

# Profile: Agnes Semmler

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Agnes Semmler.

At a time when a Final Agreement on Inuvialuit land claims seems near, we felt it appropriate to do a profile of Agnes Semmler in this first edition of the new *Inuvialuit*. Agnes helped to found C.O.P.E. in 1970, and was the organization's president. She is still, at the age of seventy-three, active in the land claims negotiations and other C.O.P.E. business, as well as many other community activities. At the time this paper was being put together, Agnes was busy fulfilling her duties as Chief Returning Officer for Inuvik for the Territorial elections. She and her husband Slim are among the Arctic's best known and respected people.

Agnes was born at Old Crow in the Yukon. Her mother was Indian and her father white, and her first five years were spent with an Eskimo family. She went to school in Hay River, and eventually

met and married Slim in Coppermine in 1930. A year earlier he had opened his first store at Cape Crusenstern. Over the past fifty years Semmler's stores have been found in Read Island, Richardson Island, Cambridge Bay, Tuktoyaktuk, Aklavik and Napoyak Channel, where the Semmlers also had a mink ranch. They moved to Inuvik during the second year of the town's construction and opened the town's first store, in a tent down by the Mackenzie River.

Her life has been one of 'firsts'. She was the first woman to run for the Northwest Territories Council (but was defeated); she helped to organize many local organizations, including the Home and School Association, and helped to start Northern Images. In 1967 Agnes was invited to Montreal to be honoured as a 'Woman of the Century', representing the women of the North.

In 1982 she and Slim received a plaque at the first Inuvik Media Festival, honouring them as longtime Northerners and respected elders, and in July, 1983 they were among those honoured by the town as part of its 25th anniversary celebrations. Each received a gold medal as a sign of appreciation for their service to Inuvik.

She was also the first woman Justice of the Peace to be appointed in the N.W.T., and through that and her other activities, is in a unique position to comment on the many changes that have occurred in the Western Arctic over the past few decades and on the effects of these changes.

The following is taken from two separate interviews with her this year.

*Inuvialuit:* How did COPE get started?

*Agnes:* What really started us off was Richard Rohmer... he came in with all these experts...oil men...and people that know the land. He had two big plane loads of people. This was in the 60's and they were going to Tuk to look over the situation and see where they suspected oil to be.

We took them to Tuk and they were looking over the land and saying if there was any oil to be found they would find it in Tuk. He told us that we should start up something and we could get into this oil deal...this exploration...if they find anything.

From then on Nellie and I said we should start something. We didn't name it anything...not COPE...we just had everybody and everything on that first board... Dene...Metis...everybody. Nellie worked for CBC and I worked for the government and all the secret meetings were in the government shop across the road...but the Commissioners found out right away. We met in secret first though.

That was in the late 60's...it took us about two or three years to really get going. We didn't have a red cent. We

went to all the oil companies and they helped us too. We went to all the bosses in Toronto and all over. I did a lot of travelling and talking to them about native rights and getting into the oil business.

COPE moved into its own after that...the Indian Brotherhood started up...

*Inuvialuit:* Has COPE changed a lot since it started?

*Agnes:* No, I think we stayed on the main track as our Agreement in Principle signed at Sachs Harbour.

*Inuvialuit:* How do you feel with the land claims settlement coming up?

*Agnes:* Well, I think it's coming to a head. I think it should be by 1984. I would say there would be something that is visible that can be seen. I would think the land claims should be more or less settled by then. There would just be a few little problems here and there that can be smoothed out.

*Inuvialuit:* What do you think the results will be from the Final Agreement?

*Agnes:* The future generation. I think that's what we were working for. That's what COPE's been working for, that's what I've been working for, our future generations. For these kids, for their kids, for their grandchildren, that's what I've been working for. So they have something to live for, that they own. Something that's theirs that will be theirs forever.

*Inuvialuit:* What do you think of the North Slope Decision?

*Agnes:* I think that's what we are all working for. First we have to save the land. We have to save the migration route, I think it's a good decision the government made on that, because that's where we get our meat from. All our caribou, all the geese go there. They come in the spring, they land there, then they go East, West or wherever and in the fall come back and they go back there to the North Slope to feed on cranberries, blueberries what they don't get on the Arctic Islands. And the

caribou they calve there. If they have the big development on the North Slope what will the caribou do? And it will be a big town. Because people will come visiting from all over, they'll come from all over going to the North Slope visiting their relatives and living there for the summer.

*Inuvialuit:* What do you think have been the main accomplishments of COPE over the years?

*Agnes:* I know we made the government aware that we were here. People had their own ideas too. We weren't spoon fed by the government about ideas of the future. We wanted these things for future generations not just for today.

*Inuvialuit:* Has there been a difference in attitude in the years since COPE was founded?

*Agnes:* In the early days they just came and told us what to do...we were just like their slop bucket boys and girls...until we got going strong.

*Inuvialuit:* In the early days did natives have good jobs... positions of authority?

*Agnes:* No...they were mostly labourers...everybody was learning.

*Inuvialuit:* You've said COPE is working for the future generations. How do you feel about the changes in the kids today. Like drug and alcohol abuse?

*Agnes:* Oh gosh, you know that really bothers me. I just hate to see the kids like that. Twenty-five years ago when Inuvik was just born, they went to school. We had all kinds of things — like we made Christmas parties for them and Santa Claus with dog teams. We had nothing else you know, and they were all so good.

They grew up, and they were all so happy, and you see them today, all this vandalism and the drugs, alcohol, and the parents not looking after their own children. You know the parents should be home looking after the children. You know it's kind of hard to look ahead and see what's going to happen, for me anyway. When I look at my great grandchildren — what are they going to do ten years from now? And you wonder if it's going to be better or worse or what's going to become of it, if this situation keeps up like here in this town and most settlements in the N.W.T. It's not only here.

*Inuvialuit:* What do you think should be done about it?

*Agnes:* What I believe should be done about it is that the children should be getting their schooling. I believe in schooling but this is not the proper way to get it in this town here. Especially for our native children. I'm not talking about the people from the South. The native children should be out in the bush, at least in their younger years. You know, when they're still young, with correspondence courses and you can find some teachers that would love to go out in the toboggan or skidoo visiting the camps, as long as it's not too big of an area. And the kids out in the bush they can learn to be with their parents and their grandparents.

That's what's wrong with this town — the breakdown. It's the breakdown of the community as a whole. The tribe or whatever it is. Long ago you had your family, you had another place with your grandparents living in it, and you had your uncles, you didn't stay all by yourself. And when the children got bothersome they went to their grandparents and they told them stories about long ago, and they taught them how to set rabbit snares and traps.

When we were living at Napoyak, we put our kids to school there. And we had a teacher and she taught the kids school. So they all went to school — they had a school right there. And they stayed home, and they went trapping muskrats, setting rabbit snares and doing everything. That's what's missing.