



Coppermine Tent Hostel

Nunavut

Kugluktuk is situated at the mouth of the Coppermine River in Coronation Gulf in western Nunavut, about 650 km by air east of Inuvik. The community was formerly known as Coppermine and was located in the Northwest Territories before the creation of Nunavut in 1999. Anglican missionary activity in this settlement and the western Arctic in general commenced in the early 1900s. The indigenous peoples of the area, the Inuvialuit, were small in number and lived in remote settlements that were usually seasonal or temporary. Formal schooling opportunities for these native children were very limited during the first half of the 20th century. Widely scattered mission day schools were the only source of learning, with a curriculum based on religious instruction, English and rudimentary Euro-Canadian subjects. Most Inuit (“Eskimo”) children still followed the steps of their parents who continued to live off the land.

By contrast, most native Indian groups to the south had earlier opportunities for mainstream education, following the implementation of several numbered treaties and the subsequent creation of mandated reserves. The prevailing system of church-run residential schools—most dating from late Victorian times—was expanded to complement or replace existing mission day schools, all receiving government support. The major players were the Anglican and Roman Catholic churches.

Prior to World War I, a few Inuit children were selected for admission to distant Indian residential schools. In the Anglican experience, these students were male and were usually hand picked by local missionaries who anticipated their return to serve the Church in their home communities. Some became catechists and one achieved priesthood after theological training. Approval of the local Indian Agent was required for Inuit to attend “Indian” schools, as these students from the Arctic were not “treaty” children. In 1917, St. Peter’s Indian and Eskimo School opened at Hay River, drawing more Inuit children of mixed gender, most being orphans or from destitute families.

In the 1920s, the Church and government recognized the growing need for a new residential school to better serve Inuit children and be closer to their traditional territory. As the government reviewed possible sites, Anglican administrators selected Shingle Point on the Yukon coast as the site for a temporary and experimental “Eskimo Boarding School.” Ottawa provided a small grant to remodel existing mission buildings. This rather primitive school complex opened in 1929 and closed in 1936 when the new government-built All Saints Indian and Eskimo Residential School (Anglican) at Aklavik was ready to receive students. A similar Catholic boarding school had also been established here in 1925.

After World War II, Ottawa embarked on a program of establishing centralized federal day schools in major communities throughout the Arctic. Most were in place by 1952. A companion program was announced in 1955, calling for several large student residences to be constructed near to many of these new day schools. The hostel program was scheduled for completion by 1960. At Inuvik, the secular Alexander Mackenzie Day School was linked to the large new government hostel, which comprised two identical buildings, Anglican run Stringer Hall and Catholic run Grollier Hall. However, at Coppermine, a different approach was taken.

The concept for an experimental tent hostel was developed in 1951, with Coppermine selected as the best site (over second choice Cambridge Bay). It was to be a hybrid facility, offering Inuit students a sense of continuity in their traditional lives and imparting needed skills through a mix of “land-based” and standard government curriculum. As well, students would be supervised and billeted in tents, which

would more approximate their native housing than would a residential school. The tent hostel would be operated only in the warmer months, April to August.

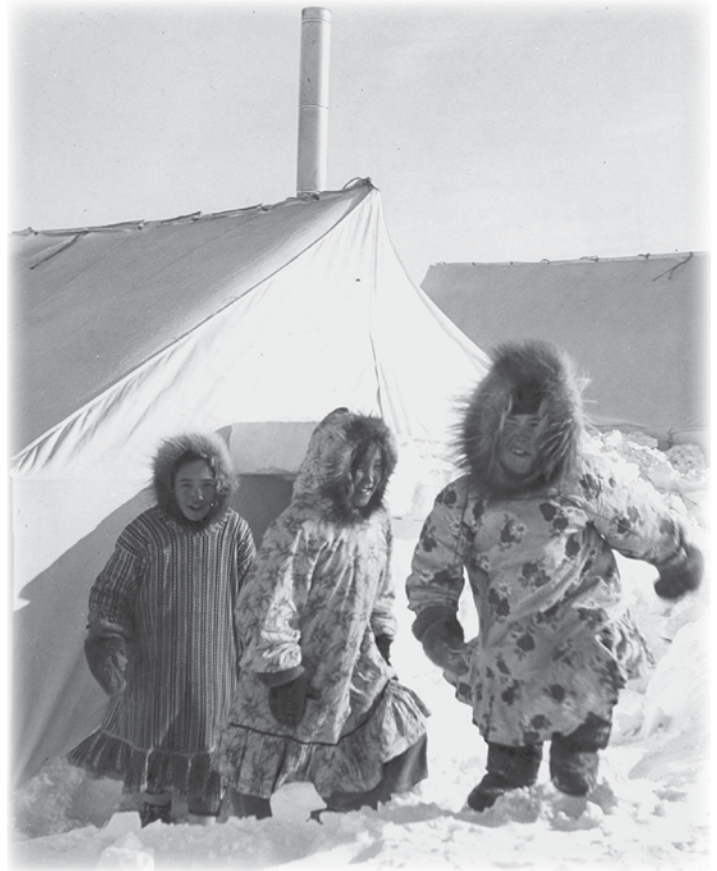
The government realized that most students would return to their communities and engage in family hunting and trapping for a livelihood. However, many were expected to see occasional employment in construction as resource based industries and military projects (D.E.W. Line) required local labour. As this was a pilot program, adjustments would be made in successive years, for the betterment of students, teachers and administrators. In 1951, a trial run was conducted from March 27 to April 15, involving 10 students who were boarded in the teachers' quarters at the day school. The Church was not involved with this initial experiment. A lengthy government review ensued and detailed plans were finally approved in time for an expected opening in 1954. However, construction materials were not received in time, forcing a one-year delay.

On April 15, 1955 the Coppermine Tent Hostel began its first full season, which ran to August 22. The hostel complex had capacity for 30 children (28 actually registered) and they were billeted in 8 tents, erected in a semi-permanent fashion with wood floors and wood half walls and warmed by oil heaters. Each tent accommodated four children, who slept on camp cots. Preparation of meals (in large separate tent) and supervision of children were the responsibility of the Anglican Church, through its associated organization, the Missionary Society of the Church of England in Canada (MSCC). However, formal responsibility for the Coppermine Hostel rested with the Diocese of the Arctic. The Indian School Administration, an agency of MSCC, managed this facility and most of the other Church-run hostels and residential schools throughout Canada. The missionary-in-charge at Coppermine, Rev. J.R. Sperry, selected eligible students. During his absence in 1956, the Day School principal carried out this task. Among the criteria for admittance, children were to be preferably Inuit and between the ages of 9 and 13; live outside Coppermine but not more than 80 km from the settlement (expanded in later years); be in good health; and be of the Anglican or other Protestant faith.

Additional tents were set up in 1956-57, raising total capacity to 44 students. While students may have accepted the arrangements, staff did not. Hostel workers complained about their own crowded lodgings, the cold, and the difficulty in making their supervisory rounds of each tent over icy ground at the start of each season. It was difficult to find and keep staff to work at this remote location where they would have to forgo a normal summer furlough. Kitchen

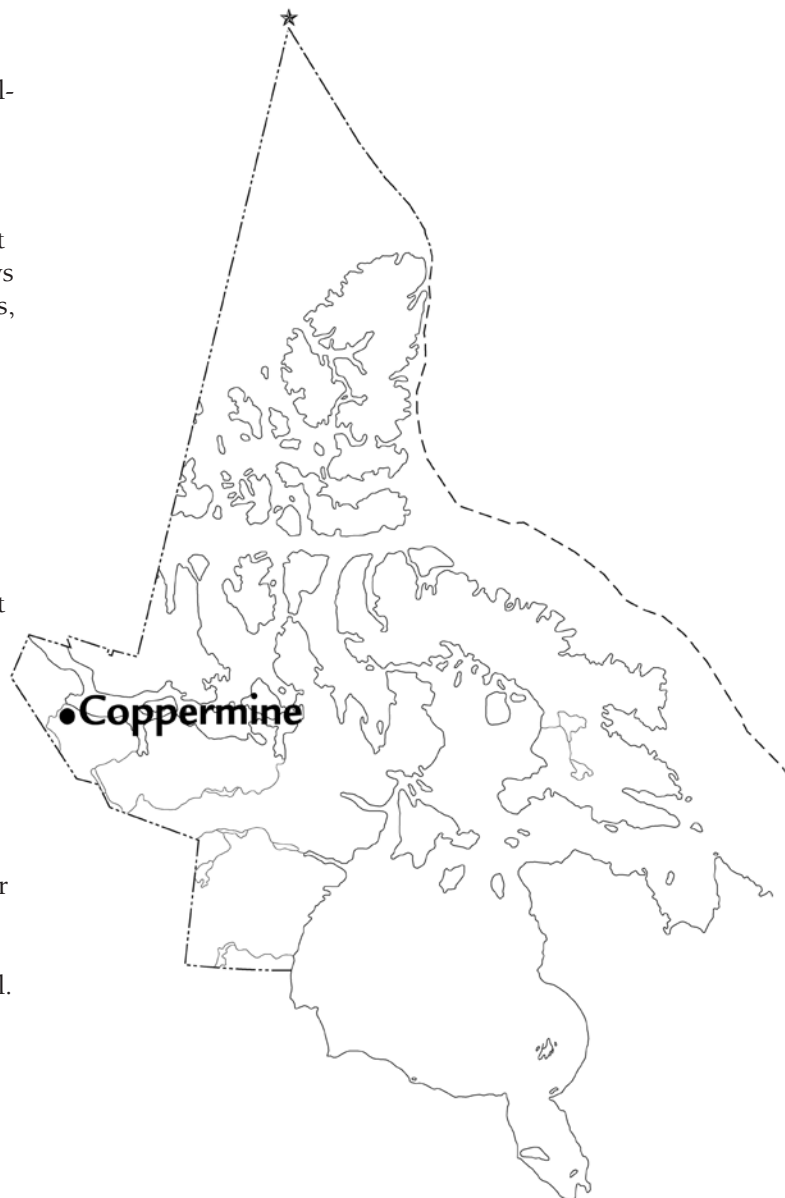
and supervisory staff were usually supplied from All Saints School at Aklavik. These issues, along with chronic problems of under enrolment, inadequate storage facilities, lack of supplies, fire hazard with use of heaters in the tents, and equipment failures did not bode well for the long-term success of the hostel. However, the decision to close the tent hostel at the end of the 1959 season had more to do with Ottawa's realization that the 5-month school year did not provide students with an adequate education. Parents of children also complained and wanted their children to benefit from a full school year and to be placed in a traditional hostel-day school facility, such as that at Aklavik.

The Government reacted by making plans to construct a conventional hostel building for 12 pupils, to replace the tent hostel. However this project was abandoned in favour of having children boarded out within the Coppermine community where they would attend the local Federal Day School. Those who were not accommodated locally were sent to the newly opened Stringer Hall at Inuvik. Anglican Church involvement at Coppermine ended August 30, 1959 when the tent facility was closed and subsequently dismantled.



Milestones

- 1951 Hostel “trial run” conducted March 27 to April 15 with 10 students boarded in teachers’ quarters. Anglican Church is not involved. Lengthy review period and difficulties in receiving construction materials and equipment delay the opening of permanent hostel facility originally scheduled for 1954.
- 1955 First full season of hostel April 15 to August 22, with 28 Inuit children registered—9 boys and 19 girls. Eight tents serve as dormitories, with capacity of 4 students in each.
- 1956 Capacity is raised to 36 with additional tent erected.
- 1957 Maximum capacity of 44 reached with two additional tents (total 11 tent residences). Catchment area is expanded with students enrolled from distant Inuit settlements in the northern Arctic islands, such as Bathurst Inlet, Bernard Island, Cambridge Bay, Holman Island, Richardson Island and Victoria Island. Hostel cannot meet its full complement, as only 29 children are registered, a number that declines in following seasons.
- 1959 Aug. 30 Tent hostel closes and Anglican Church involvement ends. Residential students number about 20 in final year. Some transfer to Stringer Hall at Inuvik the next month; others remain in Coppermine to board with local families and attend Federal Day School.



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