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East Greenland 1968

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Dear Dick,

My taxi at Kulusuk was the usual 11-dog team and driver. Usual for the North in winter, that is. After the quick jet from Copenhagen, I had eight days to cool my heels in Søndre Strømfjord, West Greenland, before weather cleared on the east coast. We finally rattled in a DC-4 over the icecap to the DEW-line station at Kulusuk. But that was by no means the end of the line.

My friend Schrøder had sent his driver James Josvasen with a dog sledge from Angmagssalik to meet me. About seven other sledges made the run. They had made two trips from Angmagssalik to meet the plane the previous week, but we had never left Søndre Strømfjord. On arriving at Kulusuk I was not to wear a rose in my lapel or whatever people do in civilized lands, but was to remain bare-headed (thanks a lot Schrøder, it was 10 below in Kulusuk!) so James could recognize the young, grey-haired foreigner and bring him to Angmagssalik.

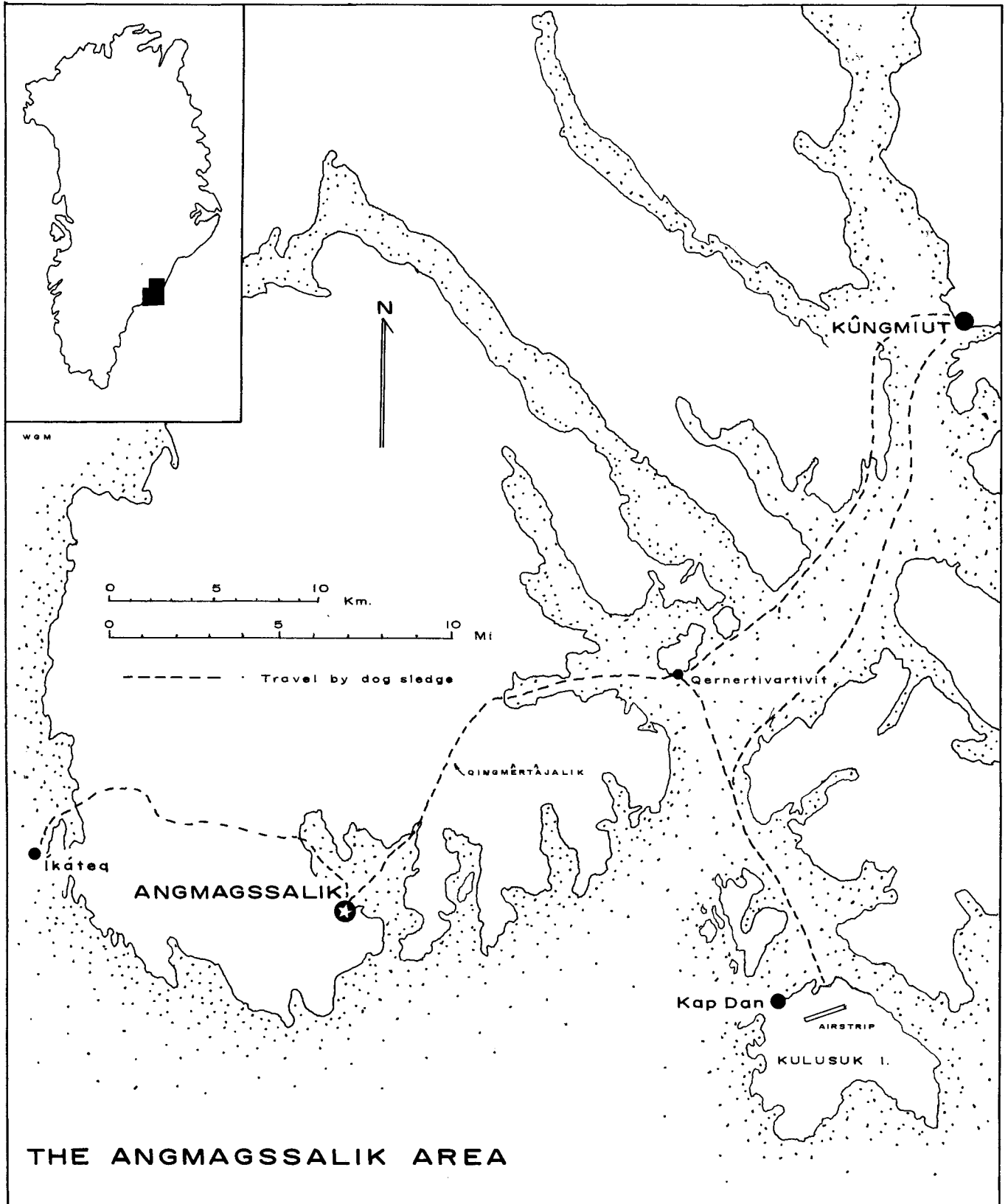
It might have been easier if Schrøder had told me to look for a Greenlander with bearskin pants and no front teeth. For James was the only driver around with the coveted (and warm) status-symbol of polar bear breeches. He also had left his teeth at home because the route between Kulusuk and Angmagssalik was precipitous in spots and not without danger--the only sledge route in East Greenland where dog drivers collect "hazard pay".

"Are you warm enough with those clothes?" asked James before we started off. I thought I was, but discovered otherwise later on. It was 10 or 15 below zero and we didn't do much but sit on the sledge all day.

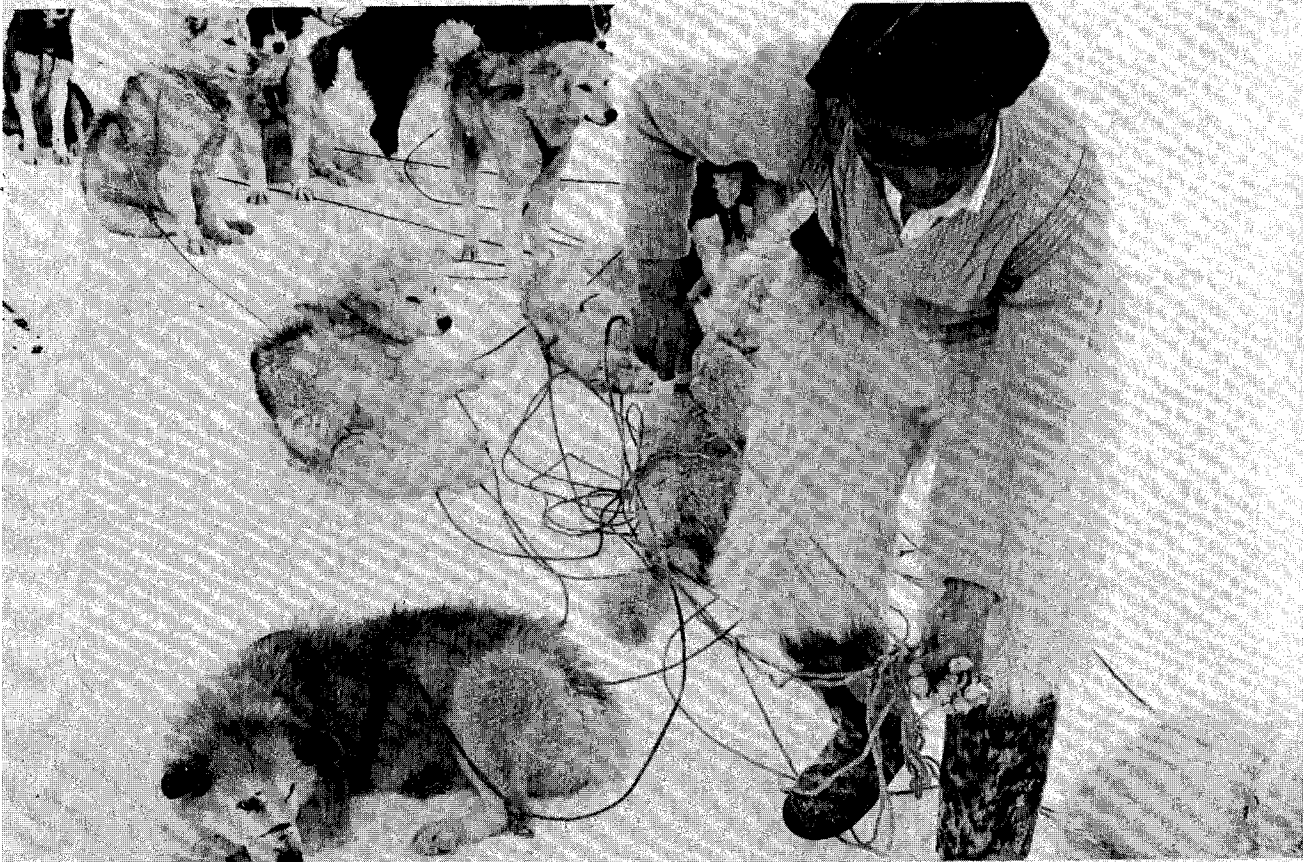
"It is seven hours to Angmagssalik, Shall we go?"

No meter ticking, no harum-scarum of New York or Tokyo taxi adventures. Just seven hours of steady plodding over the ice behind eleven huskies, which appeared half-wolf and half-starved. James didn't say anything about the high mountain pass we were to cross before descending to Angmagssalik, but I thought afterwards that he probably didn't want to spoil the surprise--or keep me worrying for the better part of the day.

Angmagssalik (Ä.mä'sä.lēk) is the capital of one of the two districts in East Greenland. The other, Scoresbysund, was populated 40 years ago by people moving north from Angmagssalik. Both districts take the name



THE ANGMAGSSALIK AREA



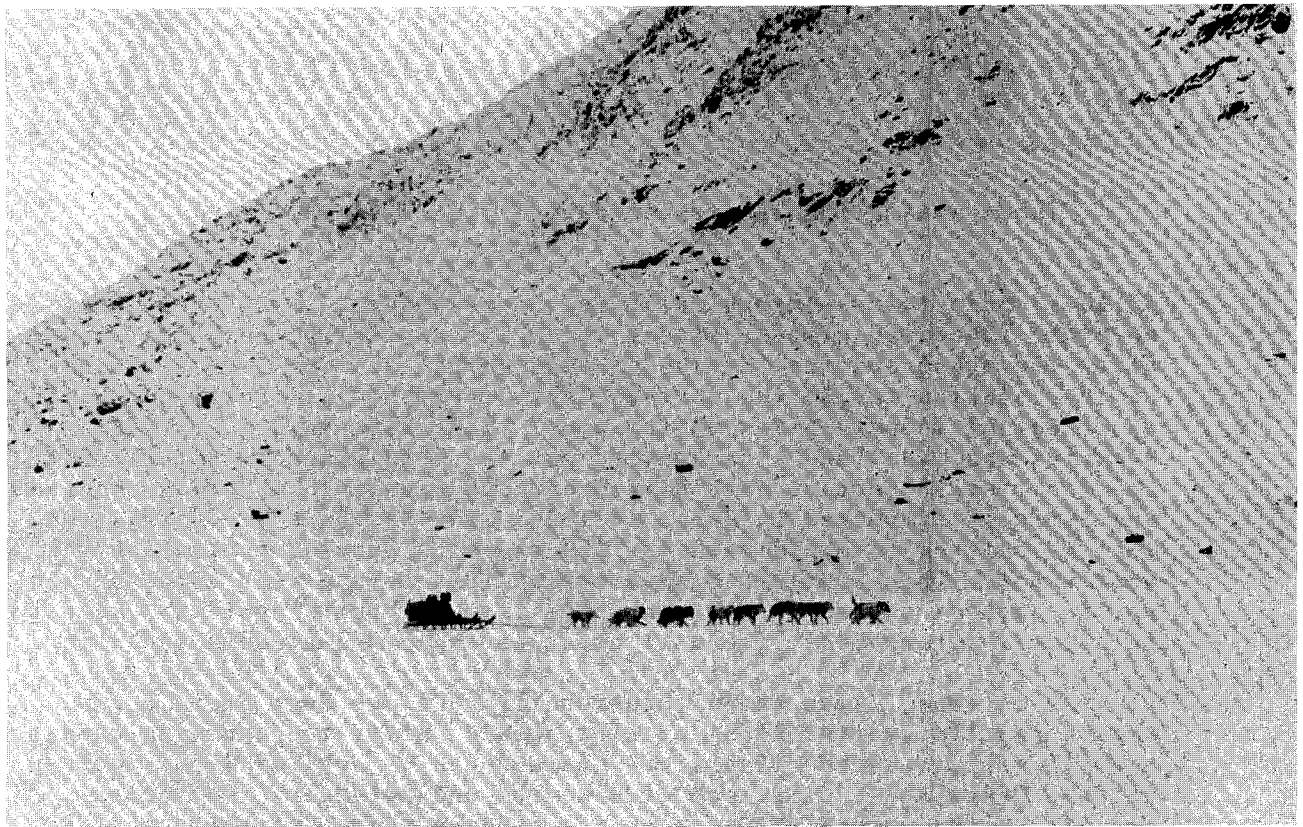
James untangling the traces during a rest on the trail

of their main towns--Angmagssalik and Scoresbysund. East Greenland has no other inhabited places, except for a few scattered weather stations along the coast and the "Sirius" Sledge Patrol station near Daneborg weather station far to the north. East Greenland is the forgotten part of Greenland today. A few months ago I might have said that Thule District was Greenland's backwater, but the B-52 crash fixed all that. The first white contact with East Greenland was in 1884, and Angmagssalik was formally colonized by Danes in 1894. The 75 years of outside contact is nothing compared with the 250 years of outside contact on the west coast. The change in East Greenland has been a leap into the new world compared to the well-known transition in West Greenland. Despite this rapid advancement, the east coast is today Greenland's backwater.

As we rode, James would occasionally urge the dogs on to a run, but we usually trotted along at slow speed. After two hours we came to a small village, Qernertivartivit (this would be spelled Qernertuarssuit in West Greenland), comprised of 6 houses and 24 souls. Qernertivartivit is the normal coffee stop for sledges bound for Angmagssalik. James (and his brother Hans, who was also along with a sledge) had been born there--so he was known to the locals. We went up the sloping

shore over ice blocks and snow drifts and into one of the small houses. The family was in the midst of a noon-time seal stew. I had tea and some ships biscuits while starting to change film in the Nikon. But I noticed the camera was covered with beads of condensation. It would have been foolhardy to open it, so I had only the black and white film in my other camera for the rest of the day.

I was, of course, the main attraction. No less because I accompanied James, with his bearskin pants. Polar bear pants don't come easily. They are the Phi Beta Kappa key of northern men. Those who wear them are the "great hunters" (storfangere) who have successfully won in the moment of truth against the king of all beasts. We in our comfort of central heating and supermarkets may scoff. But James was a man among true men. In our dreams we could match his feats of hunting, but in reality we would barely survive in his normal day-to-day life. For his life is lived in a constant battle against treacherous ice, sudden storms, raging seas, and occasional confrontations with the likes of a polar bear. On his own terms, James has no equal; thrust into our space-age, he has become a pathetic character--an anachronism in the day of jets and the moon race.



On the trail in East Greenland

But James was taken for granted by his peers around the pot of seal meat. So, in fact, I was the main attraction. An American, the Big White Father, Rolex watch and latest Nikon to support the role. I felt suddenly a bit ill--and uncompromisingly weak among other men who knew the harder battle against cold and hunger. Silly words? Try a 20-below-zero diet for a while. Cold is a great equalizer. In fact, I think cold reduces men to shivering idiots. These words perhaps prove the point, for what I have just written is a faithful copy of my diary.

I came to East Greenland for three reasons. I wanted to see Greenland in winter; I had never been to East Greenland; and I had an invitation from an old friend, the acting handelschef or trade chief of Angmagssalik. I left Copenhagen on 11 March: four hours by DC-8 jet to Søndre Strømfjord, eight days' delay in Søndre Strømfjord for weather, two hours by DC-4 the 380 miles to Kulusuk on the east coast (partly retracing the jet's steps, so to speak), and seven hours from Kulusuk to Angmagssalik, arriving there on the evening of 18 March. You might say that my progress at the end was reduced to a slow crawl. But I got there--and back again. So here's the story.

My wait at Søndre Strømfjord was not wasted, although it was a bit upsetting not to know when the plane would leave for the east coast. I spent days in the hills around the base at "Sonde" stalking caribou and ptarmigan with cameras for both slides and movies. The deputy CO at our air base at Søndrestrom is Major Willy Knutsen, famed Norwegian-American survival expert. Willy and I spent many interesting hours together while he recounted old tales from the Arctic, and I told him about our falcon-trapping last autumn, which I didn't have time to do in September. As the days passed I grew uneasy for two reasons: I had a lot of work sitting at home to be done, and I had brought with me two crates of fruit for Schröder and his family in Angmagssalik. The fruit was safely stored in a cold room at the hotel, but I wondered how long it would keep.

Finally came the day when weather eased off a bit and we flew over to the east coast. After a few hours of flying over the white desert of Greenland's indlandsis (the inland ice cap), the rugged coastal mountains appeared. Perched on one of them was the DEW-line station DYE-4. For some reason this station was located near several hunting villages of Angmagssalik district. The landing strip to service the radar site has, of course, meant improved transportation for Angmagssalik, but I can't think of any other advantages for the lives of the local hunters. The village of Kap Dan, near the DEW-line station, now has over 380 inhabitants. Instead of hunting, I believe that most of these people are now living off the sale of soapstone and ivory carvings to Europeans. Some hunting, and in recent years cod fishing, is still pursued around Kap Dan--so perhaps the worst fears of administrators in Copenhagen have not been realized.

After the sledge journey from Kulusuk to Angmagssalik (including that awful climb up and scary ride down the pass), I quickly saw what is today's main problem in East Greenland. The trend towards concentration of population, which is probably the only solution for West Greenland, has occurred on the east coast as well. On the east coast,



Lunch time on a sledge journey

however, the economic necessity for population concentration is not present. Other than the obvious benefit of better health care and schooling, concentration of population in a hunting district is tantamount to snuffing out the hunting way of life.

There is a terrific difference in physical conditions between the west and east coasts of Greenland. The west coast is favored by some slight influence of a branch of the North Atlantic Drift--or Gulf Stream. Ice is therefore less of a problem and only occasionally hinders fishing from the four so-called open-water towns. One of these towns, Sukkertoppen (about which I wrote in WGM-23), has had no fish landings in the first three months this year, but this is an exceptionally heavy ice year in Greenland.

Unlike the comparatively mild conditions in West Greenland, the east coast is under the influence of the East Greenland Current, a cold ocean current which is the main outflow of the Arctic Basin. With this current drifts a thick belt of pack ice (storis). Both the cold current and the ice it carries make the east coast an inhospitable one, accessible for only a short period each summer (or not at all in some

years). Hunting has always been the way of life in East Greenland. A spurt of cod fishing began at Kungmiut in Angmagssalik district in the late 1950's, but this has fallen away again. The hunting life cannot be pursued from large towns, for the area soon becomes barren and starvation is the natural result.

There is ample evidence that East Greenland once supported a large hunting population. But in the hunting life, where people are directly dependent upon natural conditions, years of plenty will fluctuate with years of famine. When the first Europeans made contact with the East Greenland Eskimos in 1884, it was evident that the 416 souls were but a remnant of a once-large population. The Danes moved to save this Eskimo group. By the time Angmagssalik was colonized in 1894, only 350 people remained. But, by 1924, Angmagssalik district was becoming overpopulated, so 82 people were moved north to establish the Scoresbysund settlement under the impetus of, among others, Capt. Ejnar Mikkelsen. In 1938, 150 people moved to the southern part of Angmagssalik district where the settlement of Skjoldungen grew up.

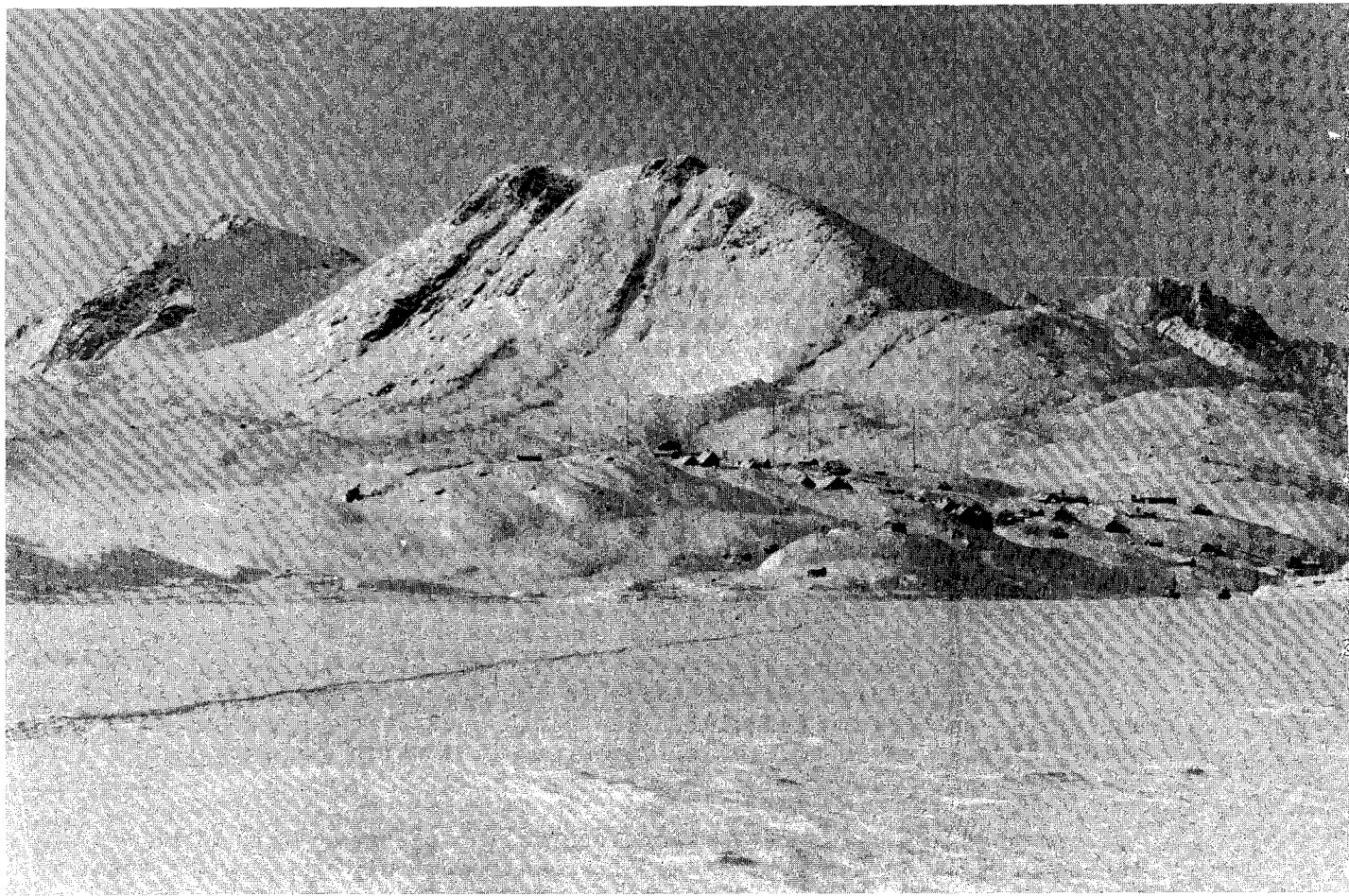
Scattered hunting families have lived along the six hundred miles of coastline in Angmagssalik district, but recently the trend has been towards growth in a few of the larger towns, while many of the older hunting villages have closed down.

There are now (per 31 December 1966) 2149 Greenlanders living in Angmagssalik district, 621 of these in the town of Angmagssalik itself and almost as many in Kungmiut. Kap Dan has 383. The remaining 550 people live in seven smaller villages, most of which are growing smaller each year.

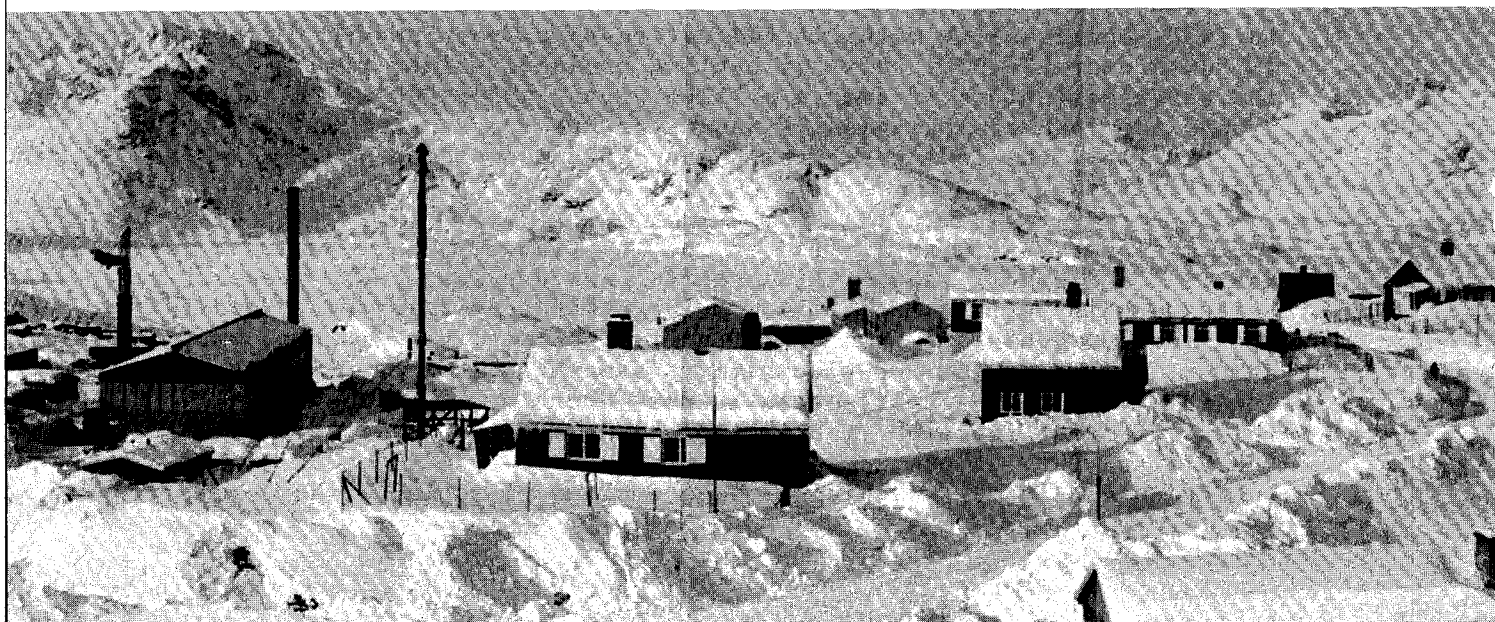
In Angmagssalik, one is therefore seeing the same type of population development as on the west coast of Greenland. But, whereas the west coast's concentration results from a definite policy to foster growth in industrial fishing towns, concentration on the east coast, where hunting is the only producer (apart from Kungmiut's fishery), can only endanger the hunting way of life with no other economic alternatives.

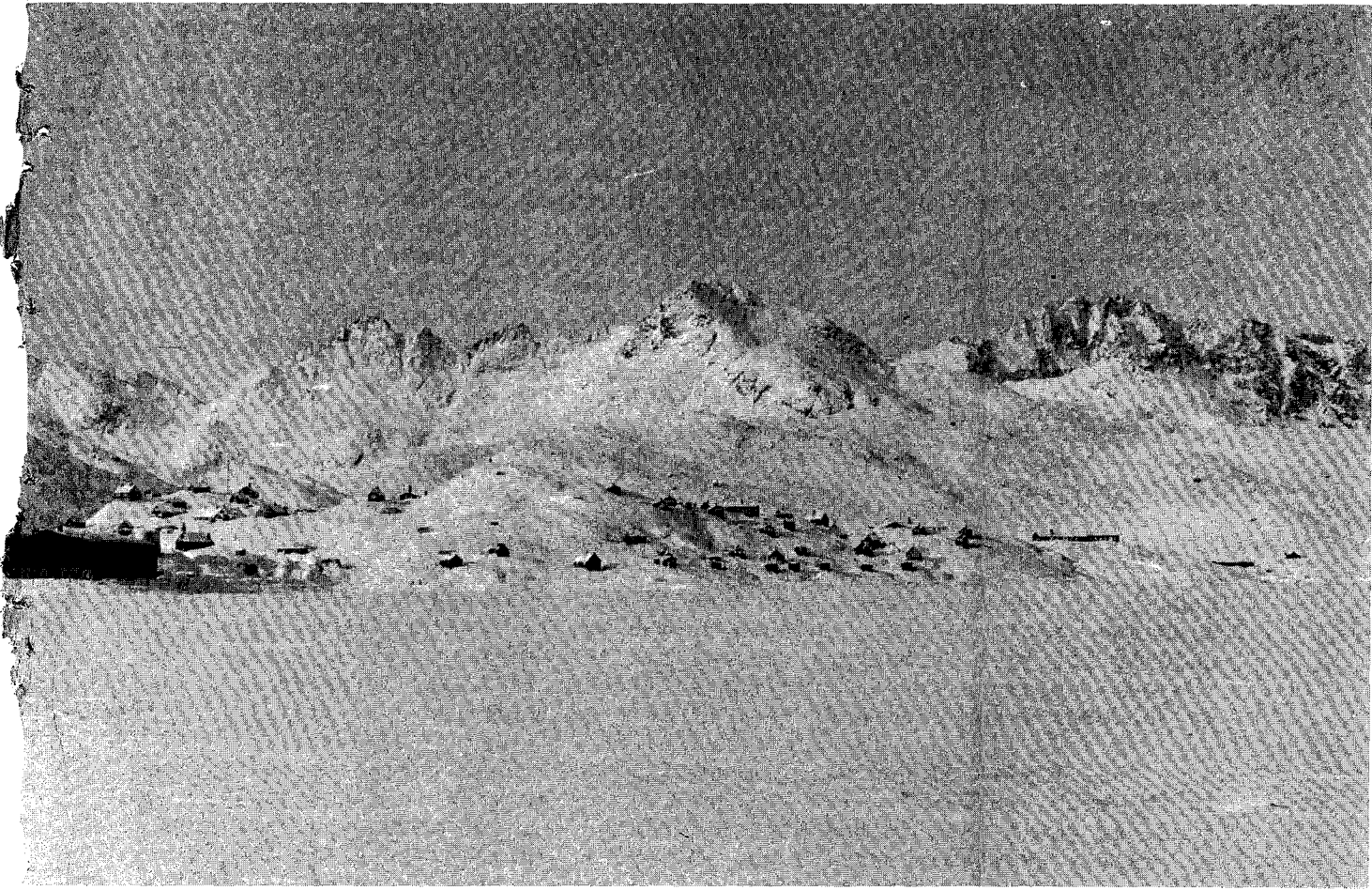
The main town, Angmagssalik, is really an administrative center. In 1965, Angmagssalik with its 654 native-born Greenlanders landed 43,000 kroner (\$6,000) worth of hunting products versus purchases in the government store of over 4 million kroner (\$600,000). The country around the town of Angmagssalik was never known as a rich hunting area, and, in fact, the town was located there because of the good harbor possibilities.

As Angmagssalik grew, its service function also increased. A new hospital and school, shops, kindergarten and orphanage, old peoples' home, and water works were built. A large warehouse, which can handle the flood of goods from the yearly supply vessels, was finished last summer. Angmagssalik has electricity, something that cannot be said for the other native settlements in East Greenland. Because of Angmagssalik's service function, many Greenlanders find employment there with the State. But, as one long-time resident said to me, "we are just taking in each other's washing". Wage employment explains the large

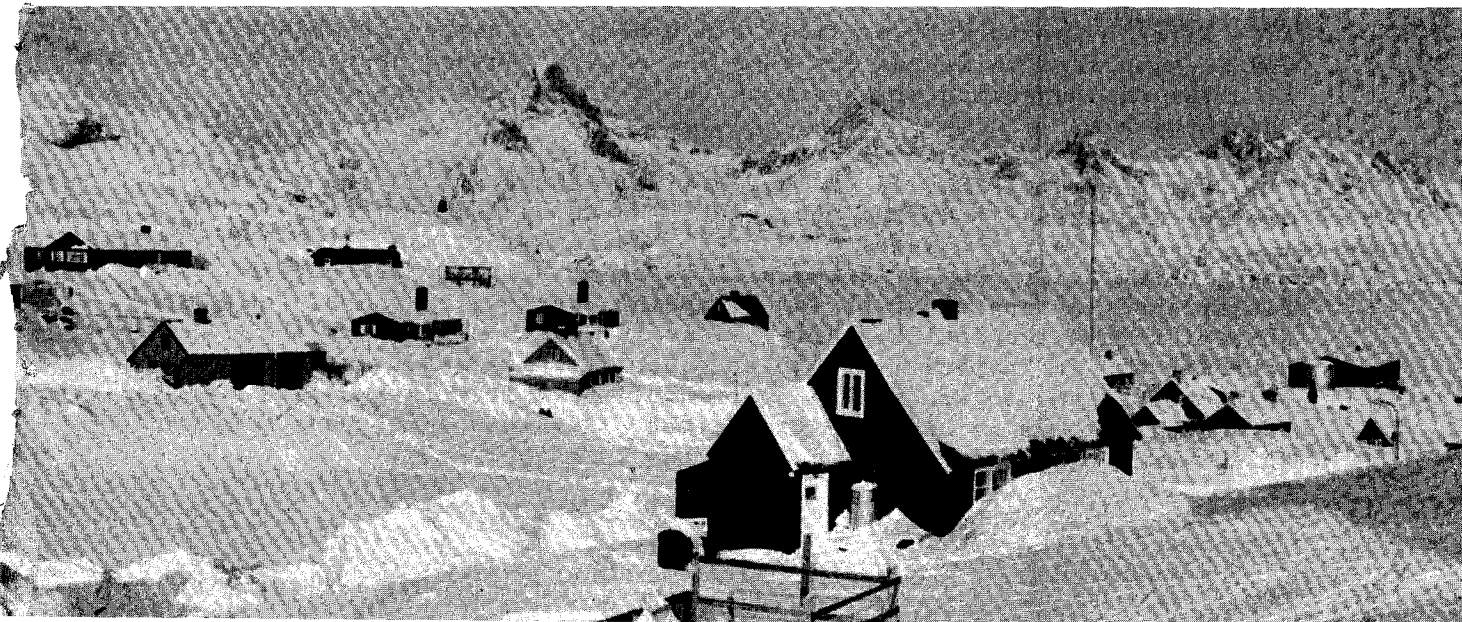


Angmagssalik





1968



discrepancy between value of production of fish and hunting products in Angmagssalik and sales in the shops there. (High welfare payments are another income source.) Of course, as a large service center for the east coast, Angmagssalik is the home of many Danish civil servants, so that their purchases in the shops are also included in the statistics.

The town of Angmagssalik is in a beautiful setting. As one approaches over the fjord ice from the northeast, the town itself is almost inconspicuous. The rugged mountains dwarf anything Man can create. But one noticeable thing is the large black facade of the new warehouse. As in other Greenlandic towns, homes are scattered over the rocky hillside of the fjord. One part of town to the south of the harbor contains many large houses, newly-built under liberal State home-loan arrangements. The older part of Angmagssalik surrounds the harbor, but this is a small area and quickly gives way to the omnipresent hillsides.

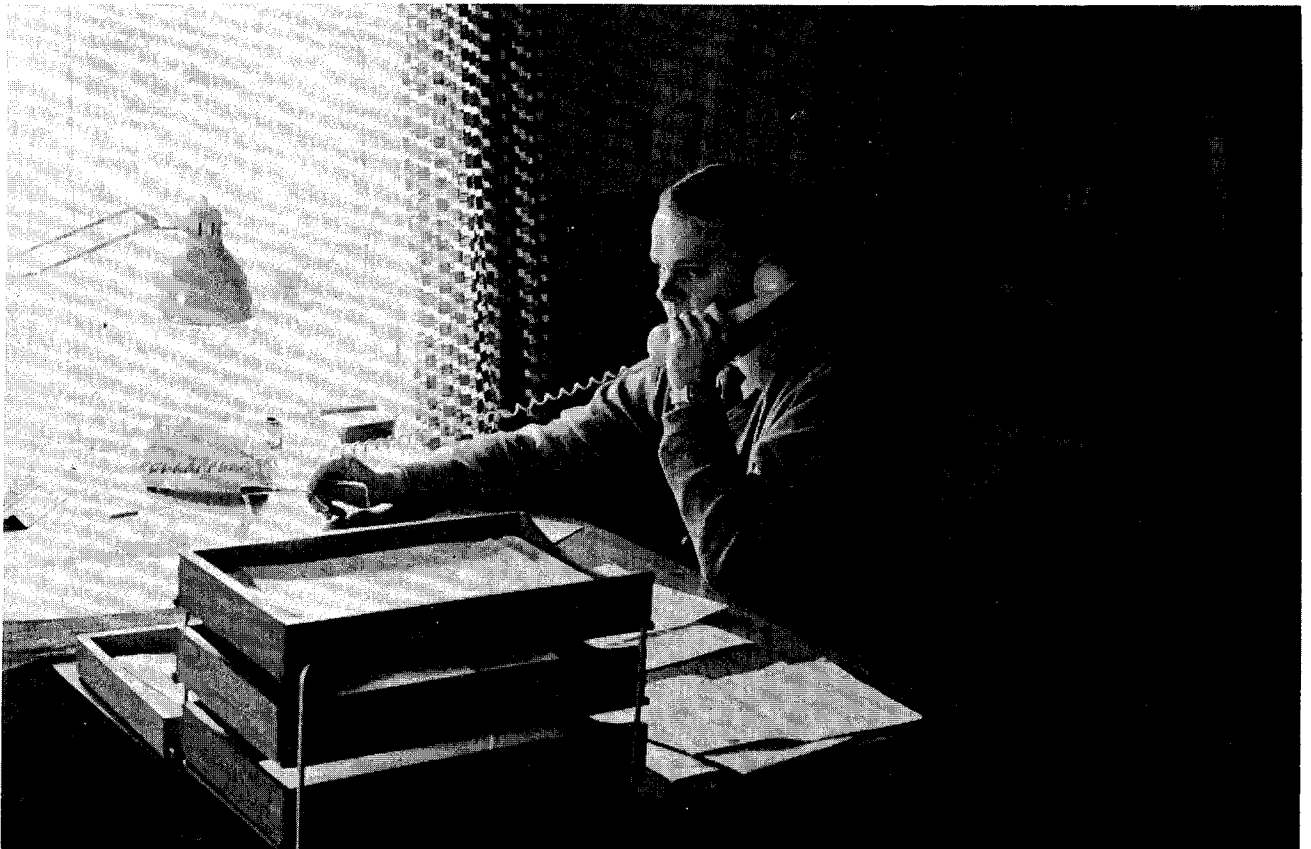
It was dark by the time we reached Angmagssalik, but it was also mid-March and nearing the Equinox so that daylight and darkness were about that of New York, Paris, or London.

As we sledged into Angmagssalik, Schrøder popped out of a crowd to greet me. Then James tried to get the dog team up a road to Schrøder's house, but the dogs would have none of it. They had not eaten in two days and didn't want any detours on the way to feeding time. We quickly unloaded my baggage (oh my! had the crate of lemons frozen?) as the dogs strained for home on the other side of town. A steep walk up to Schrøder's house with my gear almost finished me.

"Ja, Bill, and how was Qingmærtájalik?" That tongue-twisting name is the mountain pass we crossed just before getting to Angmagssalik. I had to admit that it had almost finished me, but we had half-carried an elderly gentleman most of the way up, so that it was a bit longer and more strenuous than the normal "one hour up and two minutes down". I think we did the descent in about 90 seconds. James had wrapped skid chains around the sledge runners and I was digging in with my heels to brake for all I was worth. But the descent ended in a jumble of dogs tangled in their traces, snow, curses, and an overturned sledge.

After a day to rest my stiff old bones, I explored Angmagssalik and surroundings until one day when Schrøder announced he would begin a series of inspection trips around the district and that I would accompany him.

Our first trip was to Íkáteq, a small settlement on the western side of Angmagssalik island about three hours by dog sledge. Our four-sledge group consisted of Schrøder as head-man; myself; Jakob, a young Greenlander who is in training to be an outpost manager; and Ole Kriegel, a Dane who runs the financial bookkeeping end of the State operation in Angmagssalik. Kriegel was to count money in Íkáteq, Schrøder was to inspect the outpost generally with Jakob as interpreter, and I went along to see what a small hunting village looked like. We made good time as we had no extra weight other than some space heaters which were being offered for sale to the folk in Íkáteq.



Acting handelschef S. Chr. Schrøder Sørensen, Angmagssalik

Íkáteq is a small village of seven houses and 41 inhabitants. The old Danish classification for inhabited places in Greenland (by = town; udsted = outpost; and boplads = village, literally "living place") has now been changed so that all the 18 district capitals are called by (town) regardless of size. All other places are termed bygd, or a living place. The old classification indicated roughly the size of a place and whether it had a government store. The boplads was usually the smallest type of settlement and had no store. Some, however, had a depot with bare essentials to make life a bit easier. Íkáteq would have been a boplads or depotsted in the old classification.

The first thing we did upon arrival at Íkáteq was to have tea with William, the depot manager. I had seen William in Angmagssalik several days earlier when he drove in to get some flashlight batteries for his depot (the batteries are used to power transistor radios). William had reported then that Íkáteq had no more coal--or rather, what remained was buried somewhere under deep snow drifts.

William's house in Íkáteq was typical of a boplads dwelling today. It was a small, one-story wooden house with one room and a small entry porch. It was clean and warm; the atmosphere was cozy. Color roto-gravure pictures of Crown Princess Margrethe and Prince-consort Henrik were tacked to the wall. We drank hot tea and ate home-baked bread containing a few raisins. William's wife hovered about the table, but did not sit down with us. Grandmother lounged on a bed smoking a filter-tip. Two children halved a "Butterfinger" candy bar which I had brought all the way from Søndre Strømfjord.

After the tea ritual, most of the men went down to the small depot shack to arrange the stores and count money. I wandered about the small village; children skied on barrel staves nearby. School, which gathers in the church chapel, must have been canceled for the day. This added ten children to the throng of pre-schoolers. East Greenlanders are a smiling bunch; East Greenlandic children are cast in the same warm mould.

Íkáteq is a hunting village. In 1965, 15,000 kroner worth of hunting products were sold to the Royal Greenland Trade Company depot



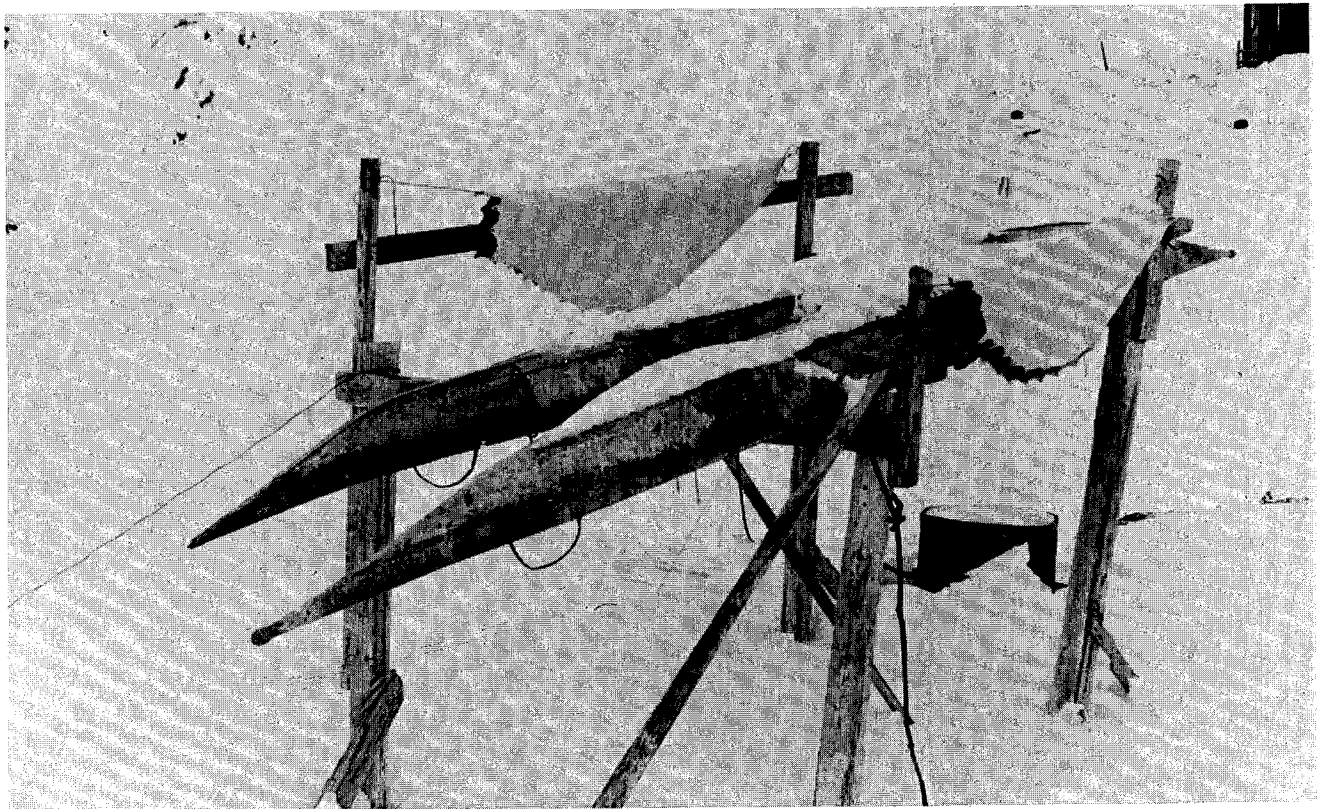
In time for tea at Íkáteq, Angmagssalik district

there. Sales at the depot store were 37,000 kroner. A year later, both sales and purchases were down. In 1959, Íkáteq had 73 inhabitants; today it has 30. (my own unofficial count).

Back at the depot, dust was flying. Stores were being straightened out and consolidated; half-filled cases put together, and spoiled goods cashiered. Cases of cigarette cartons filled one corner--a popular item at \$1 a pack. Half the depot seemed to be filled with cases of soap flakes--six years' supply at present consumption. Íkáteq has no running water. In winter, snow is melted down for water; in summer, children fetch water in buckets from a nearby lake.

On the way back to Angmagssalik a fog descended on us. The dogs had little trouble following the trail. Half-way home we passed a sledge heading for Íkáteq. On the sledge were a Greenlander and his wife and child, the ubiquitous burlap bag, and a case of Tuborg beer in throwaway "stubby" bottles. Greetings were exchanged, but we didn't stop to talk. I think James wanted to avoid a dog fight.

As we jogged along, I speculated about the future of East Greenland. From 350 people in 1895, the east coast has grown to 2,600. The towns



A dog-proof frame for storing kayaks and drying sealskins, Íkáteq



Inspecting the depot at Íkáteq

of Angmagssalik and Scoresbysund are permanent, despite the lack of economic possibilities for such a large population. Denmark must either find new economic alternatives to employ the population or siphon off the excess growth to West Greenland. New economic alternatives will probably not be forthcoming. Encouraging migration to the west coast probably raises more problems than it settles. Many East Greenlanders have gone to the west coast in the summer to work in the fish plants. But they all return in the winter to East Greenland. To succeed in encouraging East Greenlanders to move permanently to the growing towns of the west coast, two things must be present: housing and winter employment. Both are big problems already for West Greenland without having the additional problem of people moving in from the east. And it will not be an easy move to make for the people involved.

One recent innovation has been in a new direction. Families have moved out on extended hunting trips far along the east coast. This is, of course, the old pattern of life. Although it could take pressure off the big towns and enable hunters to live in practically virgin territory, such trips do not please, for example, the school authorities. In August 1966, in the most publicized move, nine families with 60 people in all were sailed far up the coast from Angmagssalik to spend a year hunting

near Kangerdlugssuaq, 400 kilometers from the nearest town. I talked with one of the hunters who had been in that group. They had taken their hunting gear, kayaks, and necessary provisions. They chose the site of a former American weather station and built their wintering houses from material still scattered near the base. The year's stay provided good hunting: 38 polar bear, 62 narwhal, and 2,100 seals with a total cash value of meat to feed the hunters' families of about 250,000 kroner (\$33,000)--to say nothing of the seal and polar bear furs' value. Also, four babies were born during the year. Most of the families wanted to return again for another year.

After several more days in Angmagssalik, Schröder decided to travel to the northeastern end of the district. The main town in the area is Kungmiut, where a fishing industry grew up in the late 1950's based on a local stock of cod.

We sledged over the imposing pass, Qingmértájalik, on a bright day. As the sledges raced down the other side of the mountain in a cloud of snow, we braked with all our might, but the sledge was finally slowed down by a few of the dogs getting caught beneath the sledge runners. We ended up at the bottom a howling mass. One of my knees had been wrenched out of joint in the drop over the pass, so I joined in howling



A Greenlandic boy of Íkáteq

with the dogs. That put me on the disabled list for a while, as I had little control over my loose knee. We pulled in to the village of Qernertivartivit for coffee and then sledged on to Kungmiut, arriving there after about seven hours of sledging from Angmagssalik.

Next to Angmagssalik itself, Kungmiut is the largest town of the district with 600 people and five times Angmagssalik's production of fish and hunting products. When approaching Kungmiut from across the fjord, one notices first the rows of large drying racks for cod. A large fish house was built several years ago at Kungmiut; in a way the town is a transplanted bit of West Greenland, although fishing in open water is possible for only a few months of the year. Despite enthusiasm for fishing and hunting at Kungmiut, yearly incomes from sale of these products is only about 2,000 kroner per family (\$250); and fish landings have declined rapidly in recent years.

The trade chief of Kungmiut is an energetic and effective Greenlander, Ulrik Lennert. He comes from West Greenland (Holsteinsborg district) and has been at Kungmiut nearly 10 years now. Regina, his wife, served us fresh cod--and used in the recipe the last onions of her storage bin. Kungmiut has no electricity, but a generator serves the school, government store, and several homes; a permanent water supply is being installed. Local people thought part of the fish house could be heated so they could produce salted halibut; also if a small freezing plant were installed, salmon could be produced for export. Right now, however, heavy depreciation costs on the fish house investment put Kungmiut's production on the red side of the State ledger.

The soccer club from Kungmiut played Angmagssalik in an away game not long ago. The Kungmiut team sledged a fast five hours down to Angmagssalik, won the game played on fjord ice, and sledged the five hours home again the same day. Spirit?

After the delicious sautéed cod, Lennert went down to make the radio schedule and learned from Angmagssalik that a plane from Søndre Strømfjord would come to Kulusuk the next day. My time was almost up in East Greenland, and with my gimpy knee I was useless for sledging further than necessary. So the following day two of our sledges turned south and did the seven hours to Kulusuk in brilliant sunshine. While far out on the fjord ice, we saw a plane land up by the radar station. The dogs were urged to a run for most of the last hour and I was hustled up aboard the waiting plane in a rush with barely a chance to say goodbye to James and his dog team and to my host Schrøder.

A few hours later I was eating a steak with Willy Knutsen in the Officers' Club at Søndrestrom. There were heated busses, electricity, hot showers. The trip was like a dream--East Greenland seemed very far away.

Sincerely,

Bill Mattox

W. G. Mattox