

Happy Jack, Ivory Carver of Nome



Alaska State Library - Historical Collections

Collection Name: Dr. Daniel S. Neuman. Photographs, 1911-1920. ASL-PCA-307
Identifier: ASL-P307-0151
Title: "Happy Jack" the famous ivory carver with his latest wife.
Description: Title taken from album caption. Studio portrait of the couple, dressed in fur parkas.
Creator: Goetze, O. D. (Otto Daniel)
Subject.TGM: Artists
Couples
Men

Subject.LCSH: Women
Subject.Local: Parkas
Subject.Local: Alaska Natives--Northern Alaska--Inupiaq
Personal Name: Happy Jack (Angokwazhuk)
Location: Nome (Alaska)
Region: Northern Alaska
Time Period: 1896 to 1913
Type: Image (Photographs)
Image (Group portraits)
Related Materials: <http://www.ccl.lib.ak.us/uhtbin/cgisirsi.exe/x/0/5?searchdata1=ocm54942847>
Ordering & Use: http://library.state.ak.us/vilda_rights.html
Holding Institution: Alaska State Library - Historical Collections, PO Box 110571, Juneau AK 99811-0571
mailto:ASL.Historical@eed.state.ak.us
Transcript: "Happy Jack" the famous ivory carver with his latest wife.



Anchorage Museum of History & Art. Library & Archives.

Collection Name: O. D. Goetze Collection
Identifier: AMHA-b01-41-225
Title: **Happy Jack & family, Nome, Alaska.**
Description: Title taken from front. Group portrait of Eskimo family, Nome, Alaska, dressed in fur parkas. Photographer's number 1036. n.d.

Creator:

Photographer: O. D. Goetze.
Goetze, O. D. (Otto Daniel)

More about “Happy Jack” Angokwazhuk:

In the late 19th century, Iñupiaq artist “Happy Jack” Angokwazhuk overcame unfortunate circumstances to become the most famous and innovative ivory carver of his time.

Angokwazhuk was born the youngest of three children to his father, Anatawanuk, and mother, Anyayak, sometime in the late 1800s. His actual birth date is not known. His family made his first home in the village of Ayasayuk, near Cape Nome, Alaska. After his father died, Anyayak brought her children to Port Spencer for the annual matrimonial and trade fair. His sister Angyaya met her husband, and Angokwazhuk’s future as an artist began to take shape.

With his sister’s marriage, the family moved to the Diomed Islands in the Bering Strait between Russia and Alaska. Though still young, Angokwazhuk earned a reputation as a skilled hunter and provided for his family on Big Diomed.

When Happy Jack’s sister died, he and his mother moved to Little Diomed. It was here, on a hunting expedition with a partner, that Angokwazhuk’s life changed forever. Drifting ice trapped the two men for almost a month that winter. His companion died, and after finally making it to shore, Angokwazhuk dragged himself home. Both feet were completely frozen and eventually were amputated near the ankle. For the rest of his life, Angokwazhuk walked on two half-foot stumps. His hunting skills were obviously hampered. To make matters worse, the relatives of his hunting partner believed Angokwazhuk had murdered his partner to survive the expedition. Scorned, crippled, and unable to provide for his family, Angokwazhuk focused his attention on another Eskimo tradition: ivory carving.

In her book, *Artists of the Tundra and the Sea*, Dorothy Jean Ray wrote of “Happy Jack” Angokwazhuk’s first recorded contact with white foreigners. “Ivory carving in this part of the world was nothing new,” Ray wrote. “For almost two thousand years ancestors of the Bering Strait Eskimos had designed beautiful things of ivory.” In researching and writing about Happy Jack, Ray has become the foremost authority on his work, and identifying authentic pieces made by the artist.

Walrus ivory and whalebone was first used for utilitarian purposes in Native Alaskan culture. In 1778, Captain James Cook collected drill bows that depicted some of the first artistic Eskimo carvings.

But as Ray explained in her essay “Happy Jack and Guy Kakarook, Their Art and Their Heritage” in *Eskimo Drawings*, the Iñupiat tradition of ivory carving has a mysterious origin. “Two explanations have been proposed: That the Iñupiat borrowed the idea from early explorers prior to Cook’s voyage both in Alaska and Canada; or that their ancestors, the Thule people (A.D. 1200-1800), who had invented the bow drill, independently came up with the idea.”

Before the Alaskan gold rush, Iñupiat contact with foreign white people was limited to the few whalers and adventurers who sailed the Bering Sea. In 1892, Captain Hartson Bodfish commanded a whaling ship that stopped at Little Diomed Island. Upon arriving on the island, Bodfish heard of a particular ivory carver who possessed unique ability, but was unable to come aboard the ship and trade. Bodfish ignored the trading

convention that allowed Natives to barter only on board the visiting ship, and ventured to the artist's home.

Concerning Bodfish's first encounter with Angokwazhuk, Ray wrote, "In spite of the language barrier he immediately took a great liking to the good-natured boy. He was greatly impressed by his ivory carvings, for although the ivory work of the Bering Strait Eskimos was known to be better than that of any other Eskimos of the world, this was marked by the stamp of genius."

Captain Bodfish was so impressed with the young man's friendly disposition and talent that Bodfish offered him a position on his ship. Angokwazhuk was reluctant to leave his home for San Francisco. Naturally, he loved and cherished the land most foreigners considered barren and inhabitable. However, with much prodding, Bodfish convince Angokwazhuk to make the trip. The young man enjoyed the voyage so much that he would later make another.

Angokwazhuk's trip to San Francisco marked his introduction to white American culture and gave versatility to his art. Aboard Bodfish's whaling ship, the crew gave Angokwazhuk the name of "Happy Jack," because of his unique ability to relate with people and trade in spite of language and cultural differences.

Dorothy Ray summarized Happy Jack's nickname by writing, "It was not only Happy Jack's carving ability that set the stage so successfully in those early years, but also his personality. His nickname of Happy Jack was well chosen, for everyone recognized his optimistic and happy spirit, and some did not even suspect that his halting gait was the result of walking around on stumps of legs with the feet cut off."

Happy Jack's carvings reflected his artistic ability to capture images from both Eskimo and white American culture. He carved walrus tusks to combine portraits of Eskimos and villages with cribbage boards. Happy Jack's innovative work suggested a masterful artist with incredible attention to detail. He copied magazine photos in his carvings and was frequently praised when they were more lifelike than the originals.

In the collection of essays titled *Eskimo Drawings*, Dorothy Jean Ray wrote again of the now-famous carver: "Happy Jack was the first professional Alaskan Eskimo artist. He earned substantial income from his art, unlike the many part-time carvers who worked only when the mood struck or when they needed cash. He often helped his fellow carvers in a sort of 'school,' loaning them his tools and ideas, and even selling their pieces for them . . ."

By 1900, Happy Jack was again providing for his family. Only now, he was unwittingly changing Eskimo art. Two years after the first migrants of the gold rush, he moved to Nome and successfully traded with the flurry of miners. Consistent with his personable character, Happy Jack mentored aspiring artists with their own work. He became popular as both an artist and person, so much so that some unknown carvings may be attributed to him incorrectly.

"Happy Jack" Angokwazhuk's innovative and masterful work heavily influenced future Alaskan Native artists before and after his death during the great influenza pandemic of 1918. In her book, *Artists of the Tundra and the Sea*, Ray wrote, "His willingness to try anything suggested to him was an important element in his popularity. Happy Jack was the first to recognize that ivory carving of the future was to be done for a different purpose and for a different culture than before."

More reading:

Be sure to check for availability online through **your local library** catalog at <http://sled.alaska.edu/library.html>. For the statewide **Alaska Library Network** catalog, go to <http://sled.alaska.edu/library.html> and click on **ALNCat**.

Eskimo art : tradition and innovation in north Alaska /

Dorothy Jean **Ray**

1977

English Book xi, 298 p. : ill. ; 29 cm.

Seattle : Published for the Henry Art Gallery by the University of Washington Press, ; ISBN: 029595518X

Libraries with Item:

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AK	KENAI PENINSULA COL, UAA	X@5
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AK	SEWARD COMMUN LIBR	X@3
AK	SHELDON JACKSON COL	Q2X
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AK	VALDEZ CONSORTIUM LIBR	X#2
AK	WILLOW PUB LIBR	X#3

Eskimo drawings /

Suzi Jones

2003

English Book 208 p. : ill., maps ; 23 x 26 cm.

Anchorage, Alaska : Anchorage Museum of History and Art in association with Anchorage Museum Association, ; ISBN: 1885267053

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Painting in the North :

Alaskan art in the Anchorage Museum of History and Art /

Kesler E Woodward

1993

English Book 159 p. : col. ill. ; 25 cm.

Seattle : Anchorage Museum of History and Art : Distributed by University of Washington Press, ; ISBN: 0295973196 (cloth) 029597320X (paper)

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Artists of the tundra and the sea.

Dorothy Jean **Ray**

1961

English Book 170 p. illus. 23 cm.

Seattle, University of Washington Press,

Libraries with Item:

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