

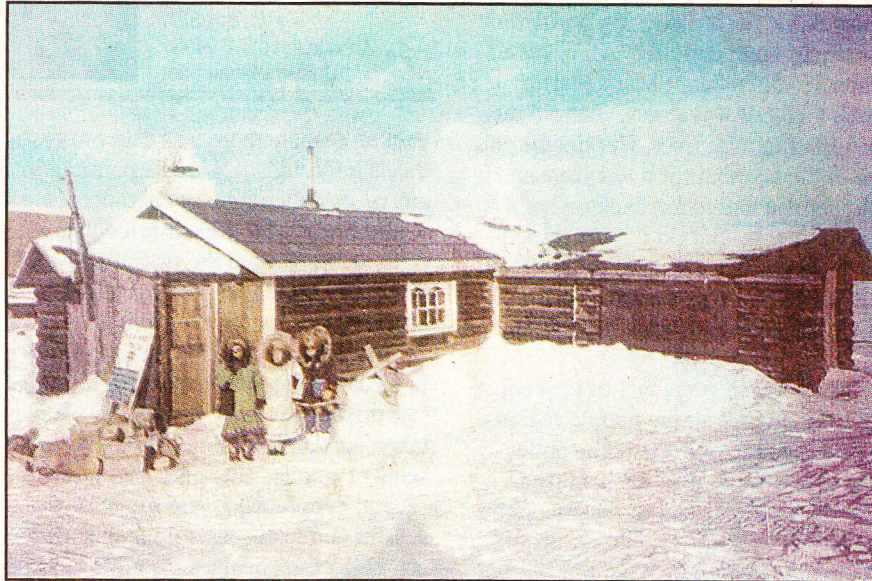
My most heartfelt postcard: Greetings from Tuktoyaktuk

By CYNTHIA ELYCE RUBIN

As every postcard collector knows, postcards are as diverse as snowflake patterns. An endless variety from one-color to multi-color, from illustrated to real photo, from simple to complex – all continue to inform and intrigue us postcard collectors. Rarely, however, does the most simple image leaves a powerful impression. This is a story of such a postcard.

As I looked down from the six-seater Cessna 207 making its way along Canada's great Mackenzie Delta, for miles I viewed only expanses of landscape resembling sumptuous green velvet. In this immense terrain, myriad lakes disguised themselves as patches of blue-green plush, and trees quickly declined in number until suddenly they disappeared altogether. No shadow of man existed – none whatsoever.

My journey had begun in Inuvik, the largest town north of the Arctic Circle in the Northwest Territories. A planned community built on frozen ground called permafrost, its singular water and sewage systems have turned into tourist curiosities – “utilidors,” a vast meandering network of above-ground pipeways that roam over streets and through backyards. Like



the Igloo Church, they provide unique local landmarks.

After attending the Northern Lights Arts Festival, the region's largest gathering of northern artists, I headed 80 miles northward to Tuktoyaktuk, an Inuvialuit (Western Arctic Inuit or, as Americans say, Eskimo) community bordering the Beaufort Sea. On a glorious July day filled with nearly 24-hour sunlight, my destination was literally the edge of the North American continent. On this ancient soil, some 900 people hold onto the traditional skills of hunting, fishing and trapping while living in today's computer-driven world.

When I arrived in Tuk, as it is commonly known, most of the inhabitants were “out on the land.” Men were hunting beluga whale while women waited at traditional fish camps to cook and dry the whale's outer layer (muktuk) as well as thin layers of interior inner meat, a delicacy called mipku. There were also fish to dry, filet and prepare for the smoke house. All foods will later be stored in one of the community's ice houses, natural underground freezers where families keep their provisions cold year-round.

Tour guide, Ricky Mac, pointed out several attractions: Foremost was the largest pingo in the world, a huge vol-

cano-shaped hill whose center is filled with blue ice. Because the earth here is treeless and flat, pingos are the first thing you notice on the horizon. Then we came upon The Lady of Lourdes, a retired Catholic mission ship that from the 1930s transported supplies as well as children to and from their communities to attend school in nearby Aklavik.

I recognized a Cold War icon in the distance, a circular tower of the D.E.W. Line (Distant Early Warning) or Dewline chain of radar stations built to detect foreign aircraft over the polar region and to relay the warning to the North American Air Defence Command. Now that the Soviet threat is over, most have been dismantled but this domed symbol remains in operation.

We then visited the community's oldest building, the tiny Anglican church constructed in 1937 from driftwood logs that washed up along the shore. Inside the humble interior, handmade benches and religious pictures fashioned from sealskin welcome worshippers with a sense of unpretentious religiosity. The collection plate, a sealskin pouch made from pieced-together scraps of sealskin, was the most unusual I've ever seen. Then

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I noticed a sign on the altar,
"Postcards for sale, \$2.00 each."

"They're trying to raise money for the church," Ricky explained.

So I bought one. Printed on ordinary paper with a computer scanner and cut to size with a scissors, the backside read, "St. John's Anglican Mission." It was a most simple postcard made of the most simple material.

Ricky continued: "Let me tell you about the three ladies in the picture."

These three women posing in front of their beloved church in fur-trimmed Mother Hubbard parkas were respected elders. On the far right was an elderly

community leader, a woman who passed away several years ago from natural causes. The woman in the middle was not so fortunate. Another revered elder in her eighties, she disdained modern conveniences, including snowmobiles and taxis and made a point to walk everywhere at anytime, even during the most blinding of snowstorms. And one day, during a blizzard that lasted several days, a woman driving a water delivery truck didn't see her small figure and killed her instantly – a senseless tragedy for everyone. The trucker didn't return to work for months and the community never fully recovered. The woman on the left is the only elder alive today.

These three women and their front-

tier church provide a metaphor for contemporary life in the distant Arctic. The building is primitive but the computer technology that recorded it was modern. The forces that shape both the land and its people feel a constant push and pull. Nature provides, but it can also wreck havoc at anytime. The old survives in memory; the modern can help as well as harm a traditional lifestyle; but there's always hope for the future.

Surrounded by a stark immensity of land, the people of Tuk balance tradition and modernity every day. In this postcard, the past and the modern world come together, testifying to life's own strong and bittersweet drama.