

Labrador Life

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Fall 2011

A Personal Journey

After more than 80 years,
22 Labrador Inuit finally
brought home and laid to rest

Inside this Issue:

*Cindy Wall's Last Day
Stranded on the Rocks
Searching for Mikak
Ice Islands Pay Visit*

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Una
na lunakkutak
lingattitawuk
ikKaumallugit Inuit
Timingit tisuusimajut
William Duncan Strongimut 1927mi
Timingit utittawuuttut Labradorimi
Inunginut, utittilugit angigaanganut
iluvittawgialladlut ik June, 2011-mi

This monument is dedicated to the memory
of the people whose remains were
taken by William Duncan Strong in 1927.
The remains were returned to the Labrador
Inuit, brought back home, and reburied in
June 2011

Daniel ? 1897	Esuk Apigait 1831-1887
Andreas 1822-91	Daniel 1845-1887
Noah 1808-1881	Magdalen 1815-1887
David 1840-1883	Emelle? 1834-1881
Marcus 1850-1887	Beata 1831-1881
Mattias 1834-1884	Justina 1844-1887
Abel 1838-1882	Margarita 1835-1887
Zacharias 1867-1888	Lea 1839-1884

ma/u sâkset ulhnausimangit
d sik unidentified individuals

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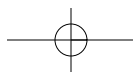
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Our Cover

Labrador Inuk John Terriak puts the final touches on a monument erected to commemorate the repatriation of the remains of 22 Inuit at Zoar, south of Nain.

(Photo by Kathleen Lippa)

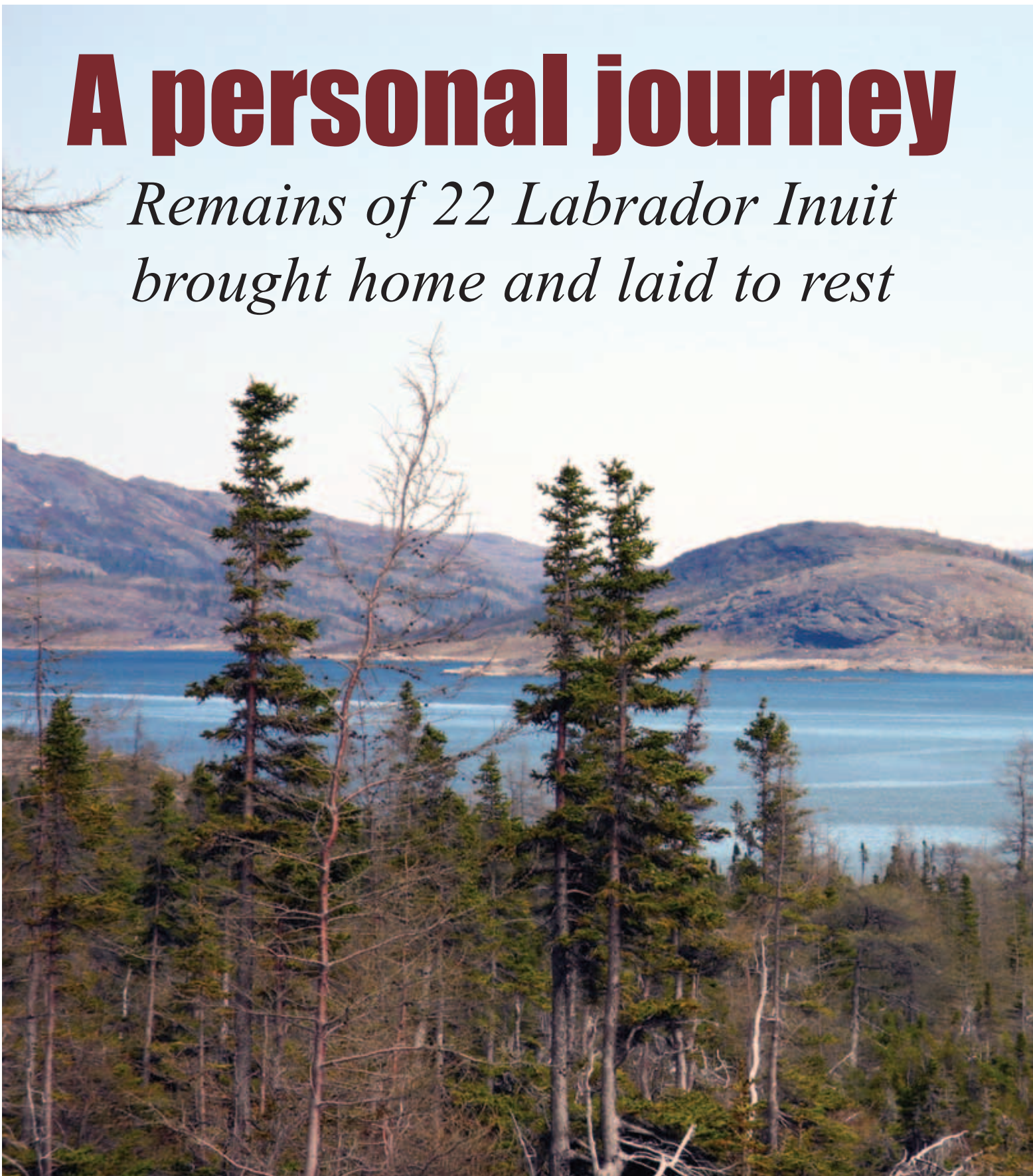




cover

A personal journey

*Remains of 22 Labrador Inuit
brought home and laid to rest*





story by Kenn Harper
photos by Kathleen Lippa

I had two reasons for accepting an invitation from Johannes Lampe – Minister of Culture, Recreation and Tourism for the Nunatsiavut Government – to accompany a group of Inuit and others from Nain to the abandoned Moravian community of Zoar in June. One was, of course, to witness the repatriation of the skeletal remains of Inuit taken from the abandoned graveyard there. The second was more personal. Zoar had been on my hope-to-visit list for a long time, for it is an important place in a story that I have been working on for far too long. That story is the narrative of a group of almost 60 Inuit from Labrador who were taken, willingly it must be said, from their homes to become living exhibits at the Chicago World's Fair over a century ago. For three of those Inuit, the most important to the tale I hope to tell, that story begins in Zoar.

A year ago I read about the planned repatriation of the skeletal remains of 22 Inuit whose bodies were exhumed, illegally and surreptitiously, from their peaceful graves in the Christian cemetery at Zoar, and spirited away for study in Chicago in 1927. The perpetrator of that crime, William Duncan Strong, went on to a notable career in anthropology, apparently oblivious to the distress his actions had caused on the Labrador coast.

Over time, the memory of Strong's theft diminished and was forgotten. But a few years ago, a researcher came across a reference to it and brought it to the attention of officials of the Nunatsiavut Government.

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cover

The Field Museum in Chicago was home to the largely-forgotten remains. The Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) does not compel American institutions to return skeletal remains to places of origin outside the United States, so the cooperation of the museum was necessary if the remains were to be brought home. According to Helen Robbins, a museum official responsible for repatriations, in earlier years the museum had helped Strong (who died in 1962) to cover up his actions. But times have changed. The Field Museum, now an institution with progressive and enlightened policies, cooperated fully.

Strong's outrageous actions on the Labrador coast in 1927 reminded me of events that had taken place in Greenland and New York 30 years earlier. I wrote a book about those events 25 years ago, a book that told the story of Minik (1891-1918), known as "The New York Eskimo." It recounted how explorer Robert Peary convinced six Inuit to accompany him to New York in 1897, with disastrous results; four of the Inuit were dead within a year, among them Minik's father. The boy remained in the US for 12 years and fought unsuccessfully for his father's skeleton to be removed from the American Museum of Natural History and given a proper burial. He never succeeded. But in 1993, embarrassment over the story I had unearthed resulted in the museum returning the remains of the four Inuit to Qaanaaq, Greenland for final interment. Minik's goal was finally achieved.



Caskets ready for burial at the Zoar repatriation ceremony.

There were other similarities between the Greenland and Labrador cases. In most repatriations, the bones are anonymous - the remains of people dead for hundreds of years. But in both these cases, the bones in question were those of people whose names were known, whose dates of death were known, and some of whose living descendants could be traced. This made Strong's actions all the more egregious.

The response of the American Museum of Natural History a century ago was very different from that of the Field Museum in recent years. Where the former was reluctant and for years denied the truth of my story, the latter was proactive. The result, in 2011, was a respectful reburial witnessed by at least 75 Inuit and others.

My spouse and I were fortunate to be

able to make the four-hour trip from Nain to Zoar in one of two longliners. Others travelled by speedboat. I used the time to talk to some of the elders making the trip. As a Northerner not from Labrador - I've lived almost 50 years in Baffin Island communities in Nunavut - I was fascinated to travel this coast, to see the growths of stunted trees reaching the coastline (I'm rather partial to rocks myself!) and to explore some of the nuances of the Labrador dialect that differentiates it from the Inuktitut dialects with which I'm familiar in Baffin. I felt the same excitement I felt 40-some years ago as a young teacher moving to the isolated community of Padloping off the Baffin coast, where I got my immersion in Inuktitut language and a way of life I had only imagined before.

continued..

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cover



Inuit choir singing at the gravesite.

The Canadian Rangers had gone to Zoar the day before and prepared the gravesite where the bodies, each in its own small casket, would be interred. The site is on the sandy crest of a narrow isthmus, commanding a view of the land and sea to both east and west. When all the boats had arrived and everyone had assembled at the graveside, Johannes Lampe gave a short but touching homily, his voice choking with emotion as he recalled the insensitivity of Strong's crime. "What was done 84 years ago was immoral, disrespectful and disgraceful," he said, adding that the purpose of the ceremony was "to welcome back the wandering spirits of these remains."

An Inuit choir, dressed in traditional garb, sang to the accompaniment of a battery-powered organ. Tears were shed. A moment of silence was observed.

Something else was observed too. During the service, two black bears wandered into the area of the old Inuit and

settler village near the abandoned mission, perhaps a kilometre away, where some of us had walked only an hour before. One of them stopped still for a time, seemingly listening to the harmonies of the choir. Later, in addressing participants, Peter Penashue, Member of Parliament for Labrador, remarked that, to the Innu, bears represent the spirits of deceased ancestors and must be treated with respect. It was, he suggested, appropriate that two bears appeared just as the remains of Inuit long-dead were finally being accorded the dignity they had been denied for almost a century.

The interment over, we all moved a short distance away from the gravesite to an area where the rocks formed a natural amphitheatre. A few short speeches followed, while a crew of men from Nain finished filling the grave and erected a pre-painted ready-made white picket fence and a rock cairn, cemented together on the spot, on which was placed a

marker. Made of soapstone, it bore the names of 16 of the deceased – the names of the other six were not known. Respectfully and efficiently, the job was done and the assembled crowd adjourned to the beach for a lunch of sandwiches and soup.

It had been a long day by the time we returned to Nain that evening. But I was pleased beyond measure. I had observed a solemn and touching repatriation ceremony. And I had achieved my long-held goal of visiting Zoar, from where Abile and Helena and their daughter, Esther, had departed Labrador for Chicago in 1892.

The author wishes to recognize the tireless work of Johannes Lampe, Jamie Brake, Dave Lough, Isabella Pain and Crystal Allen of the Nunatsiavut Government (and probably many others), in organizing the trip from Nain to Zoar. ㇏