Northern Lights Episode 4
A Harmless Eccentric?

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Interviewees: Alice Qannik Glen, Coffee and Quaq Podcast

George Shaw Interviewed by Mike Dalton and Adriana Coyle in Dawson City, Yukon on August 19, 1973 (used courtesy of the Tanana Yukon Historical Society)

Introduced by: Sarah Mackie

Sarah Mackie
Hello and welcome to Northern Lights, the Harvard Arctic Initiative Student Podcast. Today’s episode was written and produced by Elliot Hunker, a student at the University of Alaska Fairbanks and resident in Talkeetna, Alaska.
Elliot tells us the fascinating – and probably fabricated – story of Arctic explorer Jann Welsall and explores the impact of past generations of explorers on those living in the Arctic today.
This is Elliot Hunker with ‘A harmless eccentric?’.

Elliot Hunker
Part one, a harmless eccentric,

George Shaw: Then there was old Welzel, Jan Welzel. He was quite well known in his native Poland and he got to the stage where he was inventing a perpetual motion machine and had a small cabin, I'd say about 16 by 16. And this I used to see him quite regularly.
And this machine was taking up about four fifths of the and he just had room for his stove in his bed. The rest was filled up with this perpetual motion machine that they called him Weasel the inventor.
His name is Welzel Jan Welzel. And he was quite well known in his native land, apparently, and quite an eminent scholar. But he came in the early days in the gold rush and in his old age, he must have been 80 or something like that.

He had this perpetual motion machine. And of course, it is stopped at a certain place. So he put weights on another wheel to keep it going and it bounced up someplace else and he put more weights on each month. This got a little larger and larger until there was room to move in the cabin. But then he turned down and started another one. And that went on for years and years and years. That was his whole life.

**Elliot Hunker**

But it wasn’t his whole life. George Shaw, who you just heard from, might’ve suspected as much, but wouldn’t have pried. As a Dawson old timer, he knew plenty of characters, and knew better than to investigate anyone’s biography from their days before they came to the Yukon. Shaw mentions he believed Welzl was Polish. If it mattered to Shaw where Welzl the Inventor came from, he’d know he was from what was then called Czechoslovakia. But it didn’t to matter where the old man with the funny accent and the perpetual motion machine came from – all that matters to most people in a town like Dawson is that you don’t make life any harder for the people around you. So the harmless old inventor died in Dawson City, and is buried there today. Before he was Klondike famous for his eccentricity, he’d made a whole life of exploring, coopting, using, abusing, and sharing the Arctic.

For so many, the Arctic has forever existed as an infinite plane of opportunity; an imaginary landscape that exists outside of time, outside of space. Devoid of the kinds of life found in the real world. If one were so inclined, as so many were at the turn of the last century, you could leave your real world and all of the problems that came with it, and make your way North. In the Arctic you might find your fortune. Return home a hero. Men like Vilhjálmur Stefánsson, Robert Peary, Matthew Henson, and Charles Brower live on today as national heroes for there work as Arctic explorers. While relatively unknown outside of the Czech Republic today, Jan Welzl has been hailed as one of the first truly Czech contributors to discovery, science, and literature – and at the same time, a complete fraud.
It seems that only in the Arctic, where dreams and reality intersect, can a man like Welzl make a life, and a fortune, and lose it all. As much as the North is foolproof because of its unforgiving elements, it might also be the perfect climate for the peculiar and bazaar to thrive. The history of the Arctic is filled with some beautiful and terrible stories. Jan Welzl’s is one of them.

Welzl was born in 1868 in what is today the Czech Republic, to a working class family. After elementary school he left to apprentice as a journeyman locksmith. After traveling throughout Europe as a locksmith, and then soldier, Welzl was hired as a stoker for steamship headed to the United States. From there he took a job on another boat to San Francisco, and then Vladivostok. From there he took up with a crew working on the Trans-Siberian Railway. Here is where the fact and fiction of Welzl’s story gets blurry. According to Welzl, he then spent the next 28 years living on the New Siberian Islands – an archipelago in the Extreme North of Russia. It is from the 3 decades spent living on the islands that Welzl accumulated the stories that would make up his most famous book, 30 Years in the Golden North.

This book, first published in English in 1932 as a selection to the prestigious Book-of-the-Month Club. As such, it sold more than 150,000 copies in the United States in it’s first year of publication. It was at once applauded for its plain speaking “you are there” qualities, as well as derided as complete fiction, if not parody or satire. Vilhjálmur Stefánsson, perhaps the most well-respected of the many Arctic explorers of the time, publicly scorned Welzl and his book for the many hundreds if not thousands of inaccuracies in 30 Years.

Welzl claimed he not only quickly made friends with the local population of Inuit living on the New Siberian Islands, but was elected Chief of the Islands – this apparently all happened despite the fact that there has never been a documented permanent settlement on the islands.

In addition to wolves and the Inuit’s sled dogs, there were many packs of wild jackel’s roaming the tundra of Welzl’s Siberia – of course the northern boundary for jackel distribution lies several degrees of latitude south.
Arctic mailmen typically would deliver their letters and packages on long trains of sleds, sometimes 24 of them long – these would be pulled by dog teams of 350, who would be harnessed up to a half mile away from the end of the sled-train.

The New Siberian Eskimo’s, as Welzl called them, had a culture entirely unique from any other seen in the Arctic. For example, a favorite pastime was to engage in at-sea boxing matches, fighting while balanced on kayaks. The men and women of New Siberia were also very devout, spending much of their days worshiping a 25 foot tall wooden idol of a monkey.

Welzl was also the first European to make contact with a race of pygmy Inuit who’d only recently made their home in the Arctic, having come there on a meteor from Mars.

After the initial success of 30 years in the Golden North, Welzl released a second book, and then spent much of the rest of the 1930’s touring the world, lecturing as an expert on all things Arctic – though it is important to note that in these speaking events, Welzl would often confuse his audiences with his understanding of geography, placing the south pole just west of the north pole, for example. But as famous as Welzl became, he was never able to fully capitalize on his success; he was some combination of bad with money and cheated by publishers. And so like so many other broke storytellers, he found a home in an end-of-the-road town in Dawson City.

Like any story, Jan Welzl’s is neither fully good or bad. While much of what he wrote and spoke about the North is innocently creative, a lot of what Welzl was selling was poison. There’s nothing benign about Welzl including almost no actual names of the native people he’d met in his supposed thirty years spent living in the Arctic. So how important is it to remember Welzl? What, if any, is his place in the history of the Arctic? Are there shades of grey to armchair racism or cartoon exoticism? What’s in a name? Why would discussing a charlatan’s account of life in the Arctic be helpful or harmful to people who live there today? I spoke with my favorite Alaskan podcaster about Arctic explorers, sharing knowledge, and the E-word.

Elliot Hunker
Alice Qannik Glen

Yep, so my name is Alice Qannik Glen (Inupiaq introduction), I was born and raised in Utqiagvik, formerly known as Barrow, the northernmost city in the United States. But I now live and work here on Denaina land in Anchorage, Alaska, (Inupiaq land acknowledgment) . I now work full time on my podcast titled Coffee and Quaq, a podcast to celebrate and explore contemporary native life in urban Alaska. Coffee to represent keeping us woke and to represent our contemporary side and quaq to represent examining our topics through an Alaska Native lens. Like a lot of early settlers, early explorers like Robert Peary, they were doing it for glory to say that they've gone to these remote places, unforgiving places, you know, uncivilized, uncharted kind of places, which I get and I understand. And I think that there is some allure and that and everything, you know, and then you have to think about those things with a grain of salt, too, because that's the times you like.

And that's a I believe that I'm not like one of those people that say like, oh, you can't say that it wasn't the time because blah, blah. But I do think that people make choices just like you and I make choices today. So it's just like interesting that this whole theme of like just going to the Arctic, being, you know, an explorer and then writing something about it.

And I do think there's a lot to learn from those accounts. Obviously, they're very interesting and educational and everything like that. But like what it begs the question, like who wrote the book? Why? What are their intentions? For me, as like an Inupiaq person, I try not to pay too much attention to those kinds of things. You know, there's a lot of space right now that's being taken up that native people would like to claim, like they want to tell their own stories. And that's kind of why I started my podcast. You know, I just really wanted to hear from people's mouths what they think about certain things. There's this Eskimo, Inupiaq guy, who has no problem with the word Eskimo. I don't have a problem with the word Eskimo, too, but I did an episode on it. Right. And I you know, I wanted to hear what other people thought and hearing the history of the word Eskimo and just taking like this much research deep into it to find out, like, where it came from and what
it means. And it's enough for me to stop trying to use it, you know, to try to move it out of my vocabulary, because it obviously hurts people like us in Canada, Inuit people in Canada.

And this whole history with Eskimo identification numbers where they gave them numbers instead of names like the government couldn't even recognize them by name. They had to recognize them by numbers, which is so dehumanizing. And you think those things don't hurt people, you know, like and they don't in in like a specific case, like, I'm not being actively hurt by someone calling me an Eskimo. And I, you know, this guy who took pride in it. And I'm like, OK, that's cool. That's fine. But like, the definition of privilege is, you know, not being - just because something doesn't affect you directly doesn't mean that it doesn't indirectly affect a lot of other people. You know, those stereotypes actively play out in other ways of dehumanization of native people, you know, so to be like characterized as this meat eater, raw meat eater, whatever, and that's all we are. Whereas the word Inupiaq means the real people just putting those two definitions up against each other, like, OK, he's like, oh, I don't find any offense to being called Eskimo because it means raw meat eater. I do eat raw meat. I'm that's what I am. And I'm like, but that's not all you are like you don't want to define yourself by just eating raw meat. Inua means like the spirit or breath of life for like, you know, that means that's part of our name.

That's and that people know like the importance of naming because there's so much that we attribute. I'm named after my grandmother. What it means, like we take on characteristics after the people that were named after. And there's just like a whole thing about it. Right. And. It's a part of the dehumanization process of Native American people, Native American people and Inuit people. And what contributes to that? Maybe people have a misunderstanding of who we are as people, and that comes with part of being called Eskimo. It's not directly affecting, but it's also not helping these bigger, huge issues that I struggle with every day. Like I'm not safe as a native woman. Like, that's just that's my reality. And so to think about those things in a bigger context and to think about having a book written about like us, like this way it's not worth it for me to spend any time trying to fight it or acknowledge it or give it any kind of attention, really. I don't put my energy towards that. What I want to spend my time and energy on is moving forward and moving away and building on real, authentic conversations, connections and understandings of people, you know, and of us.
So and then I also struggle with that, too, because I'm like, do I want to tell the people where the berry patch is, I don't tell them the truth or are they going to come and take all the berries? And then, like, I'm just here like left responsible for all this. But I'm like, no, I'm I'm an optimist. You know, I feel good about sharing who we really are and who I really am with other people so that there is that understanding and maybe that, you know, we're just better together.

**Elliot Hunker**

I think Alice is right, that we are better together. After our conversation, I asked myself what I was doing with Welzl’s story. His life isn’t a berry patch to be kept secret or shared, but it can serve as a window into what the Arctic never was and always will be. A home for the beautiful and terrible. In researching Welzl’s life for this podcast, I’ve had the opportunity to think about my place in the Arctic. What responsibility do I have to share and be honest? How much do I owe the people that have lived on this land forever? I think about this, and my hope is that if you think about it too, we’ll all be better together for it.

**Sarah Mackie**

Today’s episode was written and produced by Elliot Hunker.

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