not only travels across the globe with its performances, workshops and message, but it serves a very important function — to motivate other Arctic communities facing similar challenges to establish their own self-esteem enhancing initiatives. Most importantly, Artcirq intends to be a

project for youth, by youth.

In one of Artcirq's routines, titled *Oaraya*, or "can't wait," while the performers wear traditional Inuit clothing and reenact behaviors of their native seals, they also draw from influences of other cultures by incorporating Chinese music and African drums into their act. The international scope of these performances reflects how the Arctic is not as isolated at it once was, now that television and the Internet have reached Nunavut's communities. But for all its global aspirations, Artcirq nevertheless remains distinctly Inuit.

An abandoned swimming pool drained of its water, old mattresses salvaged from the dump, and a circus trainer may be odd ingredients with which to fashion a suicide prevention program, but that is all that was needed to turn Igloolik's despair and powerlessness into hope and a sense of belonging. In a land where ancient ways and the modern world clash, Artcirq has managed to transform disillusioned teens and young adults into engaged community members who carry their pride of heritage far beyond their little island's boundaries.

...and all without elephants! □