



Weather station at Anaktuvuk Pass, by Jeffries Wyman.

Anaktuvuk Sojourn

The art of Jeffries Wyman

BY MICHAEL ENGELHARD

YOU COULD CALL JEFFRIES WYMAN A RENAISSANCE man—a Harvard philosophy graduate with a knack for mathematics, in WWII he worked on sonar and smoke screens for the Navy and wrote a seminal paper about hemoglobin, based on an insight striking him in a Kyoto Zen garden. But above all he was restless, a seeker willing to take risks. Vacationing in western Pakistan, he walked into a part of Afghanistan off-limits to foreigners and was promptly escorted back, astride a yak, by a bodyguard. After his second marriage failed, this Boston Brahmin spent a month as self-declared “good man Friday” and resident artist with Nunamiut hunters, inland Inupiaq Eskimos, at Anaktuvuk Pass. His journal pages and watercolors from the summer of 1951 are snapshots of lives hard yet graced, of fates inextricably bound to the land.

Only two years before Wyman’s visit, 13 Native families gravitated from the Killik River and Chandler Lake toward the Anaktuvuk Valley desiring air service, trade goods, and a school and post office. Because the fishing was better at Tulugak Lake, three of these families summered there, 15 miles north of the main settlement—the Continental Divide-scatter of sod houses known as “Summit.” Wyman, lodging at Tulugak and finding a Denbigh-type arrowhead, noted that hunters stalking caribou on their annual treks had camped near the lake over thousands of



Portrait of Elijah, Wyman’s host, by Jeffries Wyman.

years, just as their group did.

Wyman alighted on the river facing camp in a floatplane steered by Terris Moore, then the University of Alaska’s president. During takeoff from Fairbanks, the plane almost capsized and Wyman, fully dressed, jumped into that lake. As it happened, the



Elijah using his spyglass to look for caribou, by Jeffries Wyman.

craft had been overloaded, its cargo unbalanced.

At Anaktuvuk, signs of successful adaptation to a harsh climate and scarce resources surrounded the footloose New Englander. His hosts' grandparents had hunted with spears and arrows, hazing caribou into lakes. Their offspring in turn set gillnets for grayling, whitefish, and lake trout, trapped ground squirrels or shot them, skillfully, even from a drifting boat, and chased ptarmigan, Dall sheep, and caribou. Always glassing the valley, Elijah Kakina, at whose home Wyman stayed, referred to the season's first ungulate migrants as "big meat." "Our stomachs are like mountains," the white-haired, patrician houseguest wrote about one feast. And he marveled at a five-year-old boy wielding a sharp knife, cutting meat, Eskimo-style, close to his lips.

The families kept meat fresh in "icehouses," caches dug into permafrost near white canvas wall-tents and skin "igloos" entered through bearskin flap doors, movable summer habitations. The only firewood came from dead streamside scrub willows. Dogs, their sole means of land transport, packed 60-pound loads.

Wyman settled in quickly and comfortably, eating, napping, sketching, helping to check nets and haul meat, and visiting much of the time. "Everyone keeps open house, and it makes for a most gracious manner of life," he wrote, impressed by the families' quiet dignity and ethic of sharing. Simon Paneak was a "commanding personality," somebody who would have been a shaman in the old days, "or, among us, a man of learning." He enjoyed Paneak's stories of Raven and the "little people," whose children were small enough to be dressed in clothes sewn from a caribou ear. At Summit, after a foot-trip with pack dogs, river crossings, and a toddler stowed in a parka hood, Wyman wished to see Eskimo singing and dancing. The locals gladly complied. Two skins were located, soaked, scraped to the right thickness, mended with sinew, and stretched over washtubs—improvised, three-person drums. The igloo's stove was cleared out for space, and the party began. It ended long past midnight, when a couple in fur parkas, their faces concealed by their hoods, mimicked caribou mating.

Creating art could be challenging, harassed by high winds and by cold that numbed fingers until unscrewing caps from paint tubes became difficult. Still, early snow made the mountains look "distinguished." Kids followed Wyman while he was working. The weather and light changed "in the flash of an eye." Evenings were the most exciting times for painting outdoors, and he often persisted until it got too dark to see colors well. He

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wished for the skills of a Turner or Hokusai to do justice to "great clouds, sometimes blue-black, sometimes coal-black, sometimes tawny yellow, sometimes of the light fluffy gray of the gray wolf." The contrast between skin igloos and canvas tents and the blue-red August hills thrilled him: "The color of the tundra is a most elusive thing and the combined feelings of warmth and coolness which it evokes are incomparable." Translucent tent walls were perfect backgrounds for his indoor portraits and still lifes. Steadfastly supportive, Wyman's new friends provided raven quills for his ink sketching, and eagle feathers for journaling, besides keeping him fed and clothed.

"I shall be sorry to leave this life with these people," he wrote the day before his floatplane was scheduled to arrive. But he also hankered for news of the outside world and for a change from a diet almost entirely meat. On an airliner from Fairbanks to Seattle, instantly disenchanted by reentry into urban civilization, he felt trenchant loss. "When I think of them all and recall faces, smiles, laughter, generosity, hospitality, excitement in the hunt, joy in their skills, love of games...then I realize that these people know life and enjoy it in a sense in which few of us ever do."

Though Wyman never returned to Anaktuvuk, in a fitting coda, facsimiles of his art did. Sixty years after his visit, the biochemist's daughter and son donated 17 framed reproductions to the Simon Paneak Memorial Museum, a multi-room log cabin amid Arctic peaks. (The originals, too delicate for non-climate-controlled environments, remain at the University of Alaska Fairbanks' Museum of the North.) In the cabin's Elders' Room, the three families' descendants and future generations can see them: the folk Wyman so lovingly captured, the ones who so charmed him, a stranger; those who mattered among few humans he pictured in a long life of painting and wandering. 🐾

Michael Engelhard will always have a weak spot for Anaktuvuk Pass, where he first set foot into the Arctic. He was glad to obtain Jeff Wyman Junior's permission to reproduce his father's art here.



Little Jacob, asleep on the furs, by Jeffries Wyman.