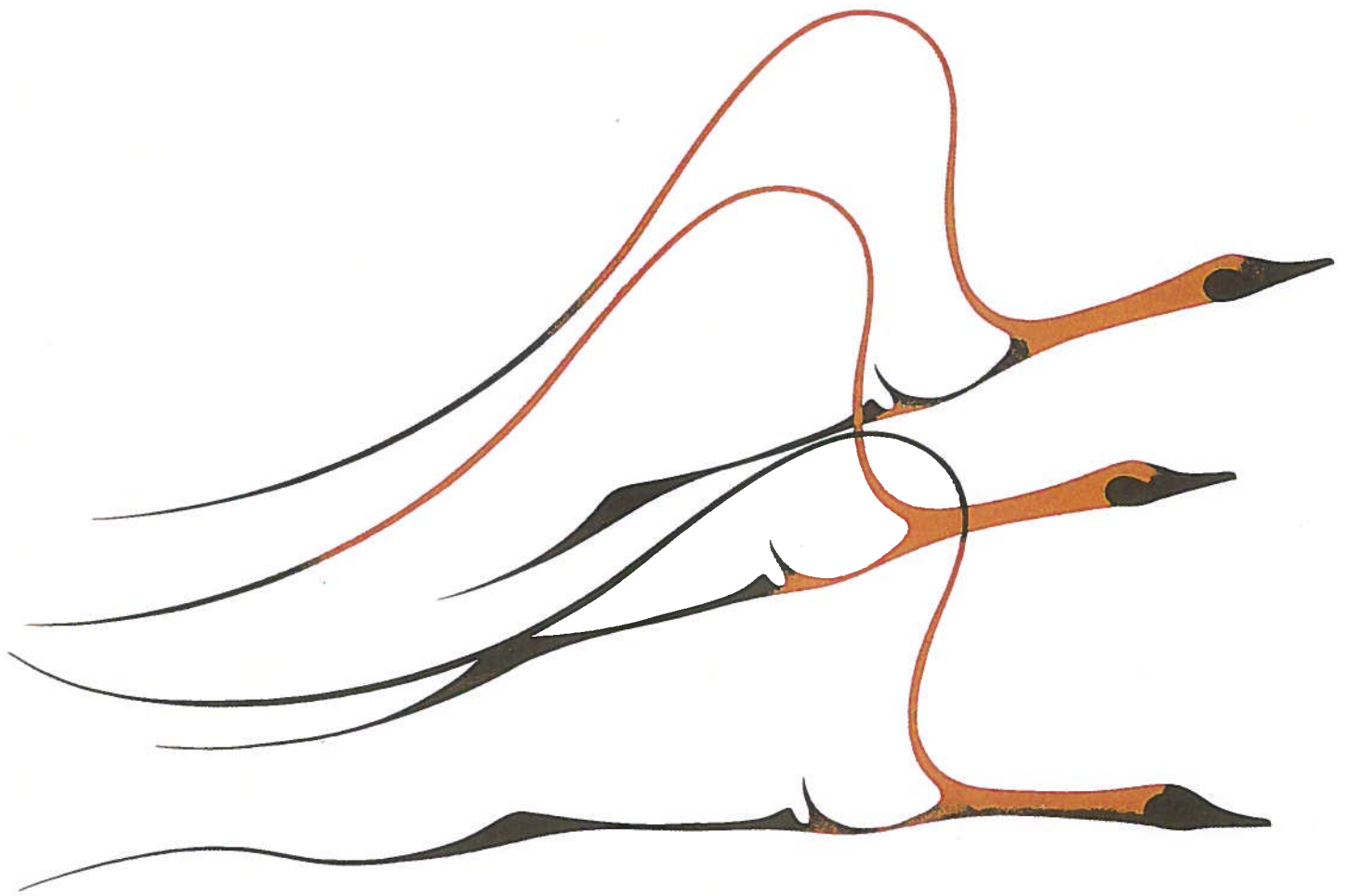


# The Beaver

SPRING 1977



*Suzanne Chu*  
Chu '76

# The Beaver

MAGAZINE OF THE NORTH

*Editor: Helen Burgess*

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**COVER:** A painting of birds in flight by Benjamin Chee Chee, gifted young Ojibway who died tragically by his own hand on 14 March 1977.

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# THE WRECK OF THE 'FINBACK'

BY W. O. DOUGLAS

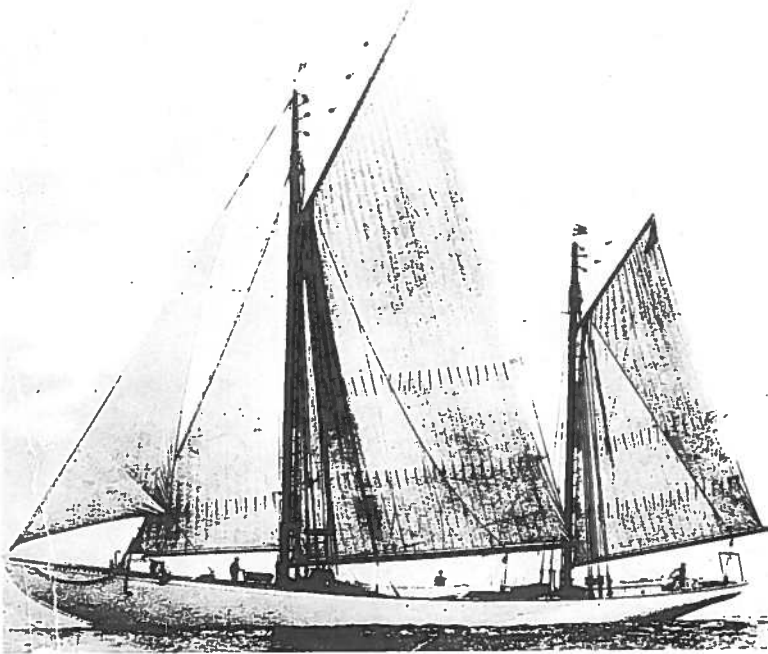
*Mr Douglas sailed into the Arctic in 1916 and served there for 17 years, first with the RNWMP and then with the Hudson's Bay Company.*

IN THE SUMMER of 1919 I had come down to Chesterfield Inlet from the Royal North West Mounted Police detachment at Fullerton to meet the Hudson's Bay Company supply ship *Nascopie*. In those days we, whose duties took us to remote places, had to develop our own methods of getting supplies to our units. The *Nascopie* could not possibly call at every port.

In my case, I had the *Lady Borden*, a well-powered tug, capable of towing a barge with our supplies. At that time, the Hudson's Bay Company was still doing some freighting from Chesterfield Inlet to Baker Lake, using one of the old, half-decked-over coast boats. It was the last of these to see service in the Bay.

While we waited for the *Nascopie* to arrive, I had my meals with the H B C manager, Solomon Ford, and his assistant, Bill Phillips. We had no way of knowing when the ship would come in, so it became customary for someone to maintain a watch on the high hill close to the settlement. There, with a spy glass, he would scan the horizon for that tell-tale puff of smoke which signalled the annual arrival of the ship.

*The yacht 'Finback', later wrecked and purchased with all her equipment and stores by the author for three hundred and ninety dollars.*



On one day that I recall very clearly, the excited lookout raced down the hill to inform us that a string of three small boats — two whale-boats and a motor boat — were crossing the mouth of Chesterfield Inlet from the north. A number of thoughts flashed across our minds. Had something happened to the *Nascopie* and were these the survivors coming toward us?

As the boats rounded the point and made their way into the harbour, some of the men recognized the whaling master, Captain George Comer, who was steering the motor boat. No sooner had he set foot ashore than he greeted me and came over to shake hands. He said that his whaling ship, the converted yacht *Finback*, had been badly holed and was now a wreck on a reef at Fullerton. Therefore, he added, he was placing his crew under my care. The 'distressed foreign seamen' had had only enough food and fuel to get them from the wreck to Chesterfield Inlet. I, as the RNWMP sergeant in command at Fullerton and a representative of the Canadian government, was apparently responsible for their food, shelter, and passage back to civilization.

This situation was beyond my experience, although I did recognize that the men had to be cared for under some sort of international arrangement. The Company manager, Solomon Ford, offered accommodation and food to Comer, his engineer, and mate. Fortunately, I also had at my disposal a small warehouse that I had built to store any police supplies that we might leave at Chesterfield. Here I proposed to house the seven crew members. I managed to borrow a cook stove and some kitchen-ware from the Hudson's Bay Company and assured the men I would do all I could to make them comfortable until the supply ship arrived.

Captain Comer was an experienced arctic whaling captain. His name first appeared on the records as having wintered at Fullerton in 1897; he had had a successful summer and had taken six whales. He returned to the area year after year and knew the waters around Fullerton better than any other man. I admit that a number of doubts crossed my mind. Either the captain or the owners of the *Finback*, I suspected, may have wanted to dispose of the ship.

I had a long chat with Captain Comer about the wreck of his vessel. He explained that the *Finback* was a yacht converted to a whaler. She had an exceptionally deep keel and, he told me, this fact had

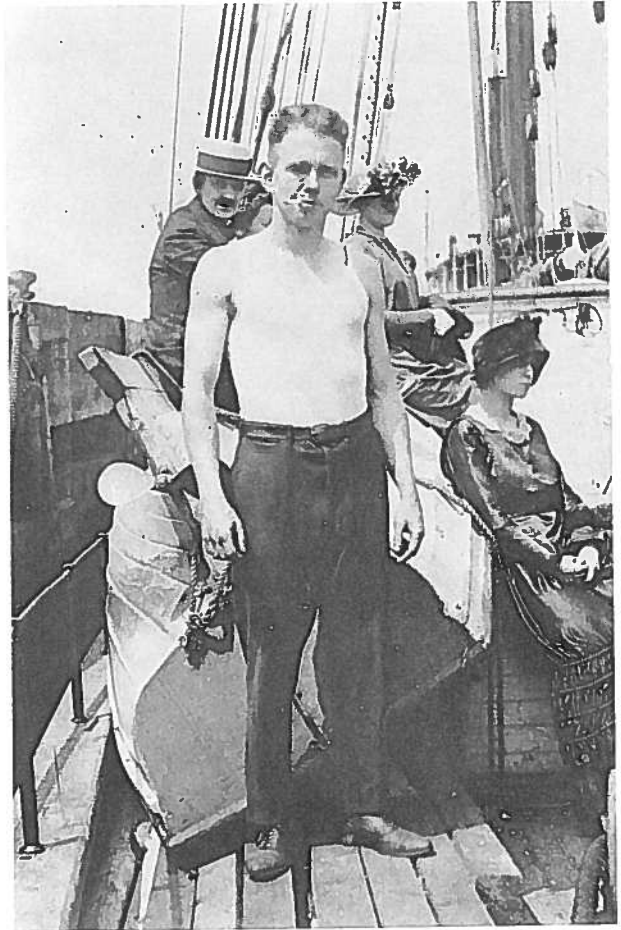
slipped his mind while navigating the waters near Fullerton. I did not quite believe him. I next interviewed the members of the crew. They were rough, violent men — wharf rats was the term Comer used to describe them — shanghaied from a New England port. With the exception of one man, a Swiss who apparently was a watchmaker, they were all potential trouble-makers. I asked Captain Comer if the men were armed. He replied that the only weapon in the group was his own sporting rifle. I believed him until one day an excited Eskimo ran into the Company building to inform me that fighting had broken out among the seamen, and that shots were being fired. I immediately got in touch with Captain Comer.

Comer was then, so he told me, over seventy years of age. He was a powerfully-built man, not much over average height, but rugged and fit.

'Shall I go out and beat them up, Sergeant?' he asked me. 'If I do, you will charge me with assault so you had better investigate this yourself.' He added that he admired me as a policeman but he knew I would never have been able to handle a shanghaied crew on a whaling ship. I confronted the men, explained to them that they were in a foreign country, that they were breaking its laws and liable to imprisonment. Unless we came to some understanding, I warned them, we were in for long-drawn-out legal complications.

I then suggested that they all step down to the wharf and throw the revolvers that they were carrying out into deep water. They agreed and we came to an amicable agreement. No harm had been done but the

*The scene aboard the 'Finback' as the ship prepares to leave New York harbour. The ship's engineer stands in the foreground.*



*The manager's house at Chesterfield Inlet (far left) as it was when Captain Comer, his engineer and mate, were lodged there.*





WHALING MUSEUM, NEW BEDFORD

*The crew of the 'Era' c.1900. Captain George Comer stands in the centre, back row. The Eskimo youngster with him is probably John Ell, who lived aboard the ship with his mother Shoofly.*

possession of dangerous weapons by such an irresponsible group could not be tolerated.

The *Nascopie* arrived; Captain G. H. Mead was in charge and Captain E. Mack, a former master of the vessel, was acting as ice-master until Captain Mead gained more experience. Captain Comer was then able to get in touch with his owners in New York by short-wave radio. They instructed him to put the wrecked *Finback* up for sale by public auction.

Meanwhile I had to persuade Captain Mead to give the foreign seamen passage south. He agreed to take them as far as St John's, Newfoundland; this was the ship's last port of call before returning to her base at Ardrossan in Scotland. The ship, however, did not have sufficient passenger accommodation for Comer's seamen. They were given buckets and brooms and were ordered to clean out the sealers' quarters. This area of the ship was used when the *Nascopie* went out to the ice floes off Newfoundland to harvest young seals.

The accommodation did not please the seamen, and I was later told by Captain Mack that there had been trouble. When fighting broke out Mead (who had taken the precaution of breaking the points off the knives that all the seamen carried) ordered the men to line up on deck. He told them that disorderly

conduct would not be tolerated on a British ship. Captain Comer again volunteered to rough up his crew, but his offer was declined. Comer satisfied himself with giving the men a tongue lashing, a performance in which he excelled. The trouble ended.

When I informed Captain Comer that passage had been arranged as far as St John's, Newfoundland, he was pleased.

'You know, Sergeant' he said, 'I've always wanted to see that city'. He then went on to tell me that once in a thick fog he came close to Newfoundland but that he had not taken the opportunity to visit St John's. When one had a shanghaied crew, he explained, it was a risk to enter any port before reaching the whaling grounds. He added that he did lose one of his crew in the waters off Newfoundland. The man jumped overboard and, I was astounded to learn, Comer made no attempt to lower a boat to save him. Comer reasoned that he had not told the man to jump overboard and his fate effectively persuaded others not to follow his example.

Stories about Comer, and other whaling masters, were always circulating in the north. One story dated back to 1903, when the first police detachment was established at Fullerton. A report came to Superintendent Moodie, the officer-in-charge, that an American sailor was being mistreated — actually

strung up by the thumbs — on a whaling ship in the harbour. This practice was not uncommon in the days of windships.

Moodie sent one of his men to inquire as to the truth of this allegation. The policeman was informed that he was aboard an American ship and what happened was no concern of the RNWMP. Moodie threatened to imprison the captain if this gross mistreatment of his crew did not cease, and reminded him that he was in Canadian waters. Another story from that same year, or the following, was that two seamen who were dissatisfied and causing trouble, got 'lost in a blizzard', although they had a guide and the ship's bosun with them on what they thought was the first stage of their journey to Chesterfield Inlet. These stories are not documented, but Moodie, in his report to RNWMP headquarters in 1903, mentioned that a complaint had been made by one of the crew of the *Era*, Comer's whaling ship of that year.

Although George Comer was harsh with his crew, he had a high regard for the Aivilik people. Their territory extended north from around Whale Point to Lyon's Inlet, where Comer did most of his whaling. He gave his Eskimo crews excellent training; the best of the Aivilik men steered the boats and harpooned the whales, while the regular white crew rowed the whale-boats. When the owners of the *Era* decided to discontinue whaling, because of the failure of the

The RNWMP building at Chesterfield Inlet, built as a warehouse but used by Sergeant Douglas to house the crew of the 'Finback'.



COLLECTION OF W. O. DOUGLAS

Eskimo families in the after cabin of the 'Era'. Comer employed about 70 Inuit at Fullerton in 1903.



WHALING MUSEUM, NEW BEDFORD

Captain Comer was sailing the waters west of Southampton Island when this photo of whale-boats was taken in 1903-04 by A. P. Low.



P. A. C.

market for baleen, Comer wrote to me and asked me to give the whale-boats and whaling gear he had left at Fullerton to his two principal Inuit men. They made good use of the boats and gear and I personally witnessed their killing of two whales within an hour.

Captain Comer frequently came into contact with the Sadlermiut as well but there is no evidence that he employed them with his Aivilik people. In 1910 he wrote a paper in which he described his meetings with the primitive Sadlermiut and published a map that is described in *Arctic Canada from the Air* as the 'most complete and roughly correct map of the island [Southampton], the result of visits to the area between 1896 and 1909.'

Knowing that the Sadlermiut people had been exterminated by disease in 1902-03, Captain Comer apparently attempted to colonize Southampton Island with his Aivilik people. Several families were landed at Cape Kendall, north and west of Bay of God's Mercy. The following year when Comer returned to trade produce and furs, the people told him that the area was unsatisfactory and that they were going to move to South Bay. Captain Toke Munn had established a small post on the island a few miles from the present Coral Harbour location, but he was an indifferent trader who spent most of his two years in travelling. After Munn's departure, Comer's Aivilik people remained on Southampton without any trading facilities. Occasionally they crossed to Repulse Bay when conditions were favourable.

The leader of the group was Oudlanak [John Ell], who had spent some years of his young life in Comer's vessel, the *Era*, with his mother, Shoofly. He had been named John Ell, or properly John L., by the sailors,

all of whom greatly admired the heavyweight boxing champion John L. Sullivan.

After Comer received his instructions to put the *Finback* up for sale, he nailed the notice of a public auction on the door of the Hudson's Bay Company store. Out of curiosity I asked Comer privately what was included in the deal. 'Everything' he replied, 'the boats, all whaling gear and whatever cargo any prospective buyer can salvage from the wreck.' He thought the *Finback* might possibly be re-floated, but he doubted it.

The sale got under way. Captain Comer announced that he had been authorized by his New York owners to put the wrecked vessel up for sale at public auction. Only two half-spirited bidders came forward: Father Turquetil, O.M.I., of the Catholic mission, and Manager Solomon Ford of the Hudson's Bay Company. I was astounded at the low bids and bid a reckless three hundred and ninety dollars. Down came the hammer and I was the owner of a yacht. Unfortunately it was on a reef, eighty miles to the north. I still treasure the bill of sale since it bears the signatures of George Comer, E. Mack and G. H. Mead.

I sold the whale-boats for three times what I paid for them. I then engaged a group of Eskimos to go north and salvage what they could from the wreck. I am still convinced that, had I had the time, or someone who knew how to go about repairing a yacht, I would have had my vessel afloat again. As it was, the Eskimos had a great time, collecting their relatives on the way north and helping themselves to all the canned and other food that was stored, still undamaged, on the *Finback*. My 'employees' were so involved in opening cases to find out what was inside of them that they had little



Father Turquetil who bid on the 'Finback', with L. Ledingham, Chief Engineer (left) and Captain E. Mack (right) of the S.S. 'Nascopie'. In the background is the H B C warehouse at Chesterfield Inlet.

time left to look after my interests. However, they salvaged some deck equipment, whaling gear, and spare sails, and plumbing fixtures that I later found useful when I built the detachment at Chesterfield Inlet. There were two cases of well-oiled rifles, another of telescopes, and all the engine room tools.

I have often wondered if I was amply compensated for my investment in the wrecked *Finback* after I paid all the Eskimos. I never did set foot on my quarter-of-a-million-dollar yacht, but on one particularly calm day, at Fullerton, I leaned over the side of a whale-boat and I saw my 'investment' lying in deep water. It resembled a large white whale. An onshore wind with a heavy ocean swell had combined to push the damaged vessel off the reef and into deep water. Although she had a hole in the port bow, I have always believed that if I had had the time, and the proper equipment, I might have succeeded in beaching her and saving the last of the New England whaling ships to sail the waters of Hudson Bay.

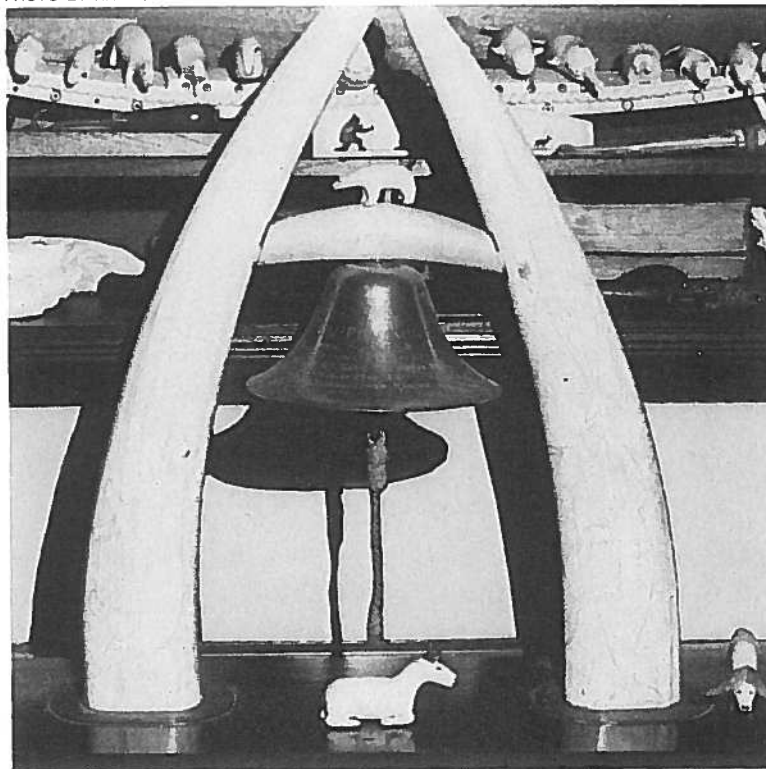
All was not lost however. Flagpoles made from the *Finback's* booms and gaffs were erected at Chesterfield; the first was raised at the RNWMP detachment and the second was placed on Company land when I entered the service of the H B C. I had the ship's bell suspended between two fine walrus tusks and mounted on a hardwood base; this souvenir of the *Finback* is one of my proudest possessions.

My meeting with the shanghaied seamen was also a memorable experience. I interviewed them all, took their names, home addresses and next of kin. One fine-looking lad around 18 had two black eyes and some front teeth missing. I asked him what had happened; he refused to tell me, but another crewman volunteered the information. The young lad had apparently sneaked into the galley to make a snack. He heard Captain Comer coming but before he could escape the Captain had him in a stranglehold and was punching his face.

I gained more insight into Comer's methods of handling a crew when an Eskimo named Bye & Bye came to me with a boy who needed a tooth pulled. I had the equipment but I had never done an extraction. Bye & Bye, noting my reluctance, said 'Do it like Captain Comer used to do it for his crew.' He then explained that the 'black bosun' would force the man's mouth open with a belaying pin; then Comer would cut down the gum on either side of the tooth and flip it out, using a pocket-knife. In the case of my 'patient' however, the tooth was quite slack and easily removed by orthodox means.

After the auction, the list of items with the prices I received for them from the Hudson's Bay Company was sent to York Factory where Chris Harding, the Hudson's Bay District Manager, had his headquarters. When the winter mail packet arrived, it included an acknowledgement of my list of prices;

PHOTO BY RAYMOND BOULTON



The '*Finback's*' bell, suspended between two walrus tusks and mounted on a hardwood base, a focus of interest in the Douglas home in Victoria.

another letter, signed by Mr Harding, suggested that I owed the Canadian government customs duty on the goods and that he, as Collector of Customs, would discuss this with me.

I was due to go out on leave and when I passed through York Factory the district accountant, in the absence of Mr Harding who had gone to Winnipeg on business, gave me a lecture about the customs. I refused to pay or to give a written acknowledgement that I owed money to the government. Then, in Ottawa I went to the Commissioner of Customs, and told him the whole story — the notice on the store door, and the public auction, and I showed him my bill of sale. His deputy was present at our interview and, while the Commissioner took me to lunch, the deputy went into the case. On our return he had his report ready and the Commissioner studied it carefully.

I would have no customs to pay, he informed me, since the vessel was a total wreck, abandoned by her captain and crew and submerged in water. He thanked me for bringing this matter to his attention and decided that henceforth the collection of customs would be done by the RNWMP from the Fort Nelson headquarters.

The purchase of the *Finback* was an unforgettable experience for me. It gave me the opportunity to meet Captain George Comer — the last of the New England whalers who had dominated whaling activities in Hudson Bay for many years. His crew was probably the last to be shanghaied to the Canadian Arctic. ♦