DAVIDEE PIUNGNITUQ (1929-1993)

On 14 August 1993, Davidee Piungnituq, age 64, died in the company of his family in Clyde River, Northwest Territories. Born near Sam Ford Fiord in March 1929, Piungnituq lived and hunted throughout the area between Home Bay and Buchan Gulf, East Baffin Island. Until two months before his death, Piungnituq resided at Aqvivitq, in Eglinton Fiord, where he and his extended family had moved in the mid-1960s. It was here that he and his wife, Sipporah, raised their nine children.

Piungnituq was the quintessential spirit of inummariit, recognized as a hunter and provider, leader of his extended family after the death of his father, deeply religious and, above all, a loving spouse and parent. Throughout his life he studied the animals and land that he and his family depended upon, always instructing his sons and daughters by example. Each day of hunting ended with all the members of the Aqvivitq community gathering in his qangmaq to share in the day’s harvest. And each evening, youngsters listened as he recounted the day, discussing the characteristics of the sea ice or the behavior of a polar bear, each “lesson” delivered isumacayuq (with wisdom). Especially memorable was his delight when his seven-year-old daughter Letia, thinking she was unobserved, ventured onto the spring ice to shoot a basking ringed seal— it was a much enjoyed meal!

Piungnituq was of the land. Throughout his life, his sojourns at Clyde, with the exception of Christmas, rarely lasted longer than the one day it took to trade several months’ accumulation of seal and polar bear skins at the Hudson’s Bay Company. His preference for life away from town did not prevent him, however, from indulging in hours of conversation with kinsmen by CB radio, especially when the state of his health no longer permitted him to travel to Pond Inlet or Igloolik by dog team or skidoo.

In the course of time, Piungnituq, not surprisingly, drew the attention of scientists, journalists and ordinary travellers. Invariably he welcomed all of us with equal generosity to Aqvivitq and into his home, learning on each occasion something new about Qallunaat. His exceptional work in whale bone, depicting aspects of Inuit culture and oral tradition, led to his first and only voluntary visit to “the South” — an exhibition of his art in Montreal in the mid-1970s.

Piungnituq’s passing is that of a special person. His legacy, however, goes beyond the bounds of his life. It lives not only through his children but through each of us whom he touched, whether for a day or for decades.

George W. Wenzel
Department of Geography
McGill University
Montreal, Quebec, Canada
H3A 2K6