

HISTORY & CULTURE

RIVER MAN

Nature was my university

A lot of people thought a lot of James 'Jimmy' Spence. He was a tall, barrel-chested man with a weathered face and leathery hands, respected equally for his kindness and his knowledge of the land. A larger than life figure in a land known for its larger than life characters.

Born at the turn of the century, February, 13, 1900, he grew up at York Factory, then still a tiny fur trade-era settlement. He worked as a trapper, leaving school to join the Hudson's Bay Company at a young age.

For a time, he worked on a York Boat, hauling furs between Norway House and York Factory. After that, he spent fifteen years running dog teams out of Shamattawa. Working as a Hudson Bay Company 'fur tripper', he would be on his own for weeks at a time, delivering supplies and exchanging furs to remote traplines. He learned the meaning of hard work and a genuine respect for the land.

In 1939, he relocated with his first wife to Churchill and soon joined the crew of the schooner, *Fort Severn*, hauling supplies up and down the length of the bay. They would deliver mail and supplies to remote posts such as Chesterfield Inlet, Baker Lake and Igloolik to the north; Moosonee and Fort Severn to the south. There were few men as familiar with Hudson Bay.

Even as trapping declined, it remained a way of life for many of Churchill's pioneers. Jimmy Spence was no exception. Soon after arriving in Churchill, he built a cabin across river at Mosquito Point, carving out a home with his second wife, MaryAnn Gray. From there, Jimmy, and his trapping partner, Simeon Spence, would travel up river. He built a shack out on his trapline, down by mile 474-445 on the east side of the Churchill River.

They would travel there by boat in the summer and dog team in winter, gone for days or weeks at a time, living off the land, trapping and travelling. They used to go up Goose Creek and up the river once it broke: fishing in Herriott Creek, hunting on the islands.

Larris Spence, Jimmy and MaryAnn's son, remembers waiting for his father



James (Jimmy) Spence guides his boat across the Churchill River, returning from a tour to Prince of Wales Fort

and uncle to return. 'If Jimmy and Simeon said they would be home on Wednesday, by the afternoon, we would start watching up river. Eventually, we would see a dogteam in the distance and by the time they got home, my mother, MaryAnn would have supper ready.'

MaryAnn, his second wife, is remembered as loving and caring, funny and courteous. Larris recalls, 'She was the type of woman that would do anything for you.'

'She worked hard with him (Jimmy). She would skin, cut and dry the furs, make snowshoes, put meat away, cut up the meat and fish. She would carry wood on her back - there was no such thing as loading a truck, you carried it on your back.'

Jimmy lived his life on the land and was at ease on the trapline. Larris remembers, 'One time I was up river with my dad and we got stranded, high winds and we couldn't travel. We weren't worried, we lived on caribou and geese. He had cabins and tents in different places, in case he had to bed down somewhere for the night.'

'I traveled a lot with my mom and dad by boat, fishing, hunting, camping. They tried to teach me how to respect the water and the weather but all I wanted to do was play.' Larris continues, 'My dad would teach me how to look at the clouds - how far away, which way they were traveling, which way the wind was blowing - if the clouds were coming against the wind, bad weather was on its way. You had to know this stuff, it was just part of life.'

Like many of Churchill's pioneers, Jimmy adapted as time changed. Once he began to wind down from trapping, he worked variably as a hunting and fishing guide, a whaler, a guard for the R.C.M.P. and even skinned polar bears for the Department of Natural Resources.

In his later years, he stayed in touch with the land. Larris explains, 'He would say that he got his university from the land, from the water, the weather, from the animals and the birds.'

'He was a river man right to the end, always had two boats and a few motors. Once he couldn't travel out on the land anymore, he still took tourists over to Prince of Wales' Fort.'

Jimmy Spence took pride in showing Churchill to visitors, in getting to know people and in making a difference. He used to go out and meet people at the train station, then take them across to see Prince of Wales Fort; guiding people by boat during the summer and in winter, running dog team tours across to the fort.

By this time, Jimmy and his family had moved down to the end of Kelsey Boulevard, Churchill's main street. It was an old house given to him from the Harbours Board, nicknamed the 'House of Many Colours'.

Larris recalls, 'the 'house of many colours' used to be a house for kids to go to before my parents got it, that's why it was all those colours. Jimmy didn't give a shit what colour it was, as long as it was a roof over his head, that's the way he was. His heart was

on the land, fishing and camping up river.'

Lorraine Brandson, curator of the Eskimo Museum, spent a lot of time with Jimmy and MaryAnn. She remembers Jimmy and the House of Many Colours fondly. 'Taking the boat to the fort with Jimmy Spence was really something. It was authentic, a real experience. You went to his house, his wife could be plucking geese while you were waiting, sitting with them, waiting for the tide to be right to go across river.'

'When there were tourists aboard, sometimes he'd make the motor konk out half way across the river. He would make it look like there was something wrong and then try to look all worried that it wasn't going to start. And you knew that because he had done it all before.' She pauses, thinking before continuing with a smile, 'But then again maybe it wasn't always on purpose...'

'He just knew what made people happy, once you got the motor started, that's going to be the best part of their story of going to the fort. When you were travelling with him, you just knew that this person is real, they are from here, they know the place and they love this place. This was someone that had lived the trapper lifestyle.'

Jimmy Spence touched many people's lives, visitors and residents alike. At the end of our interview, Larris pauses, thinking about his father, 'I never understood when I was growing up. But now, I understand what made him tick: He loved people and he lived it. He used to joke around, play little tricks and laugh. He just enjoyed company, enjoyed making people happy.'

It has been almost thirty years since Jimmy passed away but his name still commands an air of respect in this town, usually accompanied by a story and a smile.

- prepared by Kelsey Eliasson, based on an interview with Larris Spence. This article is adapted from the story, River Man, in a forthcoming book of short stories about Churchill - if you have stories to share or know someone who does, send an email to kelsey@polarbearalley.com or find me around town!

BIRDS AND THE BEES

NICE MELONS

Whale Watching is Fine, Just Don't Stare at Their Melons

It is thought that at least 3000 beluga whales return to summer in the Churchill River estuary, reaching peak numbers by late July. They travel with the tides, entering and exiting the Churchill River twice a day, fishing on the tidal lines, basking in the warm waters (relatively speaking) and socializing.

Beluga whales are mid-sized whales. They measure up to 14' and can weigh 1000kg, the males 1.5 times the size of females. They travel from their winter home in northern Hudson Bay and Hudson Strait, swimming slow but steady. This year, the first whales arrived on Friday, June 15th, scouts for an oncoming invasion.

They appear as periodic ice floes, only their smooth dorsal ridges breaking the surface of the water. It is not until

you are peering down into the green saltwater tide or even swimming underwater that their appearance takes on an entirely new dimension. Swimming under and around your boat, these white whales take on an eerie, otherworldly glow as they turn their head to meet your gaze.

And it is their head that truly sets beluga whales apart from other whales. Plopped on top of an otherwise dolphinesque profile is a blob of fat called their 'melon', an obese appendage completing an alien theme.

The melon is for more than looks, of course. It is a means of communication, transmitting and receiving, almost a big, fatty GPS unit sitting on your nose.

Beluga whales spend much of their time under the sea ice, in a dark and mysterious world. Without light, belugas must live and travel in a world of sound.

Sound travels easily and quickly underwater, over four times faster than

on land. Belugas most commonly use a series of rapid clicks for navigation.

These series of clicks, called trains, are emitted by pushing air through their blow hole. The beluga basically 'shoots' a beam of sound (the train) through the water, changing the shape of its melon as it 'aims' the sound in a certain direction. By deflecting and focusing the sound, the melon plays a crucial role for the whale to communicate.

As these 'trains' hit an object, they bounce back to the whale. Since beluga whales have no external ears, this 'echo' is actually heard by the whale through their jaw bone. Vibrations travel through the jaw into the inner ear and are interpreted by the brain into a map of their underwater world.

This is called 'echolocation', similar to the method used by bats. Beluga whales are very adept at echolocation, even able to receive echoes reflected from the surface of the sea ice.

They are smart animals with big brains that are wired delicately and complicated, more complicated than ours, a hint of superior intelligence.

Echolocation is just one part of beluga whale culture. They vocalize with a wide variety of squawks, chirps, burps and whistles. Researchers have identified at least sixteen different vocalizations.

They also seem to use facial expression and body contact as further expression. They are the only whale without a fused vertebrae in their neck, allowing belugas to turn and cock their head, only adding to the already wide range of underwater communication and adding to their truly alien appearance.

As more whales return and get comfortable in their summer home, more vocalizations can be heard. Try it for yourself, on a tour or from the beach, by an underwater microphone called a hydrophone or simply putting your head into the water!

- prepared by Kelsey Eliasson



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