The long journey to publish Nunatsiaq News

A personal recollection – part 1

Michael Roberts, Publisher

In late 1961, we left Ottawa for Sugluk (now Salluit) after my father, A. Barry Roberts, had completed six months training as a northern administrator. The journey, mostly by Austin Airways DC-3, would take three weeks. Before instrument flying, weather meant you stayed put.

On the flight from Povungnituk to Ivujivik, the Inuk woman beside me offered me an apple. I didn't know it at the time, but it was a very generous gift. Fresh fruit was rarely seen for the next three years.

I was nine years old.

My father was an adventurer. He was a young reporter in England for the Cannock Advertiser shortly after the Second World War. After meeting my mom Pat on Victory in Europe Day in 1945 they married, had me and then quickly decided to move to Canada.

He got a job with De Havilland. As chief technical writer, he created the operations manuals for the Beaver and Otter bush planes. Then he saw an ad for "Northern Service Officer in Canada's Arctic."

So the family, with my younger brothers Steven and David, came north. In Povungnituk, we stayed for a week. A helpful teacher, Mick Mallon, planned out correspondence courses for me, as the highest grade in Salluit at that time was Grade 2.

Overnighting in Ivujivik, we saw a movie. We sat at the back and, as the place filled, chairs were turned away from the screen and towards us. I asked the person beside me why. She replied, "they didn't know that white people came in small sizes."

Our three years in Salluit is another story. But I met great friends like Noah Koperqualuk, Adamie Kalingo, and the late Putilik Papigatuk. As a child, I had numerous adventures from falling in the water while floe-jumping way out in the bay to a solo encounter with a polar bear. He wasn't hungry that day.

Arctic travel is always an adventure. This Austin Airways DC-3 crash-landed on the Salluit ice strip, crushing the landing gear and ruining a propeller. (Photo by A. Barry Roberts) ᐅᑭᐅᖅᑕᖅᑐᒥ ᐊᐅᓪᓚᔪᓂᒥ ᖃᐅᔨᓴᓇᓕᐅᕆᔨᖅᓴᖅ. ᐅᓗ Austin Airways DC-3 ᑲᑕᒃᓗᓂ-ᑐᖃᓪᓚᑕᐅᕆᔨᖅᓴᖅ ᓴᓪᓗᐃᑦ ᓄᑎ ᒥᕐᕕᖏᓐᓄᑦ, ᓄᖃᓂᑎᓚᓪᓗᓂ ᒥᔭᔪᑎᖏᕐᓂ ᐊᒻᒪ ᓄᖃᐃᓪᓗᓂ ᐸᐅᖃᐅᔨᒥᑲᒃ. (ᐊᑲᓪᓚᐅᖅᑕᐅᔨᖅ A. ᐱᐊᓚ ᖃᐅᔨᖅ)

The Roberts family in Salluit. Clockwise from top right: Pat, Barry, Michael, Steven and David. (Photo by Claire Wright) ᖃᐅᖅ ᐃᓚᒋᑦ ᓴᓪᓗᓂᓂ: ᖃᐅᔨᓴᐅᑎᑎᑐᑦ ᖃᓄᐃᓚᓂ ᑕᓕᖅᐱᖏᒥ: ᐸᑦ, ᐱᐊᓚ, ᒪᐃᔪᓐ, ᓄᑎᖅᓴ ᐊᒻᒪ ᑕᐃᕕᑦ. (ᐊᑲᓪᓚᐅᖅᑕᐅᔨᖅ ᑭᓕᐊᖅ ᖃᐃᑦᔪᑦ)

While in Salluit, my father supervised building the first road and constructing the first "matchbox" houses.

Three years later we moved to Fort Chimo (now Kuujjuaq) before we moved south for school. There, my best friend was Mark Gordon, who would tragically die in his 20s after being chief negotiator for the James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement. My friends in the Koneak, May, Watt and Gordon families would go on to become leaders: mayors, presidents, senator and even Governor General.

After leaving the North and being nicknamed "Nanook" in high school, not kindly, I did a stint at Queen's University in Kingston, Ont. I needed to escape some poor 1970s lifestyle choices and my father offered me a job as an enrolment fieldworker for the James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement. I'd get to go back to Salluit and Kuujjuaq.

In Salluit, the kids followed me down the street, calling "Mikualuk!" which I was named after a growth spurt in earlier years.

I had an appointment with town council in the same building my father presided over as administrator. The whole council looked out the window as I arrived on a borrowed snowmobile. Unfortunately, I forgot to turn if off on dismounting so they got to watch me chase it down the street.

In 1978, my father decided to quit his contracting business, and Steven and I formed a fledgling company called Nortext. David joined shortly after.

We had no money but got a contract from the Department of Northern Affairs to publish an English/Inuktitut newspaper called Igalaaq about training and education.

We had several journalism trainees of whom the most successful was Rita Novalinga, who became editor. She then went on to head the co-ops, Kativik School Board, and was elected secretary-treasurer of Makivvik. On that election night, I got a text, "not bad for your old trainee!"

At Nortext, we were an early adopter of computers, as publishing with the IBM Selectric typewriter with its "syllabic ball" was not ideal. We invested in Compugraphic typesetting terminals and adapted a syllabic font created by the N.W.T. government to finally get a working typesetting system for syllabics.

A few years later we decided to develop our own font. We partnered with the Baffin Divisional Board of Education. We drew the characters on foot square boards and then had them digitized in Boston.

During the design process, we made many decisions. One of the most important was to establish a middle line in the syllabic characters, as in Roman text, to make reading faster and easier.

Our font was then converted into the first syllabic desktop publishing font and then to the first Internet font, nunacom. This work has influenced syllabic typography to this day in Inuktitut, Cree and other syllabic writing systems.

In 1983, I attended the Inuit Circumpolar Council conference in Iqaluit. I got a call from Tagak Curley. He said, "I've got someone I want you to meet." It was John Hickes, recently appointed head of Nunasi Corporation. We had lunch at the Frobisher Inn.

We ordered our lunch and waited almost two hours to be served. After small talk and going over business plans, we started talking about the future. The land claim agreement was to be signed shortly. There would be a need for communications. Inuit needed to play a role.

We came up with the idea of a majority Inuit-owned publishing company, based in Iqaluit and serving the Arctic. It would hire and train Inuit in publishing and communications.

Six months later we formed Nunatext Publishing Corporation, 51 per cent owned by Nunasi and 49 per cent owned by Nortext, which was still owned by the Roberts family.

A few months later, I got a phone call. Nunatsiaq News was for sale.

(This is the first of a two-part series about the history of Nunatsiaq News, which is marking its 50th anniversary in 2023. To be continued in Part 2.)

Michael Roberts is the publisher of Nunatsiaq News.