

JIMMY MEMORANA (1919–2009)

Jimmy Memorana lived in Ulukhaktok, formerly known as Holman, Northwest Territories, a small hamlet situated at 70° N on the west coast of Victoria Island. His parents died the year of his birth in 1919, during which the influenza pandemic reached the Canadian Arctic and killed a large number of our northern Native Canadians.

Orphaned as an infant, Jimmy was fortunate to be adopted by Natkusiak, who had been a guide, together with Jimmy's own biological father (also named Jimmy Memorana), on explorer Vilhjalmur Stefansson's first trips to the Arctic from 1908 to 1912 (Stefansson, 1913). As Jimmy told me, "Natkusiak took me in when my parents died in the Spanish flu of 1919, and he put my father's name on me."

Natkusiak had just finished working as Stefansson's chief guide on the Canadian Arctic Expedition from 1913 to 1916 (Stefansson, 1921) and had been key to its success. Stefansson was immensely grateful and gave him much of the surplus equipment, along with a schooner called the *North Star*. This gift allowed Natkusiak and his family to travel north off the Western Arctic mainland and return to the rich trapping area of Banks Island, which he had discovered on his exploratory travels with Stefansson's Canadian Arctic Expedition. This pristine area, previously unknown to the mainland Inuit, was teeming with the valuable white-furred arctic fox.

Natkusiak and a few other trappers from the Tuktoyaktuk Peninsula were the first to trap on Banks Island, and during the 1920s, when fox fur reached its all-time peak price, they became rich. Billy Banksland, as Natkusiak then became known, was an exceptionally skilled explorer, traveler, trapper, and hunter. He and his family lived along the Beaufort Sea coast in various trapping areas, including Walker Bay on the west coast of Victoria Island.

During the many years of traveling with Natkusiak and hunting through a large area of the Western Arctic, Jimmy Memorana had learned his lessons from the very best. In the late 1930s, the Natkusiak family finally settled in Holman. Jimmy and his wife, Hyulak, who still lives there, raised 11 children and have over 60 direct descendants in Holman.

I first met and started traveling with Memorana in 1971 and made my last trip with him 11 years ago when he was 79 years old. It was a sad day for both of us when he told me, "My heart is too sore now, Tom, you have to take my son Roger with you from now on."

Those who knew Jimmy all have many stories to tell about him, which are always full of humor. They will tell you that he could never sit still and that he was always traveling. He embodied the buoyant energy made up of real knowledge, confidence, enthusiasm, and pragmatism. In my overly comfortable southern urban world, these qualities are admirable, but increasingly rare.

Jimmy was a natural teacher. He taught by example, with few words and an ever-present sense of humor. He loved his life as a hunter, and you could not help but be drawn in and taken up by his enthusiasm.



Jimmy Memorana traps an arctic fox. Photo: Tom Smith.

I went to the Arctic as a wildlife biologist keen to learn about the animals that were adapted to life in this harshest of environments. What kept me going back are the remarkable Inuit people who have so successfully made their lives there. Jimmy, proudly, generously, and without hesitation, opened up this world to me—a southern greenhorn scientist. He was always the best of teachers, and his example continues to guide me.

Much is written about what today is termed traditional ecological knowledge (TEK). Such knowledge is, of course, an important element in the cultural identity of our northern peoples. As a working scientist seeking to learn about Arctic seals and whales, I have benefited greatly from the lessons passed on to me by the real hunters such as Memorana (Smith, 1987). In 1997, Jimmy was recognized for his significant contributions to science as a Fellow of the Arctic Institute of North America.

More important, though, are the life lessons that can be taught and learned only from a close friendship forged through years of work and travel in both good and hard times. Those are the lasting values that remain forever. Jimmy taught me the most important lesson: that you must never depend on someone else to take care of you and that you must be prepared and able to do it on your own. Such independence was the only way to succeed in Jimmy's Arctic life and is a rare quality in today's world. He was a leader; an *Inumarialuk*.

As his son Roger Biktukana and I sat beside Jimmy in his final hours, we remembered Jimmy the hunter, explorer, and traveler, as we often saw him.

Barely visible, leading the way as always, on his dog sled or skidoo, disappearing into the ever-shifting ground drift of a howling winter gale; never looking back, sure of his way, always traveling, the consummate hunter.

Koana pargonaktok angoon. A warm thank you, my old friend.

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