

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

WGM-23

The Summer in a Nutshell - III

Højsdal 12
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Dear Dick,

I confess to a minor ICWA misdemeanor. This three-part series of "A Summer in a Nutshell" started out in peanut-size format, advanced to walnut stage, and had reached coconut proportions before drastic pruning. My pardons--but take comfort in knowing this is the last of three parts. Topsy had to go.

* * * * *

The plane was "Guttorm Viking", a Douglas DC-7C which SAS operates between Denmark and Greenland. The date was 8 August 1967 and I was on my way to Narssarssuaq in southern Greenland together with a plane load of other passengers. The name "Guttorm Viking" has been lodged in a far corner of my mind since 1957 and the day it made the world's first scheduled trip over the North Pole, from Copenhagen to Tokyo. One hour after landing in Tokyo, "Guttorm Viking" continued on around the world and returned to Copenhagen after 70 flying hours. "First over the Pole and around the World" were two firsts in the history of commercial aviation.

Our flight to Greenland last August was, of course, more prosaic. For me, however, a bit of the aura of "Guttorm Viking's" fame seemed to cling to the old propeller machine. Just as the now outdated plane had confirmed Stefansson's 1922 predictions of air traffic across the Pole, it continues today to pioneer new fields. Our flight to Greenland was filled mostly by tourists on a package deal of fishing and camping. Tourism is one of the more promising prospects of the "North as Future".

We left Copenhagen at 0820 on that morning last August. Flying at a mere 14,000 feet at 300 miles per hour, we were off the southern coast of Iceland four hours later and over our destination eight hours after leaving home. But Narssarssuaq was closed in by fog; only here and there a rugged peak pushed its nose through the overcast. After a few turns, we climbed again into the glistening world of bright blue sky and pristine white icecap below. Søndre Strømfjord, farther to the north along the west coast, was also closed in, so we headed for Iceland and landed at Keflavík eleven hours after leaving Copenhagen. The unexpected stop in Iceland was an extra dividend. I spent the night in a student dormitory at the University in Reykjavík--just two doors down the hall from the room I called home for a year in the mid-1950's.



Looking north along Greenland's east coast. 8 August 1967.

"Guttorm" was not to be denied the following day. From the airplane, we had a good view of Greenland's icy east coast with its border of rugged mountains. Those inhospitable coasts were first seen by the Viking Gunnbjørn in about 900 A.D. As we flew westward, the high peaks were gradually engulfed by the massive indlandsis (icecap) until only a few mountain nunataks were high enough to thrust their bit of dark rock above the surrounding ice. Then the ice engulfed all; below us lay a white desert with but a few turquoise lakes and meandering streams of meltwater. Then as the icecap's surface rose above the ablation level, there was only white. The surface, wherever it was, could have been fog, snow, or whipped cream--pilots beware.

We approached the southwest coast and the same process began in reverse. First the meltwater pools, then several nunatak peaks announcing more to come, and finally the coastal ranges between which the outlet glaciers from the icecap had to funnel as they ground their way to the sea. We skimmed at low level past Narssaq (where I would spend a week) and up the fjord well-known to Vikings and World War II pilots alike. Here and there a patch of verdant hillside marked a Greenlandic sheep farm--every one on a former Viking homestead. We landed at Narssarssuaq in gleaming sunshine, in sunlight only the North knows--an uncluttered but diffused light, playing against the delicate whites and blues of icebergs and the more subdued greens and browns of the arctic landscape.

At some point there must have been a sadder landing in Greenland. But in August 1967 I entered a part of Greenland that was tragic in several ways. Earlier that year, Erik Egede, sheep farmer-fisherman, and respected member of the National Council (Landsråd), had died in a freak accident aboard his fishing cutter. Overlying the sorrow of his loss was the grim fact that an unusually severe winter had killed 65% of the sheep in Greenland. Sheep farming is nothing new in Greenland. There are Greenlanders (whom we would unknowingly call Eskimos) farming sheep who are sons and grandsons of sheep farmers. They are skilled men, thrifty and innovating, full of initiative. They are living, however, on the borderline of the physically feasible. In some years, they must pay the toll for this fact of climate.

After a short wait at Narssarssuaq we took the local coastal boat to Narssaq*. We stopped first at Qagssiarssuk (Brattahlid of the Sagas), former home of Viking chieftan Erik the Red and his wife Tjodhilde. We lay offshore as a small boat chugged out with a few passengers and some mail. Erik Egede's fishing cutter, now without a skipper, rocked at anchor in the gentle breeze. Erik was my age when he died. I knew him here in Copenhagen when he was in Denmark on government business. He helped me with the sticky problem of place names and locations of some of the smaller villages of southwest Greenland. He was a talented and knowing man; strong and simple in approach. One could not help liking him. There are, fortunately, more like him in Greenland, but his loss is keenly felt.

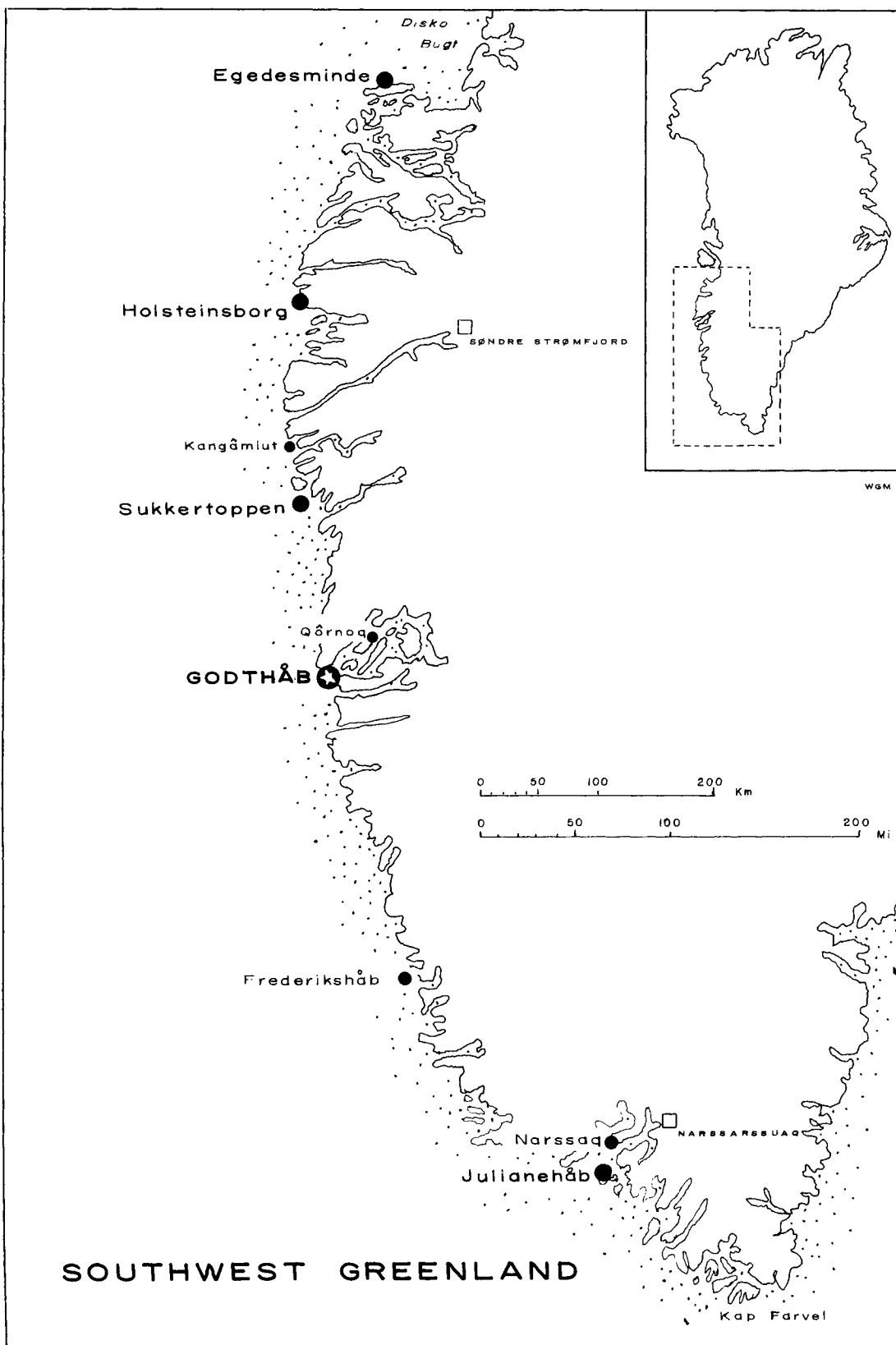
At Narssaq, after a three-hour sail, I was met by KGH ^{**}Handelschef (Trade Chief) Coulet-Svendsen, who was also the head man when I visited Narssaq in 1962. His assistant at that time was my friend Søren Chr. Schrøder Sørensen (a real Dane!), who is now on Greenland's east coast and whom I shall visit soon at Angmagssalik.

At dinner in Narssaq, I discussed with Coulet-Svendsen the hard winter and what could be done about future tragedies of a similar kind. It appears that the Greenlandic sheep farmers might have overextended their flocks without sufficient winter fodder and shelter. A cold snap with heavy snows is the great equalizer and, of course, no one plans for the unusual winter.

While we talked, Mrs. Coulet-Svendsen provided local delicacies to eat: Greenlandic caviar (the roe of lumpfish) and smoked Greenland halibut (hellefisk). The smoked hellefisk has always been a favorite of mine; I prefer it to smoked salmon. Perhaps, if production allows, KGH will appoint me their USA marketing agent for this delicacy? One eager consumer is my 3-year old son Taylor; he insists upon, and gets,

* The Greenlandic word narssaq means level land or plain. Meanings are changed by suffixes: Narssarssuaq = the large plain; Narssarssuaraq (a small sheep farm in Narssaq district) means a rather large plain, and so forth.

** KGH = Den kongelige Grønlandske Handel = The Royal Greenland Trade Company



smoked hellefisk from the local fishmonger here in Hareskov. There is, unfortunately, not much of this delicacy left over for export after the Danish demand (and Taylor's) is met.

Hellefisk is a very minor product of Narssaq. It is but a small part of a very diversified production--perhaps Greenland's most balanced. For in Narssaq, a factory exports frozen cod blocks, shrimp, and wolffish to USA; on the side, Narssaq operates Greenland's only sheep abattoir. There is a mink farm nearby; uranium has been found in the surrounding hills.

The only way to give an accurate view of Narssaq is by pasting together a panorama taken from the mountain slopes above the town (pp. 8-9). For its size, Narssaq is the most spread out of all the towns in Greenland; and there is more room for expansion. Because of the space available, the trend toward multiple-story apartment blocks is not so obvious in Narssaq as it is in other less well-situated towns in Greenland.

Narssaq is a small, but nevertheless average-sized, Greenlandic town. In the beginning of 1967, the total population of Narssaq was 1,580, of which 243 were not born in Greenland. The big statistical breakdown in the population lists is between persons born in Greenland and those not. One cannot say that all persons born in Greenland are Greenlanders, for the children of many Danish civil servants are born there and should not be included in the local population totals. Likewise, some Greenlanders are born in Denmark, but when they return to Greenland they are not listed with the local population. By and large, however, the two categories of "born in" and "born out of" Greenland reflect native population and Danes respectively, with the above exceptions.

Narssaq is basically a fishing town and an administrative center for the entire Narssaq district. The economic activity is built upon a Royal Greenland Trade Company fish factory and sheep slaughterhouse. Sheep are transported in from all over southwest Greenland to the abattoir in Narssaq. Despite the ruinous winter last year, future prospects for sheep raising in Greenland appear good.

Another product processed at the factory is shrimp--canned or frozen. When I was there, shrimp production was way down; at its highest it never was in the same league with the well-known shrimping area in Disko Bay. In 1966, a violent drop in shrimp landings occurred at Narssaq. This is thought to be because of a drop in temperature in the waters, but the fish biologists have not yet had opportunity to study the problem. One of the best shrimp fishermen in Narssaq told me that it was "just about not worth it to trawl for shrimp anymore". Another fisherman (who was on our boat crew in a 1951 hunt for falcons) sailed in to Narssaq while I was there and reported losing an entire shrimp trawl, including the otter boards, on the rough bottom of a fjord. The normal fishing risks are present in Greenland; and so is

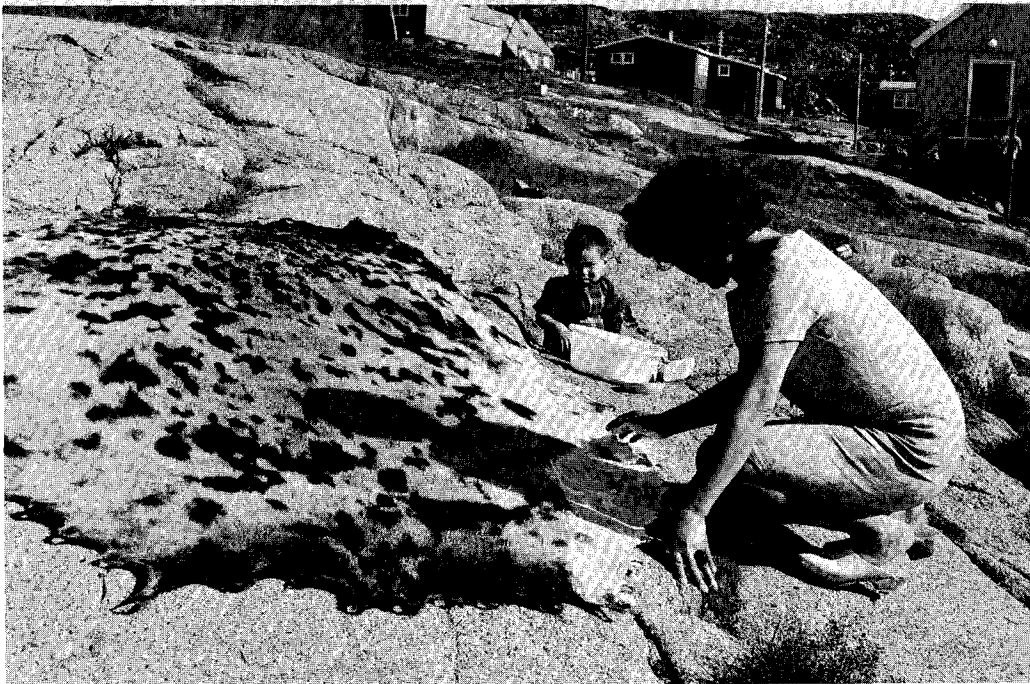
a climatic uncertainty. But the Greenlanders continue to press ahead. They are also benefiting from improved landing and processing facilities. New freezing factories and shrimp canning plants reflect the huge Danish investments of the past seven years in Greenland. The number of shaved-ice machines, bait storage units, and mechanized unloading facilities at the dock have also increased recently.

Narssaq is a lovely spot. I would like to have spent the summer there, but the coastal boat "Kununguaq"* was due and I had other places to visit along the coast.

Because two of Grønlandsfly's helicopters had met with accidents last spring, transport north along the coast was confined to rather infrequent boat service. The one helicopter remaining in service was operating solely between Søndre Strømfjord and Godthåb in a frantic effort to expedite passengers coming in and out of Greenland.

"Kununguaq" sailed in from Narssarssuaq on a sunny morning; her bright orange hull was a striking contrast to the blue-green bay and

* "Kununguaq" means "little Knud", named after the renowned explorer Knud Rasmussen.



Washing the skin of a hooded seal, Narssaq.

white icebergs in the harbor. I had been out early that morning on a round of farewell visits. I stopped to photograph a Greenlandic lady soaping down a hooded seal skin on a rocky outcrop above town. Narssaq has progressed into our modern world along with the large towns in Greenland, but some of the old life will always remain.

Geography professor Trevor Lloyd was onboard "Kununguaq", where he met some friends he had known in Greenland in the 1940's when he was Canadian consul in Godthåb. Pleasant reunions. He and I were together for a week of sailing along the coast and visiting the capital, Godthåb. It was to be a valuable and enlightening experience--looking at a developing arctic land through eyes which had seen the "before" of the before-and-after sequence.

After a tour about town and lunch at Coulet-Svendsen's home, we sailed out into Skovfjord and towards the outer coast. We made a short call at Julianehåb before heading north to Frederikshåb. Two days after leaving Narssaq we arrived at Godthåb. Those two days were storm-tossed and, thankfully, a near-blank in my memory.

Godthåb is a booming place of over 4,000 Greenlanders and 1,500 Danes. The summer season in Greenland is marked by hectic activity of building, road construction, harbor works, visitors from Denmark on official inspection trips, and other visitors like myself. This activity rages along the coast, but the focal point is Godthåb.

As Greenland's capital, Godthåb (pronounced Got'hōb) has always been an administrative center. But where, ten years ago, only a small fish salting house represented Godthåb's production, now a modern fish freezing plant hums with activity.

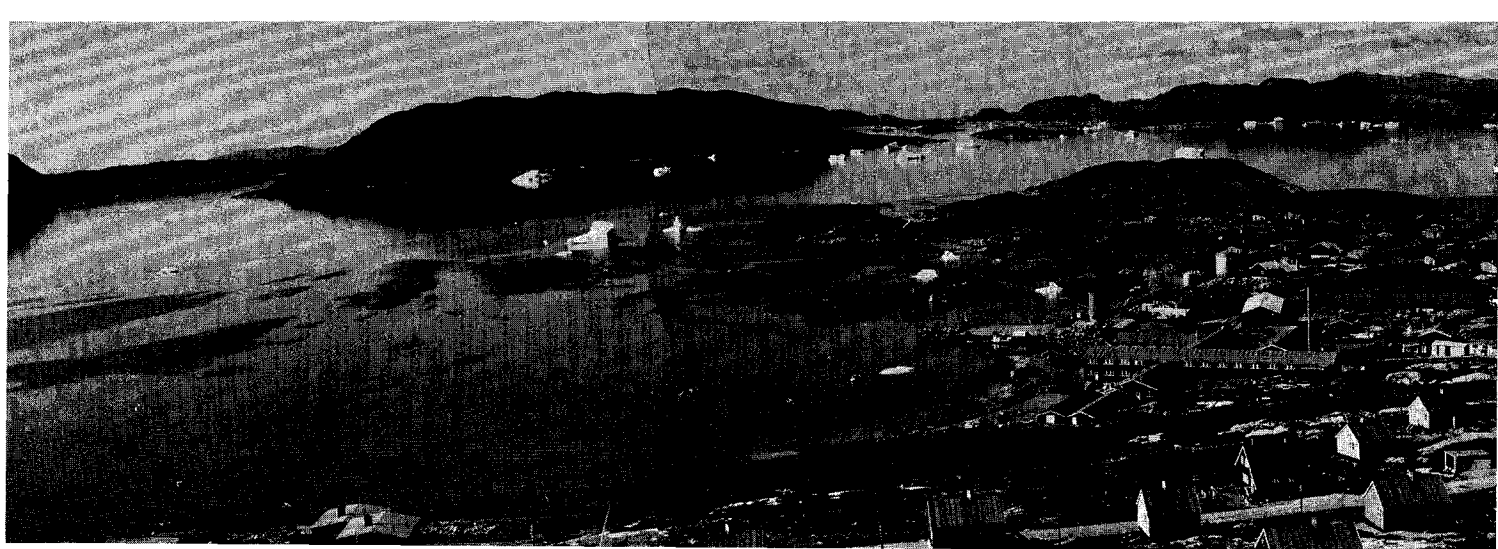
The new fish plant is a private venture, like an increasing number of shops, a hotel, bookstores, bakery, and hot dog stands. The former Danish government monopoly in Greenland has been lifted. KGH still has a large self-service market in Godthåb, but consumers' organizations and private groups are showing an interest in running more of the trade formerly under the monopoly. This trend towards privatization has both light and dark sides. Private take-overs have been urged by the government ever since the change in laws in 1950. They were slow to begin at first and even now, of course, will occur only where a profit is assured. KGH has always charged low prices for the necessities of life. The loss on sale of these items was balanced by a profit on luxuries. It is easy, therefore, to compete with KGH in some profitable lines and stay away from the necessities (which also, incidentally, are often high bulk and weight items like flour). The private consumer market in Greenland is considerable. One privately-owned general store in Narssaq had a turnover of 3 mill. kroner (\$435,000) last year. And Narssaq has a population of only 1,337 Greenlanders in about 270 households. Narssaq also has a large, well stocked KGH supermarket and general store which also has a large turnover.

So the trend in Greenland is toward increased private ownership of business and production. How far this will go and how fast is difficult to say at present. Other examples of new private operations are in banking, hotels and production (shrimp, salmon, and a new cod liver canning factory at Julianehåb). There are also private construction firms and small craftsmen, taxis, and bakeries. One man wants to open a tourist hotel at Jakobshavn, but Grønlandsfly, which operates its helicopter line at below cost ticket prices, is hardly anxious to begin with the problem of tourists to Disko Bay and back. At present, the fewer flights the line makes the less money it loses. There has never been private ownership of land in Greenland, so that a man cannot call his own the knoll of rock upon which his house sits.

In the bustle of developing Greenland, the pace of life has obviously quickened. The need for skilled workers is great, and most of these have to come from Denmark. Modernization in Greenland has meant that a new social and economic ladder has replaced the old order. Usually this ladder has been one of slow climb for the society in Greenland. Despite improved economic conditions, everyone seems to have either remained static or perhaps even moved down a rung when the infusion of workers and administrators from Denmark began.

With Trevor Lloyd, I visited the homes of Greenlanders who had been the elite of Godthåb 20 years ago. These are skilled and intelligent men who run schools, book printing and publishing plants, radio stations, and churches. Some have despaired of the pace; others find it meaningless and question the word "progress" when they see its social and psychological effects on the people. One man, when asked what he thought of recent development, said: "I can look from my window and see life going past me, but it doesn't matter. I have my house (a fine, well-appointed home) and my short-wave radio; I have a small car and my work at the book-bindery."

Narssaq

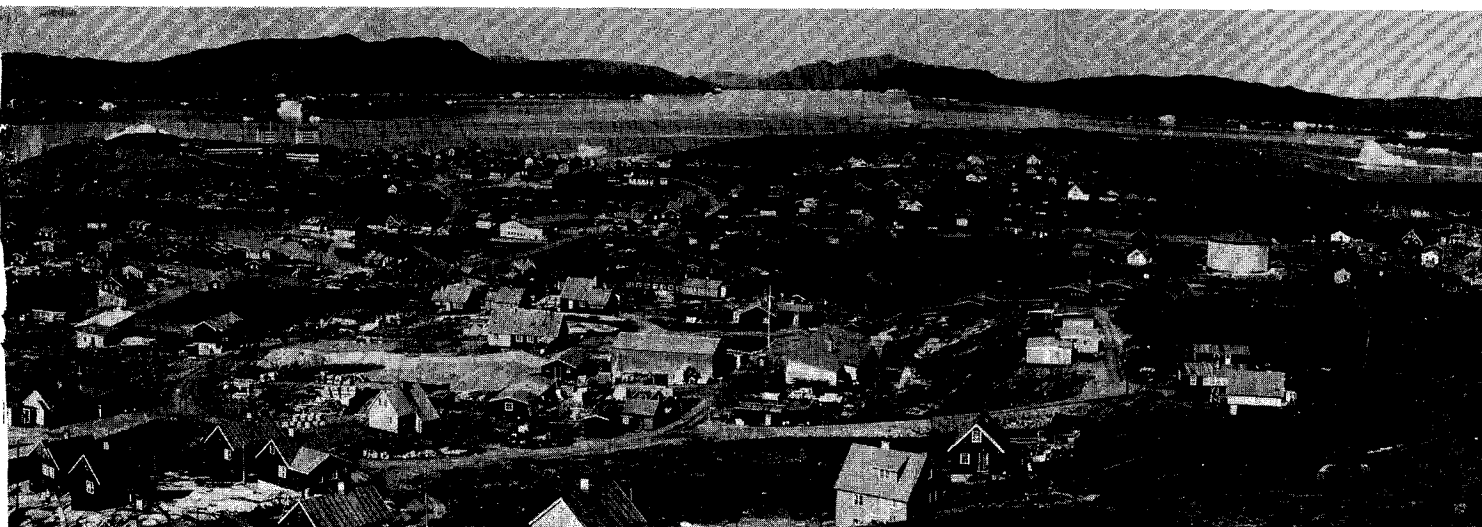


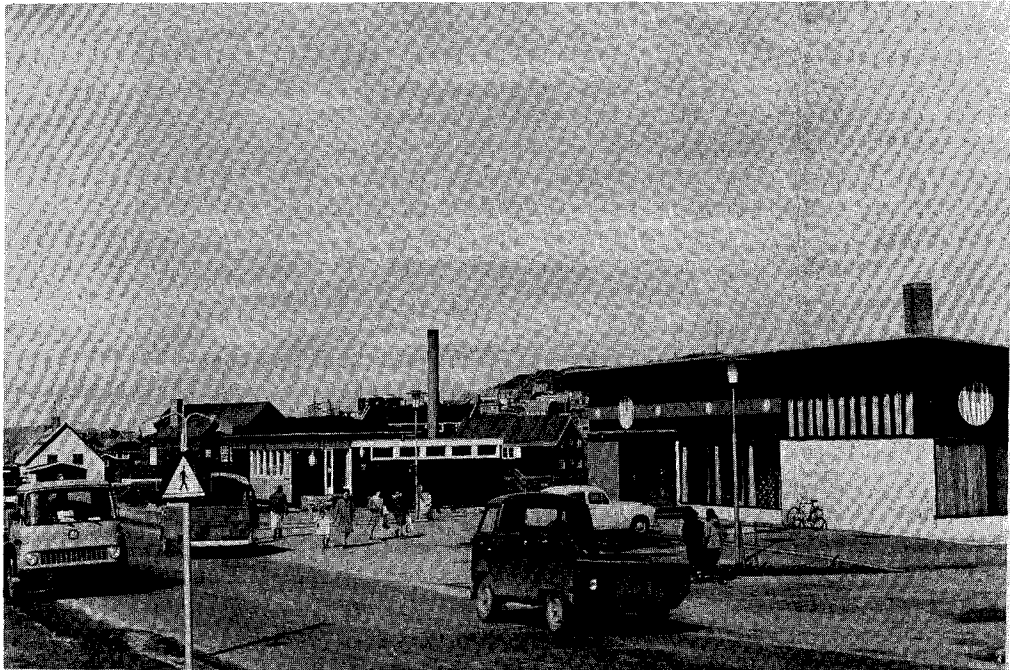
The Greenland Administration in Denmark must have expected the reactions and mixed feeling about modernization in Greenland. It is a transitional stage, and a generation will have to be written off in the process. It is both exciting and painful to see this development. When one remembers that the Greenlanders were true Eskimos of a Stone Age culture in the not-too-distant past, the present growing pains are dwarfed by the immensity of the task. This modernization, and some of its more unpleasant side-effects of alcoholism, venereal disease, and despair, has been a point of constant controversy. Many factors play a part here. One wonders how much Danish criticism can be attributed to an attempt at getting even more money for the task; or a phobia about seeing only the dark side of the picture when so much real progress has been made in Greenland. The Danes may also, in a small way, be clinging to an old colonial attitude in their relations with the Greenlanders. One Greenlander told me he disliked dealing with the Danes "because they talk so well" and also "because we are treated like children". All of this may be true. What remains is the job that has been accomplished in Greenland. I believe these actions speak louder than any words--whether they be words used by a skillful talker or in a superior way.

One evening, Trevor Lloyd and I visited the home of a Greenlander. A family birthday party was under way, but we were welcomed warmly. Many good tales were exchanged. I had even brought along my place-name map of Godthåb district. To my surprise and pleasure, one of the family was able to fill in the locations of several former villages for me. She was quite certain of the location of one (which neither I, nor the Geodetic Institute or Greenland Ministry knew)--she had been born there!

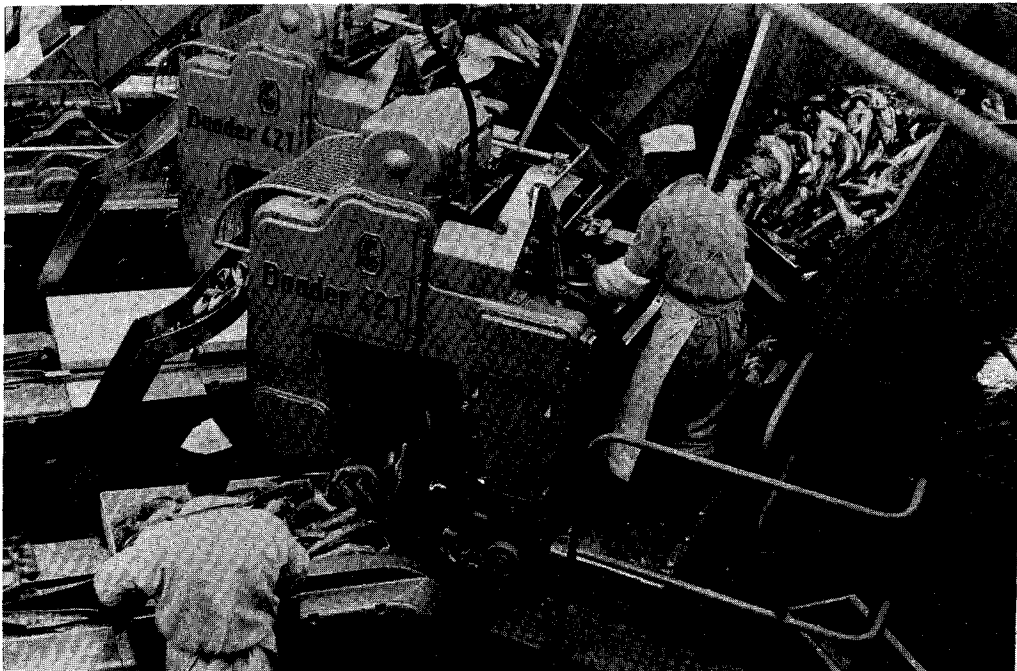
On other visits we saw the teacher's college, Greenland's museum, and the local radio station. I spent a day in the library among valuable old publications (the news that the library had been com-

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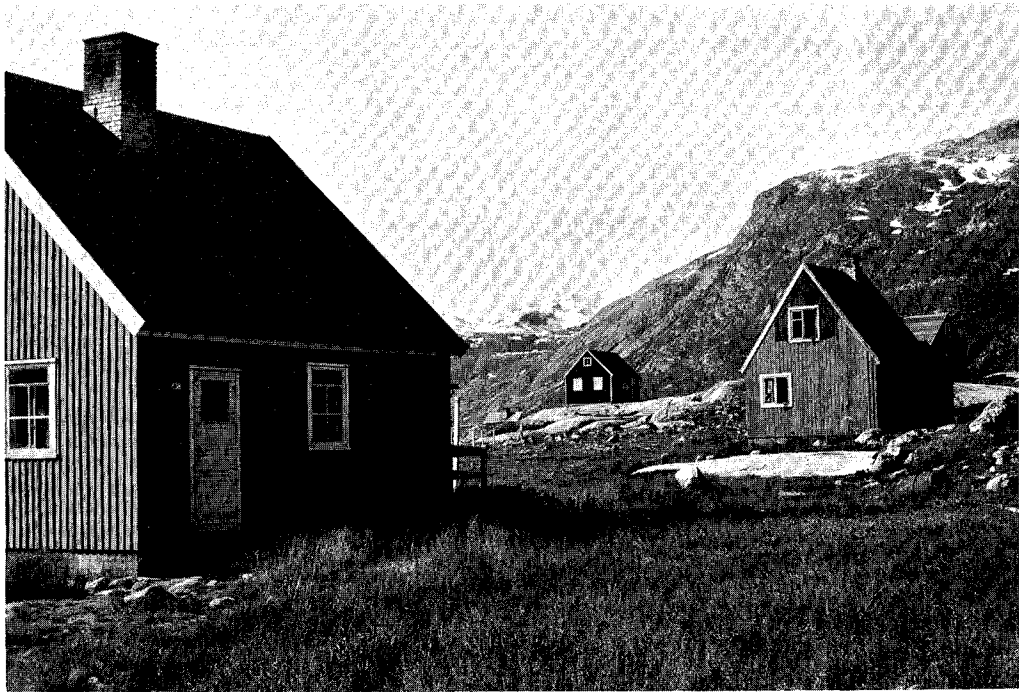




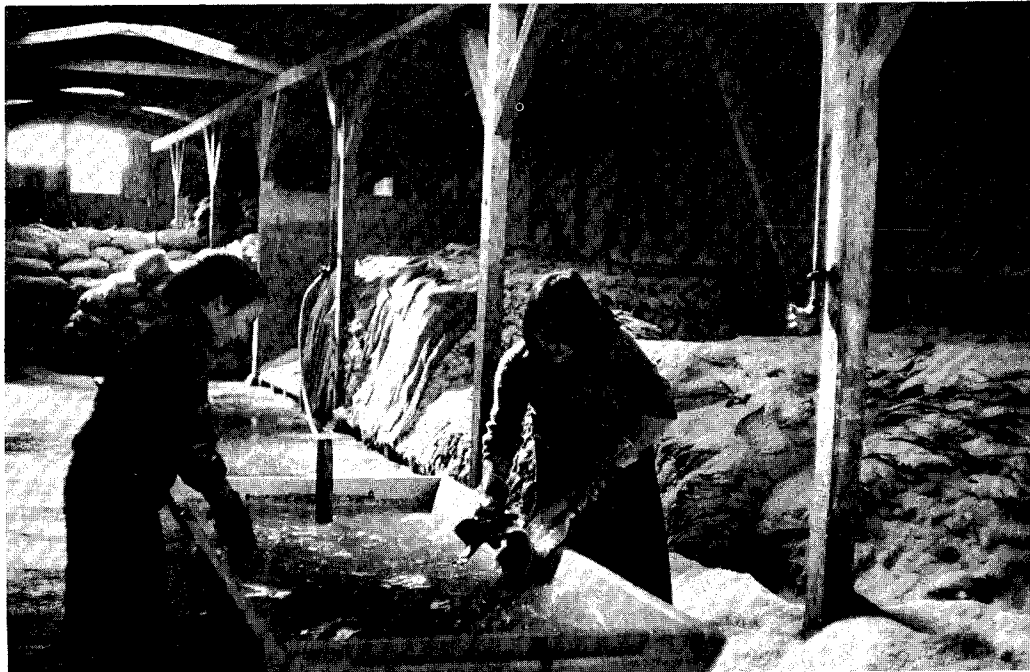
Godthåb, August 1967



Fish processing at Godthåb



Qôrnoq, August 1967



Fish processing at Qôrnoq

pletely destroyed by fire came as these lines were being typed), and several days in the fish freezing plant.

After a week, Trevor Lloyd left by helicopter to continue on up the coast. He eventually visited Thule and the Inge Lehmann seismological station up on the icecap. I saw him off at the Godthåb heliport and then stepped into one of the repaired choppers for a "test flight" to inner Godthåbfjord. The flight's purpose was also to survey a location for an alternative landing place when Godthåb was weathered in. The place selected was near a village called Qôrnoq, about 50 kilometers northeast of Godthåb.

Qôrnoq is a dying village. Today's population of 131 souls is the same size as in 1930. But that was after a drop-off from 1960's 226 people. Empty houses stood about the idyllic hillside over Qôrnoq; the morning was calm and sunny, with a crisp sparkle to the air. The climate of Greenland gets better as one leaves the outer coast. The people who have moved from Qôrnoq to take up the "city" life of Godthåb must long for the simple life of their beautiful homestead.

The smaller places in Greenland have not died out completely. Fishermen of Qôrnoq still sail out into the fjord for cod. The dry and sunny climate of Qôrnoq is more suited for drying fish than at the towns along the outer coast. Fish is also salted for export at Qôrnoq. Most of the washing and salting is done by women, while the men catch and clean the fish.

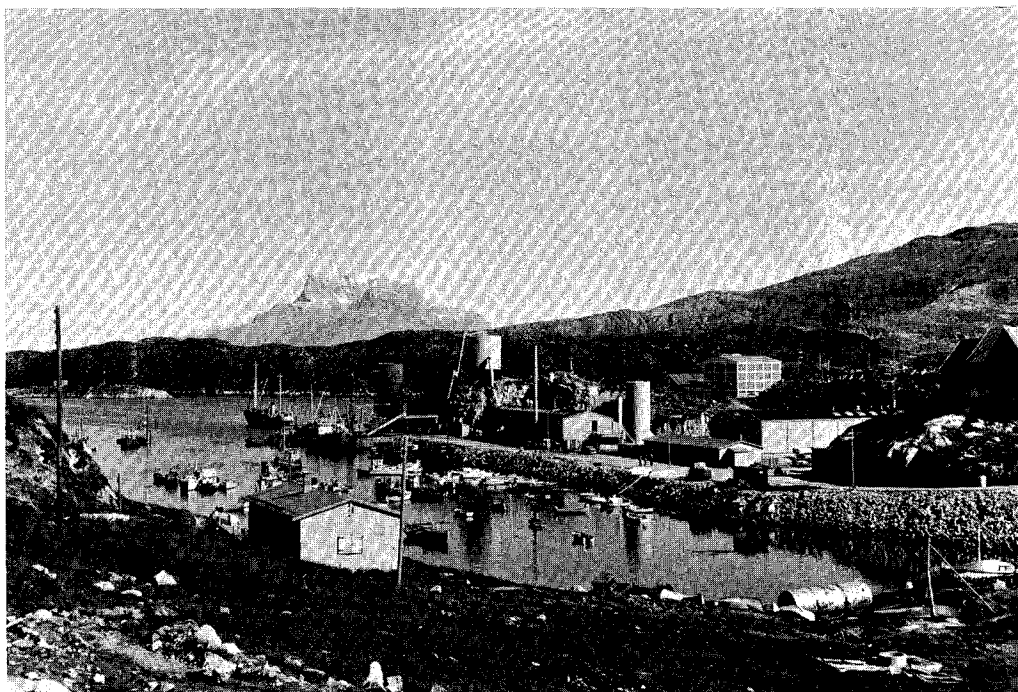
The flight back to Godthåb took only 18 minutes. I listened for some flaw in the turbines, but there was none and we arrived back safely. The second helicopter was now repaired, successfully tested, and cleared for operations.

After two weeks in Godthåb it was time to move north again. The end of August had come, and I had to visit several more towns before starting a falcon-banding project in Disko Bay. The arctic summer was waning; autumn in Greenland, if there is such a season, is a fleeting thing.

The helicopter to Sukkertoppen took 45 minutes. Sighting the old fishing station at Tovqussaq from aloft reminded me of the dark night, many years ago, when we crawled up slithery rocks in a drenching rain to spend the night at Claus Sørensen's camp there. We were in search of a vessel to carry us north for trapping white falcons. The first person we met was Peter Freuchen, who eventually helped us on our way. Peter Freuchen is gone; the Tovqussaq station burned. Claus Sørensen, now a robust 80 years, was the first man to try private fishing in Greenland. That attempt, as others, failed. Sørensen is back again in Greenland and last year sent a load of salmon worth one million kroner back to Denmark.



Godthåb from the air. August 1967



The fishing harbor at Godthåb. August 1967

Handelschef Arne Hansen met me at Sukkertoppen, and made arrangements for my stay. He also found a boat to take me up to Kangâmiut, a small fishing village fighting the trend towards urbanization in Greenland.

Kangâmiut lies near the northern limit of waters remaining ice-free in winter. It has always been a good fishing town with energetic and clever people. But places like Kangâmiut have little future in Greenland. The plans for tomorrow's Greenland center around the four so-called "open water" towns: Holsteinsborg, Sukkertoppen, Godthåb, and Frederikshåb. Future investment will favor these places--housing to encourage people who want to move from smaller villages, investment in water works, roads, electricity plants, factories, schools, and hospitals. The investment, even though large, must be rational and not spread too thinly. A few large-scale projects make more sense and are more economical than many smaller ones.

Kangâmiut has changed little since I first visited the place. The men have larger boats and are landing more fish. New housing has been raised (photo); there is a new school and improved water supply, and its population increases slowly each year, reaching 700 in 1967. But the rugged, rocky island on which Kangâmiut snuggles offers little



An apartment house at Kangâmiut. September 1967



Fishing cutters at Sukkertoppen. September 1967

promise for expansion. Kangamiut has no electricity, no roads, no cars, no telephones. The town looked even more insignificant from the helicopter on the way from Sukkertoppen to Søndre Strømfjord. Most passengers probably didn't see the town as we flew past. The future will probably also pass by without much of a nod.

At Sukkertoppen the story has been much different. Here is the best fishing town in Greenland with over 2,000 inhabitants. Natural conditions are rather worse than at other places in Greenland. A rugged, rocky shore resisted for a long time, but blasting powder has leveled enough flat ground for building. Sukkertoppen should be studied by anyone who doubts that a town can be carved out of rock. One sunny Sunday morning I talked with several of the leading fishermen of Sukkertoppen. They were young and full of drive. They have shown in later years that initiative (and a rugged constitution against the rigors of a fishing life in Greenland) can pay off handsomely. They stand as good examples for young men in other Greenlandic towns. If the future of Greenland rests with the fishermen of Sukkertoppen and the spirit they represent, let no man worry.



Michael Heilmann, Niels Carlo Heilmann, and Daniel Heilmann--
fishermen of Sukkertoppen

At Søndre Strømfjord I picked up a trapping companion and headed north for Egedesminde to see another West Greenland town in rapid expansion. After a while we left for our trapping grounds to seek the white falcon. That venture closed my trip to Greenland and a busy summer. Everything went well on the final dash to beat winter. Although snow fell and the salt water near our camp froze in the first warning of winter, we were able to carry out our plans and still reach Denmark by the end of September. But the falcon trapping is another story and will be coming soon as a part of "Falcons and Me".

Sincerely,

Bill Mattox

W. G. Mattox

Received in New York February 26, 1968