



The PEOPLE of NunatuKavut

By Jenny McCarthy

The communities of NunatuKavut dot the long stretch of coastline for hundreds of kilometres along the southernmost corner of Labrador. Sandy beaches, wharves, rows and rows of crab pots, and houses overlook the bays that carry icebergs in the spring and shelter whales in the fall.



The Thule Inuit migrated here over 500 years ago. The ancestors of these Inuit still live here today. They do not live in the same sod houses as their ancestors of generations before them, and the language has been largely lost, but they are the product of an unbroken line of Inuit lineage that dates back to those first migrants in the 1500s.

"This is what Inuit culture looks like in the 20th century, with all the pressures and influences that have been

exerted on our people for hundreds of years," said NunatuKavut president Todd Russell.

Growing up in Southern Labrador, Russell was always aware of his aboriginal roots and constantly reminded of them. In a time when shame was associated with aboriginal identity, he and other Inuit-Metis were called many different names. "Half-breed" and "Skimo" were some of the more common names they were known as by outsiders and other non-aboriginal

people. The derogatory names created a stigma that would for a long time keep people silent about their aboriginal roots.

Years later, these same aboriginal people, like Russell, struggled to define themselves in a way that could show the pride they felt in their identity.

Although records existed, little was known outside of Labrador about the "Inuit-Metis" and their history at that time. But the people themselves knew who they were, said Russell.

"All the research and archeology has shown the rest of the world who we are. We have always known," he said.

The elders of NunatuKavut, and the knowledge passed down by their parents and grandparents, helped uncover the southern Inuit homes that have been excavated along the south coast. Only a small number of sites have been uncovered so far but the presence of a year-round Southern Inuit population is well-documented by many who have explored the coast from the first explorers to Labrador to modern-day researchers such as archeologist Dr. Lisa Rankin.

Researchers have determined there was no break in Inuit occupation of

the lands of NunatuKavut. Just as the Inuit of the North Coast of Labrador are the direct descendants of the Inuit who first migrated there, so too are the Southern Inuit direct descendants of the first Inuit to the southern coast.

The academic consensus is that Inuit were in constant and widespread occupation of the south coast of Labrador long before the 1700s. At the time of the arrival of Moravian missionaries in 1765, the southern Inuit were unfamiliar with the area north of Groswater Bay and referred to Hamilton Inlet (then Esquimaux Bay) as their territory.

The Inuit of NunatuKavut fished and hunted off the south coast of Labrador for hundreds of years and enjoyed these rights even after mixing with the new European populations.

In modern days, the people of NunatuKavut began to be refused some of these rights.

In the late 1970s it became necessary to come together as a group to protect the traditions they had always known and the land they had always inhabited.

For years the Inuit and European descendants living along the south coast were told they were just "mixed

blood.” They self-identified as Inuit-Metis and so they took this name to affirm their place in Labrador and formed an organization, the Labrador Metis Association.

As the organization grew, so too did the confidence of the group. They protested to gain back rights recently taken away and to protect the land they had always called home. Then in 2010, they decided to take back the right to self-identify. No longer would other people tell them who they were. They became NunatuKavut, an Inuit word used to describe an ancient land, a home for the people.

“A sovereign people, an independent people always have the right to name themselves,” said Russell.

He said the people of NunatuKavut felt proud of their Inuit roots and wanted to take away the cloud of shame that came with the names everyone else called them.

“The name change was to better reflect the nature of our people, the essence of our communities, and the lifestyle that we lead.”

Russell said there is confusion from others about who the people of



Many members of the NunatuKavut still wear traditional outerwear and regularly hunt, fish, and trap.

NunatuKavut are. He said the group may have changed its name but they have remained the same.

“The interesting thing is that the people, the history, has not changed. We are the Inuit of Southern Labrador,” he said.



NunatuKavut president Todd Russell.

NunatuKavut has more than 5,000 members who live from L'Anse Au Clair along the Labrador Straits to Labrador City, more than 1,100 kilometres away. For the most part they still carry out the traditional activities of their ancestors, hunting caribou and seal, trapping, fishing and craft-

ing. Many people still keep dog teams and travel by snowshoes in the winter. Hunting and harvesting still supply much of the local food supply.

The people of NunatuKavut still continue to fight to be fully recognized. Although the Inuit of the North Coast have had their land claim recognized, as have the Innu of Labrador, the federal and provincial governments have thus far not come forward to negotiate with NunatuKavut on their land claims.

Researchers who work in the NunatuKavut lands continue to find evidence of the direct lineage. Earlier this year, a film was completed by some of these researchers documenting this heritage. It is called the People of NunatuKavut and will be airing on national television this summer season. Check out NunatuKavut's website at www.nunatukavut.ca for more on NunatuKavut, their history and the work done by the NunatuKavut Community Council who represent the people of NunatuKavut. ✂

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