

Interview with Ollie Ittinuar
May 10, 2004, Rankin Inlet
Mary Rose Angoshadluk interpreting

Interview took place in the afternoon at Ollie's house. We were welcomed into his living room, and chairs were arranged for us around the couch. His wife was present and greeted us, but did not say anything during the interview. She did serve us tea and cookies. One of Ollie's children came and went during the interview, but also did not interrupt. I began by explaining the work I was doing, how I was gathering the stories of people who helped to create Nunavut, and that I was also collecting an oral history for Nunavut Tunngavik Inc (NTI). I asked his permission to record him, and he said yes. Ollie Ittinuar's statements are represented here using the third person because Mary Rose is interpreting and it is her voice that is being transcribed into English. However, the content comes from Ollie.

First of all he would like to tell you about his age. He is now 84 and will be 85. Back then, there were hardly any white men around. The only white men were coming through the Hudson Bay, the RCMP and the church. Being ordinary Inuit, they used to trade pelts so they could get tea, a few things from the South. They grew up on country foods. The only thing they would have from the white man was a few tea bags and some other things. Back then, they didn't even know the white man existed, that planes existed, but when he was a child he knew about the boats because he used to see them. In 1949, he started to really work for the white people, the RCMP. The only way the RCMP would be traveling was by dog team, and that's when they wanted to hire local people so the individuals would be hunting to supply the RCMP with dog food. They wanted fresh caught country food to feed their dogs. That is the only way they could have their dogs survive through the harsh winters. They would have to go down to Churchill to pick up mail because there was no other way of transporting mail. They would go to Repulse Bay, they would go to Baker Lake, they would go to this community so the RCMP could contact different people. There were no telephones. Back then, they didn't have any government. The RCMP was their only government. They had to travel to other communities to fill out forms so our families would receive family allowances. There were no planes to bring the mail in. There was no Ski-doo. There was no Bombardier. There were just dogs. They had to go all the way down to Manitoba to pick up the allowance checks and deliver them. He was the leader of the RCMP, the guide for them to all these different locations. Even though it was very hard, they had to continue on.

Did the RCMP single you out because of your reputation or your background or your family?

The reason why he got selected by the RCMP was because they knew he had good hunting skills, no other reason. They saw him as a person who could be hunting for them and feeding the dogs. They were living in Chesterfield when the RCMP got their planes. When he was working for the RCMP, he would be making \$30 a month doing all this work. He did a lot of work for them. Then they gave him a raise to \$35 a month, to \$50 a month, to \$55 a month. All the hard work that he went through and that was all his

allowance, all the money they gave him. When he was working for the RCMP, they would be coming to Rankin Inlet to check on the nickel mine. He started finding out that people working at the mine were earning \$250 every two weeks, which was way higher than what the RCMP were paying him so he decided he'll quit and he moved to Rankin Inlet and started working for the nickel mine. Now, \$30 a month covered him and his wife because back then they didn't have very many children, that \$30 a month would feed them. When they didn't have anything else at his work, he would be fox trapping, so he lived like that. Back then, groceries weren't too expensive.

When you were working for the RCMP, did that mean that you spent a lot of time traveling away from home?

Yeah, he was hardly home because during the summer months. They would be traveling by boat to Repulse Bay, Baker Lake, Churchill, to other communities, so he was barely home.

That's just like your son's generation during the negotiations. They would be traveling a lot away from home, just like you had to do.

In today's world, everybody is leading a very easy life. They have vehicles, they have airplanes they can get on anytime. You tend to go by vehicle, even though it is very close, people won't walk. Today it's a very easy life. You just get on a plane. When he moved to Rankin Inlet in 1957 because he quit his job with the RCMP, he started as soon as he came in by dog team. He didn't even take his stuff off his sled because he was told to go to work right away. After two weeks, he got his first check for \$200. That's when he thought he was a millionaire!

But it was hard work?

It was. He found that working at the nickel mine was much easier than working with the RCMP because when you were working with the RCMP, it was stressful because you were dealing with people! You were right in between the RCMP and the people, and you had to protect both. The person who was their boss in Chesterfield, he was very rude and very mean, and three of them quit their jobs because of how they were treated by this boss. When the head boss came to Chesterfield, the head boss fired this guy and he became jobless. So he [Ollie] found that working for the nickel mine was much more enjoyable than working for the RCMP. He was working for the nickel mine here for five years and after that they closed down so he ended up in Montreal. In Montreal, he worked for a few months and then he went to Ottawa. In Ottawa he tried to find work but couldn't so he went to Churchill. In Churchill he was told that there might be a job at the Dene mining company at Loon Lake. He went to Loon Lake and they offered him a job and he was working underground. His wife was here so his wife was asked to go to Churchill. Ollie [in his own English words]: Underground it was warmer! No snow underground! Warmer! In Loon Lake there were quite a few Inuit working there, but alcohol got introduced to them. There were some people that turned to alcohol and they weren't doing their work as well as they should have been, and there were some who

were just quitting their jobs to move back North. His wife was saying that they were Inuit and should just go back. That was when he quit.

What years were they in Loon Lake?

They moved to Loon Lake in 1963 and then they moved back to Rankin in 1971. When he came back, he tried working for the government, but the pay was very low so he decided that he'll start up his own business. He had a taxi business and a coffee shop. He didn't have very much support and help so he thought that before got into a deficit, he would just quit both of them. When he moved back to Rankin after he started his own business, he started going into the Board of Directors for the corporation that started the creation of Nunavut. They would be going to different places to attend meetings.

When did you first become aware of Inuit starting to come together to get a voice in their own affairs?

That was some time ago now when they first wanted to create Nunavut. They did a lot of negotiating and that is when he became aware of it. It was controlled by the Northwest Territories (NWT) government. Back then it was easier because government was more honest and more open than today. There were a lot of happy people when they found out they would be creating Nunavut because they promised this and that, but the promise hasn't been made. There are a lot of people saddened by that because they were told at the beginning that they would receive something in reward if they say yes to Nunavut. This hasn't happened.

In the early days, what advice did you give to get things going?

He would give them advice, but when they first started talking about the creation of Nunavut, they were promised that they would have better access to whatever they want. They were told they would be given money if they said yes to the Nunavut agreement, but none of these happened. It is much harder to get what you want, and it is harder to access anything nowadays, and no dividends have been given to them. He was also mentioning that there is more things going on now, but you don't have access to them. The Government of Nunavut was only started five years ago and they make it much harder for the Nunavut Beneficiaries to access anything. We know that now, that people have been let down. He was saying how dare Beneficiaries be lied to? He was saying they are not trying to lie to us, but they are not doing any action they said they would be doing. Like in Quebec when they were trying to get their land claim, every person in the household received the same amount of money from the little tiny babies to the Elders. He was saying that today in our age group, we will never see any kind of help from the Government of Nunavut, although this was promised. But for them from NTI, they get an Elder's benefit of \$150. He is pretty sure the Elders fund will have an end, sooner or later, and it will be gone. He feels sorry for our generation because they were promised this and that. He has been to Ft. Chimo, and he has seen for himself there are a lot of activities for developers over there. They have stores that were started up and different things, all kinds of activities are happening, but for us in Nunavut there's nothing at all

happening for anyone. That's the saddest part, Nunavut Tunngavik not being able to give support to the Beneficiaries that was promised and they have not been able to.

What did you think of those guys back then, when they first joined and were trying to do the work?

When they first started the negotiations, a lot of Inuit were told they would be given money. Everybody believed in it, and they would talk about it and they were all very happy that they would be receiving money. Now people have lost their faith with NTI, and now today local people will not give their support anymore because they have lost what they thought they were going to get. This is very painful for a lot of people.

Did you support the two plebiscites back in 1982 and 1992 when they happened?

Yes, very much. The Elders talk amongst themselves saying they know already what was the cause for NTI to build up to a bigger corporation. It went downhill because the leaders started turning to alcohol. The leaders started hiring family members, started hiring their good friends. They thought of themselves only. They were supposed to treat everyone equally and there is a lot of favouritism. The Elders predict today that if this continues, it will go downhill even more. They had election after election and it seems they want to only make themselves look good and they only think about the family hiring and they only talk about their own friends gaining something from this.

And the ones who are in power are not the generation negotiating so they don't have that memory of connectivity?

Yes, it would have helped if that person when they first started negotiating was there, but that elected person doesn't see that person who started out first. Even if you wanted to go there to help, you are turned away because you don't speak English, you don't understand English and they think that you don't have any knowledge of what has to be here. It's very hard to go there because when you try to think about going there, you are told you are not educated, you don't know anything. When you look at the world through the leaders today, the Elders say that this leader is not looking at the future vision, they are looking only at himself or herself and to get rich. It is going to be very hard for them to keep going in the leadership position. If you want all of Nunavut to keep growing, you can't look at your million dollars home. You have to try to remember the Elders know best and they should try to go through Elders to get advice and that all the Nunavut people should be treated equally. You have to be 16 years old to be eligible to vote, but at the age of 16, whoever is the candidate will tell younger kids that you will get this if you vote, but younger kids don't realize they are being lied to by this candidate. Although there are a lot of smart people out there, because the candidate doesn't go to the Elders as much as they should, there's communication lacking. They tend to go to the younger people and there're a lot more younger people that have an eligibility to vote. That is one of the reasons that it is harder for them to elect someone they know will run things well.

So the irony is that the negotiation generation sought to get a greater voice for Inuit because of what they saw in their parent's generation and now that they have it, the parent's voice is not heard?

Elders today have talked among themselves and they should bring the age back to 18. They go to the 16 year olds and bribe them with this and that. They have talked about bringing the age back to 18 to be eligible to vote.

What did you want to teach your children from the things you have done and your many experiences?

Even if you try and pass on your knowledge, your experience, it would be hard for kids to take it from the parents because at school you are being taught everything in English. In the school curriculum, you learn this and it is hard for parents to teach them. When they were living in Loon Lake, their children were going to school, but when they went home from school, they would try and speak the English language. The parents were very strict that they speak the Inuktitut language. When they got back to Rankin, a lot of parents were asking them how come you can still speak Inuktitut. They used to be very strict. They wanted to keep their language with them.

From what I hear, it worked.

It is best for you to keep both languages. You have to learn English, and keep Inuktitut. If you know both, you will go on.

Who did you learn the most from in life?

He has gone pretty well all over. The only place that he would want to live is England because there are so many people. He has been sitting on so many committees and known so many people. That is where he got so much experience and learned many things.

Who taught you to hunt though?

His father. His mother was from Spence Bay [Taloyoak]. His original father was from Greenland and his name was Peter Polger. He is a white man. Because his mother was a widower, Peter I guess felt sorry for her, and from there they went to Repulse Bay and from there they moved to Rankin Inlet. His mother got pregnant from this guy from Greenland and by the time she realized she was pregnant, she married an Inuk. That is why he thought his father was his real father. His mother and the two brothers lost their parents when they were very young. His mother was adopted by his grandfather and the two got taken away because they lost their parents at an early age. His mum and two brothers never saw each other for many years. The two brothers were taken away by sailboat and his mum was taken to Chesterfield. That is when she finally saw her brothers and she didn't want to leave them anymore.

What are your mum's name and your stepdad's name?

Kaiguktina is his mother's name and his dad was Angukkaq. His real father, Peter, was a millionaire.

Nice.

He says that when the RCMP found out that his biological father was a millionaire, the RCMP told him he should do up an application so that if his Dad ever passes on, some of the estate would go to him because he had other children. They had to write up a letter to Peter who was the father, and back then it was very hard to send any mail out. When they finally sent it and he finally got it and when it came back it was months and months. The father finally agreed that when he wrote up the will, he was willing to sign off his belongings to all his children because he was not the only child. He was told, yes I will sign the will, and it had to be sent back to Greenland and before that, I guess his father was pretty ill and he died. Ever since then, he has hated his father for dying on him.

I am adopted, too. Ten or 15 years ago I met my biological mother, who was the Scottish half of me. I've never met my father so I am mad at him too! [laughter] What advice would you give for other native peoples trying to get a great voice in their own lives?

It's more like advice that you will want to let the people know, especially the Nunavut government and NTI, let them know they need to be more open to the public, to the people that voted for them, and to be more honest with them and stop lying to the people. The Nunavut government, for the last five years, they need to look at the people, and not ignore them once they get elected. Without the people who voted for them, they would not be in their position. They need to open up more and listen to what people need. With NTI it is the same thing, because if it were not for the Beneficiaries, they would not be in their seats. People were told that once you signed, once you say yes to the Nunavut Land Claims Agreement, you will be receiving this. Then another year passes by. They extend it yet another year. Tell them the truth, even if it's going to hurt Beneficiaries. Tell them the truth.

And follow through.

Because unless you treat people fairly, mistreatment will come back to you.