

# Labrador Life

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## Indigenous Connections

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sharing experiences with youth*

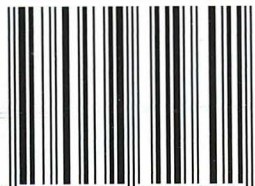
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Hudson's Bay Company Centenary Celebrations: Sod house in Killinek (present-day Nunavut), from Hudson's Bay Company Centenary Celebrations. (Courtesy of Hudson's Bay Company Archives)

# Early films of the Labrador Inuit

story by Mark Turner

Readers familiar with recent articles written by Kenn Harper in *Them Days* magazine know that Labrador Inuit were pioneers in the early years of motion pictures. But as Esther Eneuseak, Nancy Columbia and Zacharias Zad were blazing trails in Hollywood, documentary filmmakers were travelling to Labrador to film the land and its people. The land that most interested these early filmmakers was, in fact, the Grand River and Grand Falls. The people that most interested them were the Inuit.

Of course, widespread interest in the

culture of Inuit, particularly Labrador Inuit, began long before the invention of the movie camera. Abraham Ulirikab's experiences in zoos across Europe are well documented. Esther Eneuseak and her company of performers were able to capitalize on the same audience appetites. Quick to continue feeding those appetites, early American film companies would purport to depict Labrador Inuit for their audiences. In 1908, the Detroit-based Goodfellow Manufacturing Company released a film called *Esquimaux of Labrador*. The Edison Company followed suit in 1911 with their *Eskimos in Labrador*. Both of these films are now lost, but we know of

their existence because their copyright was documented. They are only two of a number of American films purporting to be about Inuit whose copyright registered before 1939.

What is interesting about many of these "Northern" films is that there is little evidence to suggest many of them were shot inside Inuit Nunaat (circumpolar Inuit lands). While there are notable exceptions, like Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922) and W. S. Van Dyke's *Eskimo* (1933), films about Inuit inside Inuit Nunaat were often shot in America. *Way of the Eskimo* (1911), a film written by Esther Eneuseak's daughter, Nancy Columbia and its com-

panion film, *Lost in the Arctic*, were both filmed in Escabana, Michigan. It is very likely that *Esquimaux of Labrador* and *Eskimos in Labrador* were also made in the lower 48, perhaps even starring Esther and Nancy. Yet, even after we separate the real from the made-up, there were still a number of films actually made in northern Labrador about Inuit prior to 1939.

Part of northern Labrador's popularity for these early filmmakers had to do with the presence of Moravian missionaries. With stations dotted along Labrador's north coast and an annual supply run by way of the mission ship *Harmony*, the Moravian presence allowed for relative ease in transport and accommodations for filmmakers. In the summer of 1913, two Americans from the Carnegie Institute in Pittsburgh, Alfred Ward Birdsall and Allen H. Evertz, made use of this network and spent roughly three months filming Inuit all along the north Coast and into Ungava Bay. "The trip," the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* reported at the time, "was made for the purpose of showing through moving picture, the life of the Labrador Eskimo and Indian and for gathering lecture data of life and legends



The Hebron Brass Band performing on a launch, July 16, 1937. Source: Library and Archives Canada/Patrol to the Northwest Passage/ISN 5670 © Estate of Richard S. Finnie. Reproduced with the permission of Library and Archives Canada.

in the semi-barbaric wilderness".

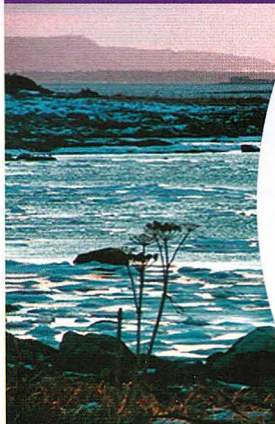
In the early years of film, these kinds of illustrated lectures were popular attractions. Moravian missionaries, Donald MacMillan and Wilfred Grenfell all made use of such lectures to fundraise in support of their on-going

work in northern Labrador. When Evertz and Birdsall returned to Pittsburgh in October of 1913, they did so with "three miles of film footage," or, roughly three hours of material. Birdsall himself would go on to present the film as part of an illustrated lecture called *Through Eskimo Land* which he gave throughout the American northeast in 1914. Now lost, it would seem, Evertz and Birdsall's footage is possibly the first film shot in Labrador. It is the earliest film of Inuit in Labrador.

A few years after their pioneering work, the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) began shooting film along Labrador's coast between Cartwright and Killinek. Their motivations were different from Birdsall and Evertz. Early to understand the importance of film in promoting their brand, the HBC's first feature was made to commemorate its 250th year in business. Presented under the title *Hudson's Bay Company Centenary Celebrations* in 1919 and repackaged with various titles over the next few years, the footage shot during the voyage of the *Nascopie* contains the first known footage of Killinek, or Port Burwell.

*continued...*

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As important as the footage is in the visual record, later films produced by and with the support of the HBC would document communities further south. In 1937, the Canadian Department of Mines and Resources sponsored a lecture film shot aboard the HBC ship *Nascopie* called *Patrol to the Northwest Passage*.

Directed by the Canadian industrial filmmaker Richard Finnie, *Patrol* contains rare, early footage of Hebron. In fact, the *Nascopie's* call to Hebron also provided an opportunity for the first radio broadcast given by a Labrador Inuit Moravian brass band, which took place on July 16, 1937.

For the HBC, portrayals of the Inuit helped to build the mythology of the HBC brand in Canada and Europe. These films emphasized how far removed the places and people that supported the fur trade were from those that

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*Through Eskimo Land* advertisement, from the *The Morning Herald* (Uniontown, PA), January 12, 1914.

purchased the final product. In showing these people and places, the final product became doubly exotic.

For Moravian missionaries, film would serve other ends. Recognizing its importance as a tool to document and promote their work in Northern Labrador, missionaries were early to

adopt still photography. Hans Rollmann has suggested that Herman Jannasch pioneered the camera in Labrador in 1879. His first five photos were taken in Hopedale.

1928 or 1929, the first motion pictures made on the north coast by missionaries were likely taken by Paul Hettasch for inclusion in the mission film *Vom Spreewald zum Urwald* (*From the Forest of the River Spree to the Primeval Forest*). Written descriptions of the now lost film suggest most of its second act depicts mission work in Nain. Paul Hettasch continued filming in northern Labrador throughout the 1930s and 1940s, with much of his raw footage now at the Labrador Institute of Memorial University in Happy Valley-Goose Bay. Following in his footsteps, his children Siegfried and Kate also took film, variously documenting life in Hebron, Nain and Hopedale up until the 1960s.

Interestingly, while Paul Hettasch's early footage seems to have been taken to show what life was like in northern Labrador to people outside, the film footage taken by the younger generation of Hettaschs has the look and feel of home movies.

Unlike the senior Hettasch, there is nothing to suggest that their films were widely exhibited outside of Labrador, beyond smaller screenings for friends and family.

While the Moravians had established ways of circulating still imagery through their publications like *Periodical*



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*Accounts* and *Moravian Missions*, there were no easy ways to distribute film. The model offered by *Vom Spreewald zum Urwald* does not seem to have been used again. If it was, additional films did not include footage from Labrador. For the younger Hettaschs, and for subsequent missionaries, making moving imagery was personally motivated.

There were other networks through which film could travel in these early years. For recognized personalities, the illustrated lecture circuit continued to be profitable well into the 1950s. After serving as part of Robert Peary's team that made the 1908 trek to the North Pole, Donald MacMillan drew large audiences for his illustrated lectures on life across the Arctic. During his many trips to Labrador, MacMillan and his wife Miriam took dozens of hours of moving imagery all along the north coast depicting things such as traditional Inuit games, hunting, and even the Model-T snowmobile (which MacMillan himself brought to the coast).

Of all these early filmmakers, MacMillan was also the first to show the film he took back to Labrador Inuit, a practice he began in 1926. As MacMillan's film was cut and re-cut for decades of lectures across America, it is difficult to trace what was produced when, but we can see and hear a reconstruction what of his illustrated lectures in the 2010 film made by the Peary-MacMillan Arctic Museum, *The Far North*.

Another, even further-reaching film distribution network came in the form of the newsreel genre, pioneered by the French company, Pathé, in 1908. Before the widespread adoption of television, newsreels were presented before feature films and, later, in their own dedicated theatres.

Another alumnus of Peary's expedition to the North Pole, Capt. Bob Bartlett, made extensive use of this genre. Between 1930 and 1934, Bartlett worked with Pathé to produce a number of items featuring Labrador Inuit such as *Bob Bartlett's Labrador* (1930) and the series, *In Peary's Footsteps* (1932-3). Many of these films are free to watch on British Pathé's website.

As some of the most widely distributed films about Labrador Inuit at that time, they are remarkable for how different they are from other films produced during the period. Part of this has to do with their intended audiences. All of the other filmmakers active during these early years were able to pro-

vide some kind of context in their work, whether it was by explaining it in words or showing it. Bartlett's films are staged. The heavy-handed intertitles and, later, over-the-top narrations are crafted for global audiences who have little context for what they are watching. These films were created as products in and of themselves.

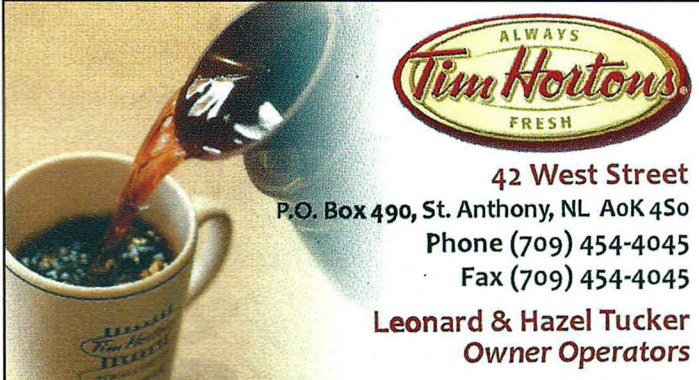
After 1939, there was a decrease in the number of films whose main focus was Labrador Inuit. The onset of World War II certainly played a role. But so too did the way the America film industry developed.

By 1939, this industry was under the grip of a small number of studios that broadly controlled production and exhibition within North America.

Industrial and lecture films did not fit the Hollywood model. And with no financial incentive for location shooting in far-flung places, Hollywood came to ignore Inuit Nunaat as it did so many other places it understood to be remote.

Hollywood's indifference did not bring an end to filmmaking on the north coast. It just changed how filmmaking was done in the region.


Importantly, it also meant that the films that followed were really made on the north coast. †



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