

99721: The Place of Many Caribou Droppings

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In the Federal Aviation Administration's lexicon of world airports, it's known as AKP. To the post office it's "99721." Geologists remark on the continental divide there, and older residents accordingly once called it "The Summit." To the state of Alaska, it's one of dozens of "second class cities." To backpackers and hikers from around the world it's the portal to Gates of the Arctic National Park. It's a tourist destination as well to day visitors who fly in from Fairbanks to experience a native village and real bush Alaska. To most who live there, it is home. Regardless of what it is called, Anaktuvuk Pass is a memorably scenic place, cradled by the gray limestone mountains that rise around it, verdant in the moment of summer, pristinely white in the deep freeze of winter. It is, in the words of one writer, a place of "gaunt beauty."

Anaktuvuk Pass, Alaska, has a population of just over 300, more than ninety percent of whom are Nunamiut Eskimo—mountain people—the only truly inland Eskimo in Alaska. The town occupies less than 100 acres of land in the middle of the broadest and longest mountain pass in Alaska's Brooks Range. As a settlement, it's just over a half-century old, but as a place and a name on the landscape of human memory it's much older—and much larger than its small size would suggest. Archaeological remains of human encampments date back 7000 years and the historic semi-nomadic Nunamiut have hunted through this mountain pass for at least the last 200 years.

In the Iñupiaq language, Anaktuvuk is the "Place of Many Caribou Droppings."¹ Thousands of Barren-ground Caribou pass through this mountain valley in the fall as they head to the interior from their calving grounds on the Arctic coast. In the spring, they make the return journey.

Like other Nunamiut names that dot the landscape—*Kongumavik* (Gathering Place), *Napaktualuit* (Looks Like Trees), *Miluk* (Breast Mountain)—the name is pragmatic, visual, unadorned. Although Anaktuvuk is a Nunamiut name, the credit for placing it on the USGS map and thus officially into the lexicon of Alaska geography goes not to a native but to W. J. Peters, a geologist. In 1901, he called the pass “Anaktuvuk” after the native name for the river that runs through it. The perpetuity of the name wasn’t guaranteed until fifty years later when the post office of Anaktuvuk Pass was established.

It was a long step from semi-nomadism to a post office. In the winter of 1943, bush pilot Sig Wein was flying supplies across the Brooks Range, from Fairbanks to Barrow, and landed southwest of Anaktuvuk Pass at Chandler Lake, near the winter camp of one Nunamiut band. On subsequent occasional visits Wein picked up furs trapped by the band and transported them to the Northern Commercial Company in Fairbanks, using store credit to purchase and supply the Nunamiut with dry goods and ammunition for hunting.² As Wein came to know members of the group over the next few years, they told him that they wanted schooling for their children, as well as supplies on a more regular basis. This meant staying in one place for a longer period of time, which, in turn, demanded a substantial and regular supply of firewood. The Anaktuvuk Valley, with its large stands of tall Arctic willow and several small lakes on which float and ski planes could land, promised these things.

Villager Justus Mekiana was twenty-two years old in the summer of 1949 when his family came from the Killik River valley to make their home in Anaktuvuk Pass.

A long time ago, before 1949, we travel everywhere in Nunamiut country, in Alaska. Moving along. No village. No store; no building. We travel like caribou. Follow the caribou somewhere, wintertime, with the dog team. In the summertime, we travel by dog pack. And in 1949 somehow we stick together. In 1949, 62 people [in Anaktuvuk]. Right now the village is everywhere, I guess, in Alaska. Change everything, even in Anaktuvuk.³

By the early 1950s a scatter of sod houses had sprung up in the pass, making a village. In the summertime residents moved out of their cool sod houses and into white canvas wall tents. Many residents packed up their tents and took off for summer camping and hunting places, leaving the postmaster's lone tent with the American flag flying beside it.

Once a month the mail, addressed to "Anaktuvuk Pass 8, Alaska," came in; the entire village turned out to watch the mail plane land. Younger villagers carried freight and mail the quarter mile from the lake to the post office located in Homer Mekiana's sod house (or tent, depending on the season). Everyone—mothers packing babies on their backs, small children, old men—stood by as Homer sorted and handed out the mail. The village began to take on a greater sense of permanence when villagers pitched in, with missionaries, to build the Presbyterian Church in 1959, followed by a school in 1961. In 1961 Wein Alaska Airlines also built a mile-long gravel airstrip that followed the north-south orientation of the valley.

No roads lead to Anaktuvuk Pass today—just the Information Highway. At the beginning of the oil boom in 1969, a winter ice road from Fairbanks to Prudhoe Bay was pushed through Anaktuvuk Pass. Dubbed the Hickel Highway after then-Secretary of the Interior and former Alaska Governor Wally Hickel, it was a temporary road constructed to haul heavy equipment to the North Slope. Excited villagers watched eighty-seven trucks pass through their village in seventeen days and hoped the economic boom would spread to the village, where jobs and cash were scarce. One villager, Jack Morry, already had ideas about what Anaktuvuk Pass should be. He shared them in an article he wrote to the Native newspaper, *Tundra Times*.

Will Anaktuvuk Pass ever grow to be a larger town like other Eskimo Villages? Or will it be as it is now ever since the first settlement started? What does the village lack that the other villages have now? It lacks almost everything such as recreation, electricity, or other things. At least we've got Hickel Highway

coming through the village. But will it ever solve the countless problems? A little. It helps some men solve the greenback problem.⁴

The oil boom in 1969, the settlement of Alaska Native Land Claims in 1971, and the establishment of a regional government—the North Slope Borough—in 1972 brought rapid changes to this village in the mountains. By the late 1970s Anaktuvuk Pass had arctic prefab housing, electricity, CB radios, satellite TV, and telephone service.

Now, a half-century after its settlement, the sod houses have all but disappeared, and the numerous public buildings reflect the government agencies and services that keep the village viable. There's the red-roofed health clinic, the community hall with the city offices, the village store, the imposing Nunamiut school attended by 100 pre-K through high school students. At the south end of town stands the fire hall, the Utilities Services building, the village power plant. And tucked away in a ramble of low trailer units, the Native corporation headquarters.

Despite such familiar trappings of the world outside their mountain fastness, to its residents Anaktuvuk Pass is the antithesis of “town,” that is, Fairbanks: Anaktuvuk is quieter, safer, and unfailingly friendly. There are no bars; possession and sale of alcohol are against the law even though from time to time villagers bring it in. Everyone knows everyone; there are no strangers here. Unlike town, with its “white people’s rules,” Anaktuvuk offers its small children incomparable freedom to roam the village during the twenty-four hours of summer daylight. Or it did until big construction projects with dangerous equipment took over the village streets to install a water/sewer supply for the village beginning in 1997.

Outsiders have their sense of Anaktuvuk Pass too. Following the establishment of the Arctic Research Laboratory in Barrow after World War II, scientists began coming to the Brooks Range to study the flora and fauna as well as Nunamiut adaptation to the arctic environment. To Dr. Kaare Rodahl, head of the U.S. Air Force’s Arctic Aeromedical Laboratory in Fairbanks, the “rather primitive and isolated Nunamiut village”⁵ provided a supply of human research subjects in the 1950s

whose lifestyle contrasted markedly to the military control subjects at the Air Force base.

But that is another story.

Just twenty years after these first scientific studies, Villager Jack Morry concluded his 1969 newspaper piece about the state of Anaktuvuk Pass with the plea, “Will this village ever be noticed?” He didn’t have to wait long. A reporter for the *Fairbanks News Miner* followed the truckers up the Hickel Highway, writing a series of articles about Anaktuvuk Pass. Every one of them contained the descriptors “remote” and “isolated,” tempered with remarks about the stunning beauty of the mountains.

Three years after the truck convoys had passed through the village on the winter haul road, Alaskan journalist Lael Morgan delivered Anaktuvuk Pass to the travel section of the Sunday *New York Times*. She wrote that the local accommodations consisted of a plywood shipping container with a 55-gallon oil drum stove, rented out by a Nunamiut hunter. There is no word for hotel in Iñupiaq, Morgan reported; the hotel’s name, Aimagvik, meant simply “home.” From the vantage point of the Sunday *Times*, remote winter tourism in the Arctic sounded appealing:

When temperatures sink to 50 below and winds funnel through the Pass at 30 miles an hour, there is a surprisingly soft beauty to the land. A thin ice fog drifts through the village, playing games with the timid sun, and the stark contours of mountains dissolve into subtle tiers of blue and gray. The nights are even more impressive, with wild displays of northern lights, of glaring moonlight that seems to bring the mountains closer. How much the summer tourists miss! It is in winter when the northland is at its awesome best, and it is also the time when the traveler has least difficulty in making a reservation at the hotel they call home.⁶

In 1991 Anaktuvuk Pass again made the front page of the Sunday *New York Times* travel section, this time as a summer destination point to the Gates of the Arctic National Park. Today’s potential visitor has access to Anaktuvuk Pass through the Internet, among other sources. The tour companies play their cards: the rugged beauty of the Brooks

Range, a place north of the Arctic Circle, life in rural Alaska, a Nunamiut village.

Anaktuvuk Pass has always been a Nunamiut village, their only village. The North Slope Borough School District's website declares, "Anaktuvuk Pass is home to the last of the Nunamiut." The Arctic Development Council's home webpage echoes others when it describes the village as "the last remaining settlement of the Nunamiut." These "vanishing race" declarations are misleading, not to mention anachronistic, since the Nunamiut are more populous now than they were in the early twentieth century, and Anaktuvuk Pass is not the "last" but the only permanent settlement the Nunamiut have ever had.

Ironically, for all the talk of place that swirls around Anaktuvuk, it is movement between places that defines the historic Nunamiut. "We never stay in one place . . . always moving," Justus Mekiana is fond of saying. "Like the wolf we follow the caribou." In today's world of wage labor, such nomadism is a weekend and vacation luxury. Even more, it's a state of mind. The wandering wolf has become the school mascot and the pride of local sports teams.

Everyday realities include a city bus that makes the rounds of this village of former nomads every fifteen minutes from 7 AM to 10 PM five days a week. The bus brakes to a dusty halt before each of the three stop signs erected back in 1990. The Nunamiut expressed their sentiments about these signs of civilization by using them for target practice. Five years later the street signs appeared: standard-issue green markers with anywhere names juxtaposed against a stunning backdrop of tundra and mountains. Who bestowed these names, I wonder? The Anaktuvuk Pass City Council? The North Slope Borough? They appeared on a 1994 North Slope Borough map of the village, a year before the actual signs did. Like every other town, Anaktuvuk Pass has its Main Street, and Airport Way logically leads straight to the gravel airstrip at the east edge of the village. Summer Street is more problematic, an unusual name for a place where it's mostly winter. Perhaps the name is wishful thinking.

My personal favorite is the intersection of Maptegak and Illinois Streets. Old Morry Maptegak was the head of one of the large

Nunamiut families, an outstanding hunter reputed to be able to run with the wolves. If streets must have names in this wilderness place, it seems fitting to commemorate local people. But why Illinois Street, I asked a resident the first summer the signs appeared. “Maybe because of the Chicago Bulls,” she suggested. Everyone’s a basketball fan in Anaktuvuk Pass, and during Michael Jordan’s reign the Nunamiut were crazy for the Bulls. Another possibility: traveling west, Illinois Street intersects Minnie Street. Two hundred and fifty air miles away in Fairbanks, Minnie Street also runs right into Illinois Street. Beyond the memorable landmarks of two liquor stores and Sampson’s Hardware at the Fairbanks intersection, I’m not sure what inspired this borrowing of street names, especially since the Nunamiut never give a street reference in conversation. A person is never “over on Maptegak Street.” He’s “over by Pat and them.” Still, street signs and names signal the settlement’s legal designation as a city. And, like the house numbers that were nailed to house fronts at the same time, they belong to the mental maps of the non-Native police force.

Though local residents invest little meaning in road signs, it’s not hard to find an emblem or symbol of Anaktuvuk Pass. One need look no further than the skin masks of Nunamiut faces. Since the mid-1950s when Justus Mekiana figured out how to create caribou skin masks on wooden molds, villagers have been making and selling this popular tourist art. The animals of the Brooks Range provide the raw materials—caribou, the faces and hair; Arctic fox and wolf (and sometimes bear), the parka ruffs that encircle the mask faces. The masks look Nunamiut, like their makers, their faces longer and narrower than those of the Coastal Eskimos, and they come in a range of types and sizes. Like any successful invention, Anaktuvuk masks have been copied by Iñupiat people from other villages. But locally produced masks bear the mark of place: villagers say you can always tell if the mask is from Anaktuvuk.

For many years, masks provided villagers’ main source of cash income; people still trade them to the village store to pay grocery bills and bring them, on consignment, to the local museum. Villagers can use masks to pay housing bills owed to the North Slope Borough and heating oil bills at the village corporation office. They can even

buy an airline ticket with masks. A villager traveling to Fairbanks might drop off a dozen masks at one of the city's gift shops or sell them at a craft table during the World Eskimo-Indian Olympics held each July. The Alaska Federation of Natives convention in Anchorage every October also brings artisans with masks to sell.

In Inge-Lisa Jensen's second grade classroom at the Nunamiut School, children make masks to mimic those of their elders; paper plates and ruddy brown paint replace caribou skin. The hair, ruffs, and eyebrows they glue on are real fur. In and out of school, Anaktuvuk children have learned the story of the mask's origin and its importance in their village.

It may be home, but no one is born in Anaktuvuk Pass anymore or anywhere nearby if it can be helped. Since the 1960s, the Indian Health Service has sent pregnant village women to Fairbanks three weeks before their due dates to assure that they get to the hospital in time to deliver. Life's final passage is a different matter. Villagers come back to Anaktuvuk Pass to die. A village woman who left long ago to marry a man from a coastal village recently returned as an old woman after being diagnosed with terminal cancer. Sick as she was on her homeward journey—and she died a few weeks later—she began singing and Eskimo dancing from her airplane seat as soon as the Anaktuvuk valley came into view through the plane's window.

From an airplane, the village of Anaktuvuk Pass is a patchwork of houses and buildings stitched onto a vast blanket of tundra and mountains. For Native residents of this place, as Barry Lopez observes in *Arctic Dreams*, “the land is like a kind of knowledge traveling in time through them. Land does for them what architecture does for us. It provides a sense of place, of scale, of history; and a conviction that what they most dread—annihilation, eclipse—will not occur.”⁷

Look carefully along the Anaktuvuk valley. To the north of the village, near the confluence of the Aniktiktok and Anaktuvuk Rivers, you can see piles of caribou antlers from past seasons' hunts. South of the village, up on the ridges, you'll see the mounded rocks of a caribou hunting blind. Look out the window of a village house in the summertime at the ATVs bobbing over the bumpy tundra, taking their

passengers camping or berry picking. Place names along the way tell a history of recent human activity. Like the spot where Elijah killed his big grizzly bear. Or Kawasaki Creek, named for the snowmachine that died on its banks. Its engine cover still rests there. To the south, at the place they call Kollutagiuk, there's a singular campsite, dubbed "New York Hotcake Country," where several summers ago this anthropologist made silver-dollar-size sourdough hotcakes to the great amusement of the Nunamiut family with whom she was camping.

Fly to Anaktuvuk from Fairbanks with a group of village men. Once in the mountains they peer out the plane's tiny windows, pointing to familiar landmarks, naming the rivers and hunting places and scouting the slopes and valleys for game. The sense of landscape, the map of the mind, begins miles before the village comes into view.

From the village of Anaktuvuk Pass a web of trails to camping and hunting places radiates in all directions. They head southwest to Chandler Lake, where Sig Wein first met the Nunamiut in 1943, where Nunamiut go to fish through the thick lake ice each May and where they hunt caribou throughout the summer. South to Masu where the blueberries grow thick in August, and north to Narvagrauraq, the best place for *akpiks* (cloudberries). Along the way is Angmongalik, where people stop to rest and smoke and visit before resuming the long ride.

In this country of the mind, as Lopez calls it, the landscape of the north central Brooks Range and the Anaktuvuk Valley is dotted with stories and camping places and crisscrossed with the journeys of generations of Nunamiut people. The journey begins with Aiyagomahala, the giant culture hero who, in time beyond recall, taught the Nunamiut how to live in their country. As a reminder of his lessons, he left behind his giant mittened hand, the Arrigech peaks of the Brooks Range. It ends with the caribou skin mask, the imitator of Nunamiut faces, the tourist art elevated to village emblem. Each mask represents a caribou hunted, killed, skinned, and butchered somewhere on the Nunamiut landscape; a caribou eaten and shared; a caribou skin stretched and dried; a sunbleached skin shaved of hair and cut into ovals to become Nunamiut faces. And it includes the knowing of where and when and how to do all these things.

The Anaktuvuk skin mask has become an official logo. At the Village Corporation headquarters it is etched on the glass partition at the service counter, and the same image is engraved on the business cards of the village corporation manager. Up the hill at the Simon Paneak Memorial Museum, a similar mask logo greets visitors at the entrance's welcome window. When they leave the village, visitors may carry away a version of the mask face insinuated into that most popular tourist memento, the humble T-shirt. One shirt declares, "Anaktuvuk Pass 99721." Most people who see my T-shirt have never heard of Anaktuvuk Pass. But it must be real; it has a zip code.

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Notes

1. "Anaktuvuk": from *anaq* (feces), *tua* (having many), *vlk* (place, source).
2. In *A Quantitative Analysis of Nunamiut Eskimo Settlement Dynamics: 1898-1969*, Charles Amsden notes that "many [of the flights by military and commercial aircraft] were chartered directly by some Nunamiut to bring goods from stores in Bettles, Fairbanks, and Barrow" (1977:314).
3. The author has been conducting oral history research in Anaktuvuk Pass since 1988. Quotes, unless otherwise credited, are from her research with Anaktuvuk people.
4. "Anaktuvuk Pass Growth Doubted By Its Citizen," *Tundra Times*, 19 September 1969.
5. Kaare Rodahl and Donald Rennie, "Comparative Sweat Rates of Eskimos and Caucasians under Controlled Conditions," Arctic Aeromedical Laboratory, Ladd AFB, Technical Report No. 84 (1957):2.
6. *New York Times*, 5 November 1972.
7. *Arctic Dreams: Imagination and Desire in a Northern Landscape*, 264-65. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.