

SPECIAL FEATURE

AN INTERVIEW WITH ERNEST S. BURCH, JR.

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Ernest S. “Tiger” Burch shares some of his early field experiences in Alaska, as well as some thoughts about current anthropological research in the North. I called anthropologist Ernest S. “Tiger” Burch, Jr., to ask him a few questions about his early experiences conducting research in Alaska. Although the original interview took place on September 25, 2003, updated information was incorporated in the text in 2005 and 2006.

RM: *How did you get started as an anthropologist?*

ESB: When I was 16, I got a chance to go on a trip to Greenland on a schooner with the old arctic explorer Donald B. MacMillan. When I left I wanted to be a field biologist; when I returned I wanted to be an anthropologist. On that trip we went to Labrador, several places in Greenland, and northern Baffin Island. So that’s what got me started.

RM: *What about the trip? What did you see on that trip that steered you toward anthropology?*

ESB: Well, I met a lot of interesting people, mostly Inuit. And it was gorgeous country, and I thought, “Gee, nice people, gorgeous country, what else could one want?”

RM: *How did you happen to come to Alaska?*

ESB: I first went up in 1954 with MacMillan, then went back by myself in 1959. I was in Labrador in the summer of 1959 doing research for my B.A. thesis. Early that summer I met a guy named Tony Williamson, who was a friend of Don Foote. Foote was working on the Project Chariot study in Point Hope, Alaska [see Wilimovsky and Wolfe 1966]. He thought he was going to need somebody to do the Kivalina part of the research in 1960–61. As it

turned out, it wasn’t given to him. But Doris Saario, of Anchorage, who had been doing the research in Kivalina for the University of Alaska, needed help. And Foote recommended me to her.

RM: *Were you a graduate student at that point?*

ESB: I was just going to start graduate school at the University of Chicago in the fall of 1960. It turned out that Doris was also a grad student there, in the Human Development program. She came to Chicago when I went there to register. We talked about her project and she hired me as an assistant. That ended graduate school for that year. So I spent a year in Kivalina, and that’s what started me in Alaskan work.

RM: *Can you tell us a little about your first fieldwork experience?*

ESB: The job was what is now known as an environmental impact study. I was supposed to find out how dependent the Kivalina people were on local resources. In order to do that, I tried to participate as much as I could in the hunting and fishing activities of the village. I got a dog team and tried to copy the locals in everything they did.

RM: *What year was that?*

ESB: That was 1960–61. I had a wonderful time.

RM: *What kind of hunting did you do that year?*

ESB: Mostly for caribou. Moose hadn’t gotten there yet. I wanted to hunt seals, but there were very poor ice conditions that year. Even the Natives didn’t want to go out on the ice, and they sure wouldn’t take me out. Fortunately, I was wise enough not to try it on my own. The expert seal hunters kept telling me that one of these days



Figure 1. Ernest S. Burch, right, looks at a narwhal tusk with Donald B. and Miriam MacMillan at the end of their 1954 arctic expedition. (Courtesy Ernest S. Burch, Jr.)

an east wind would come up and the ice would disappear. They started telling me this in early January, and in late March, by golly, the first east wind of the winter came up and the ice disappeared. All one could see was open water. The ice came back after a few days, but anybody on it when it went out would have had a hard time.

RM: *That year in Kivalina, did anyone take the role of teaching you how to hunt or teaching you about the traditional knowledge of hunting?*

ESB: Several people were pretty nice to me, after they got to know me a little bit. I guess the leader in that was Bob Hawley. His brother Amos was also very helpful, and so was Clinton Swan. But there were lots of other people too. Every time I made a mistake, someone told me what I should have done. They called it “learning by doing.”

RM: *Where did you stay?*

ESB: I stayed in a little tiny house that I rented from the Episcopal mission. It was a place where visiting clergy could stay when they were in the village. It was a little shack with an oil heater but no cooking stove. Fortunately, Doris had obtained a winter’s supply of stove oil for me.

RM: *Here’s a question that would apply to fieldwork situations other than your first: How do you do your work? That is, over the years, what kind of fieldwork strategies have you found the most successful?*

ESB: Well, I have used a combination of strategies. The first year I spent in Alaska, I used participant observation combined with very informal interviews, really just conversations. It was a wonderful way to get started, especially before snowmachines and other new-fangled devices arrived. I think I got some respect from the Natives for trying even though I didn’t do things very well.

Then on my way to the quarterly meeting of the Friends Church in Noatak in March 1961, I had an unusual encounter with a rabid wolf that brought me considerable notoriety. The story was spread far and wide because there were so many people in Noatak when I arrived there with the dead wolf on my sled. Years later, when I went to villages I had never visited before, and people were trying to figure out who I was, after a few questions they would say “Oh, you’re the guy who fought the wolf,” and I was more or less accepted.

I returned to Kivalina in 1964 with my wife of one year. We were doing another participant observation study. But unfortunately I was badly burned in a gasoline fire in early December and had to go outside for treatment. We returned to Kivalina in May 1965, but by then it was a different situation for me. I had hoped to spend

another year in northwest Alaska, in Shungnak, but I was too weak to spend the winter anywhere in Alaska. That’s when I switched to interviewing instead of participating. And that was pretty successful. But of course I was working with people who already knew me pretty well.

In the summer of 1968 I spent two months in Eskimo Point (now Arviat), on the west coast of Hudson Bay, interviewing Caribou Inuit about their past way of life. That experience, following on my 1965 summer experience, prepared me for my major Alaskan research in 1969–70.

In the fall of 1969, my wife and I returned to northern Alaska with two very young children. We were based in Kotzebue, but I also made brief visits to a number of other villages. This time I was specifically working on historical questions. My interest was in early 19th-century life, whereas previously I had focused on the 20th.

At the outset, I didn’t really think it was possible to do what I wanted to do, but I thought it was worth a try. But I started working with some of the elders that the Natives considered to be historians. And I was amazed at how much they knew about what had happened in their parents’ and grandparents’ and even great-grandparents’ times. Some of these people were born in the 1880s and 1890s. And they could tell me not only what happened two generations before their time, but how things had changed in the years since then. And that got me so excited I just kind of went crazy.

RM: *Can you mention some of the Native people who were particularly knowledgeable in history?*

ESB: I feel a little embarrassed, because I’ll leave some people out. My teachers included Simon Paneak in Anaktuvuk Pass; Robert Cleveland and Joe Sun in Shungnak; Mary Curtis, Lester Gallahorn, Della Keats, Charlie and Lucy Jensen, Putu Vestal, Emily Barr, Albert McClellan, Thomas Mitchell, Levi Mills, Walter Kowunna, Elwood Hunnicutt, and Frank Glover in Kotzebue; James Savok in Buckland; Daniel Foster in Noorvik; Charlie Smith and Johnnie Foster in Selawik; Eva and Patrick Attungana, David Frankson, and Laurie Kingik in Point Hope; Regina Walton, Martha Swan, Edith Kennedy, and Amos Hawley in Kivalina; Thomas Morris in Deering; Ernest Oxereok and Winton Weyapuk in Wales; Arthur Douglas in Ambler; Walter Nayokpuk and Gideon Barr in Shishmaref; and Peter and Effie Atoruk in Kiana. They and many others taught me how to do historical research.

RM: *Are there any people still around who have the kind of knowledge you’re talking about?*

ESB: I don't think so, maybe a handful. Most of the people I worked with had been born and raised when the oral tradition was still very strong. Few of them had spent much time in school. They had been raised in tiny little camps and had been trappers and reindeer herders early in their lives. They spent a lot of time out in the country rather than in the villages.

One thing they used to do is to bring elders out to their little camps for entertainment. During the long evenings of late fall and early winter, the elders told stories. Also, when they walked over the country, the youngsters learned the placenames and the stories behind them, and they discovered the physical remains of former ways of life in the form of house ruins, old caribou drive fences, graveyards, and piles of human bones. And they asked their parents and visiting elders about what they saw. Thus, the people who were raised and who spent most of their time in camps got ahead of their village contemporaries with regard to historical knowledge. And I was just lucky enough to catch the last generation of these people. I quickly realized that, and so I worked exceptionally hard. I hardly saw my wife and kids the whole year we spent in Kotzebue.

RM: *So, that's a thing of the past that elders would come out to the camps for entertainment? Does anybody do that anymore?*

ESB: They don't have trapping and herding camps anymore, although they still have summer fish camps in many areas.

RM: *How, over the years, has your focus changed, as you have visited these Inupiat communities?*

ESB: Well, I guess I learned how to do oral history research by doing it for ten years, then spent the rest of my career trying to fill in the gaps in my information and to correct all the mistakes I had made. I returned to northern Alaska many times after 1970 for brief trips of two or three weeks, especially during the 1980s, and tried to fill the gaps in my information. But of course the elders were dying off by this time.

I'll give you one example of this follow-up process. In 1969–70 I acquired a lot of information on battles and raids. But it never occurred to me to try to find out specifically when they took place. The thing is, the Inupiat were not very strong on absolute dates. But they are very good, and were very good, at relative dating, at before and after. And so I think it was in the early 1980s, I went back to some of the people I had worked with in 1970. And I asked Charlie Jensen, of these three particular battles,

which happened first, second, and third? He deferred to his wife Lucy, who turned out to know the answer.

RM: *And you had not asked them before?*

ESB: No, it never occurred to me. If I had done that in 1969–70, I probably could have dated, at least approximately, many of the battles on which I had information. I might have gotten some actual timelines. But I was too ignorant to know that until it was too late. Also, I didn't understand the value of collecting genealogies as a dating mechanism. If you know that somebody's ancestor X was present at a particular event, if I had a genealogy that showed where X fit, two generations, three generations back, or whatever, I could have probably formed at least an estimate of when a lot of things happened. But I was too late.

RM: *You started telling me about a few of the changes that have occurred in the communities that you work in, but I asked another question. I wonder if you could go back now to say what are the major changes that you've seen in some of the communities that you've been working in?*

ESB: Kivalina is the one I know best. When I first went up there, almost every house had a home-made wood-burning stove, but no one had any wood. And so the men spent a vast amount of time collecting willows. They had harvested all the dead willows within 20 miles [32 km] of the village, and they had cleaned out all the driftwood on the beach, so all they had left for fuel was green willows, which didn't burn very well. In the winter, they spent an enormous amount of time working on that. When they had extra seal blubber, they also used that in the stoves. Now they use oil stoves and highly efficient, factory-produced wood stoves. The women spent most of their time washing diapers.

RM: *Really!*

ESB: Oh, yeah, they had six, seven, eight kids. Two of them were in diapers at any given time, and the diapers in those days were made of cloth, not paper. They had to be washed, which meant that people had to get water, which was some distance away. Then they had to heat it, which used up even more fuel. All clothes, including diapers, had to be washed by hand.

And the people were, I would say, very poor. Almost all of them were very poor except for the school janitor and the postmistress, who had jobs. The only other local sources of cash income were seal scalps, for which there was a bounty, and furs. Men worked very hard hunting and fishing for food, trapping for furs, and collecting wood, espe-

cially collecting wood. Then in the summertime they went out and tried to get seasonal work longshoring in Kotzebue, mining near Fairbanks, working in the canneries on Bristol Bay, or fighting fires wherever. If they managed to work for a month or two, they would get unemployment checks for some time afterward.

In those days, you could build a house almost anywhere you wanted. Go anywhere you wanted. Do anything you wanted. As long as it didn't hurt or bother anyone else. Then ten years later, they started surveying the villages and putting in property lines and building houses. There were several different housing programs, and all of the new houses were heated by oil.

RM: *Did they have the HUD houses that you see everywhere in Alaska?*

ESB: Oh, yes, sure they did. There were many HUD houses, and I think NANA built some of a different type. . . . Some organization would arrange to build half a dozen houses every few years, and people would move out of their old shacks and into the new houses. When I first went to Kivalina half the houses were covered with sod. Maybe even a little more than half. And of course everybody hunted and traveled with dogs when I first got there. And ten years later they were switching to snowmobiles. Nowadays, the only dogs left are racing dogs or pets, and there are very few of them. They didn't have telephones then; now they have telephones. They didn't have electricity then; now they have electricity. They didn't have CB radios, but then they got CB radios [now a major form of communication in the villages]. They didn't have high schools; village schools went only through eighth grade. If they wanted to go to high school, they had to go to the boarding school at Mount Edgecumbe, near Juneau. Now all the villages have high schools. There's been an enormous amount of change since I first went to Alaska.

I'm not too familiar with how things are now because I haven't been up there for several years. A lot happened just between 1960 and 1980. Now they've got TV, e-mail, and everything else.

RM: *You presented a paper at the 2000 Alaska Anthropology Association meetings critically reappraising Spencer's work, The North Alaskan Eskimo, which was published in 1959. I was wondering if you've seen changes since Spencer's time, what kind of changes you've seen in ethnographic research? In how it's done since Spencer's research?*

ESB: Well, I have Spencer's field notes. So I've seen his notes, which give me some insight into how he proceeded.

I talked to his wife, his widow. And I knew Spencer a bit when he was alive. He did very good interviewing. He had good informants. I don't know exactly how he found them, but they were very knowledgeable. He asked good questions and took good notes.

Unfortunately, Spencer worked under some false assumptions. One notion prevalent among anthropologists in the 1950s was that all hunter-gatherers had been free wanderers. They could move about anywhere they wanted. Spencer seems to have had that perception.

In addition, Spencer thought that the period when his informants grew up, the 1880s and 1890s, was the early contact period. So the situation they experienced and he described in his book could be projected backward into the early decades of the 19th century. In fact there had been enormous change between 1850 and 1890. Disease and famine had greatly reduced the population, which he didn't know. There had been a lot of population movement, which he didn't know. Toward the end of the 19th century and early in the 20th, Inupiaq bands on the North Slope really had been free wanderers. But many of them were migrants from further south who were up wandering around the North Slope trying to make a living, having been starved out of their original homelands by the crash of the caribou populations. There was nobody left there to stop them. The population of Barrow was almost completely replaced between 1875 and 1900 by immigrants from the interior or from further south. The coastal people had succumbed to diseases brought by the whalers, and they were replaced by inlanders. Over time, the people from inland all ended up on the coast. The later residents of Anaktuvuk Pass moved back inland some 30 years later.

RM: *On another subject, can you address what are some of the common weaknesses in ethnographic research in the North?*

ESB: Oh, my!

RM: *Or maybe a better way to put that would be, what things need to be addressed in the North that haven't been addressed yet, in ethnographic research?*

ESB: Well, to answer your first question, I would say that the greatest weakness in arctic ethnography is the lack of theoretical sophistication, which means two things. The first is that information collected by one person may or may not relate to what anyone else has done. If everyone is working within a common conceptual and theoretical framework, then each individual's work is relevant to that

of everyone else using the same framework. Second, if the theoretical framework poses questions, you have to go out and get the answers.

Most of the people who have worked in the North either have had no theoretical foundation for their work or they have had to invent one from scratch. They've been pretty good at it, but it's difficult to relate one person's work to anyone else's. I was lucky because I came with a comprehensive theoretical orientation from my undergraduate training. All I had to do in my own research was fill in the blanks.

RM: *What are some of the gaps in the research now in the North?*

ESB: The North generally?

RM: *Well, yes. Or just Alaska.*

ESB: That's a tough question.

RM: *What are the most glaring gaps?*

ESB: I don't know, it depends what you're interested in. People up north are having various kinds of problems. Social scientists should provide some help. I don't know how, though, since it's not my part of the field. I'm primarily a social historian. I don't know much about applied research.

RM: *What kind of problems are you talking about?*

ESB: Well, alcohol abuse, substance abuse, sexual abuse, and so on. I can look up on the Web and find a list of villagers I know who are sexual offenders, which I find a little disturbing. And of course there is a huge unemployment problem, which usually can be solved only by leaving the village.

RM: *One thing I find encouraging is that the social work students at the University of Alaska now have to take some classes on Alaska Natives and cultural anthropology, which I think is a step in the right direction.*

ESB: Absolutely. Some of the Native kids on the North Slope, who are the ones I've been in contact with most recently, are getting more knowledgeable about their own history. I know because I did a couple of telephone lectures to a class at Barrow and some other villages. Jana Harcharek was the teacher. The first time, she wrote questions out because she knew nothing from written documents. I said, "Well, Jana, I'll send you a list of things you ought to read." And she did read them. And so a year or so later she wanted me to lecture to her class again. And during the course of that it became pretty clear that I didn't need to do the teaching any more, because Jana had gotten up to speed on the literature herself. Except for publications released by the North Slope Borough's Lan-

guage and Culture Commission and the Simon Paneak Memorial Museum, in Anaktuvuk Pass. When I said that Anaktuvuk Pass had been occupied by Indians 150 years ago, the students didn't believe me. And I suggested that they read the transcripts of their own elders conferences.

RM: *Good.*

ESB: I don't know what else is going on. I know there's some good people, but I don't know what's going on up there.

RM: *Do you have any suggestions on how to address that problem of the left hand not knowing what the right hand is doing, as far as redundant research or people not knowing about research that's out there?*

ESB: Well, I don't know. You have to go to meetings of the Alaska Anthropological Association if you want to keep abreast of what's going on in Alaska. Most of my own research has been historically oriented. But young researchers are getting lazy. I know of several times when people said they couldn't find anything, and the reason they couldn't turned out to be because it wasn't on the Web. But if they had just walked over to Rasmusen Library it would have been right there.

RM: *It seems to be a common problem among students and young people in general. I wonder if you could talk a little bit about trade and interchange in historical times between the Russian and Alaskan sides of the Bering Strait.*

ESB: Well, what I know about it is that there was quite a bit of action back and forth. Some of it was trade and some of it was hostile. In my most recent book (Burch 2005) I discuss this in some detail.

There were two groups, of course, in Chukotka. One was Chukchi and one was Eskimo. Sometimes they came over to trade. And sometimes they came over to raid. So it was just as complex across Bering Strait as it was in north Alaska itself.

RM: *Was there very much intermarriage between the groups?*

ESB: Not that I know of. But I'm dealing with them pretty early. Peter Schweitzer might know more about that. He studied that from a more recent perspective. Igor Krupnik also would know more about that.

RM: *OK. But generally, you say there was just as much trade as some kind of hostile exchange across the Bering Strait as there was within Northwest Alaska?*

ESB: Well, it wasn't as much. There couldn't be as much. It was hard to get across the straits because of the weather. But there was still quite a bit. They knew each other well.

RM: *Did they get across in a boat?*

ESB: Yes. Pretty big boats. They traded at Sheshalik, near Kotzebue, and near Point Spencer, at Port Clarence. And later on, and possibly earlier, they also traded up and down the coast. When the Chukotkans got to Wales most of the Wales people disappeared into the hills, because they didn't know whether they were coming to trade or to fight.

RM: *Can you comment on any comparison between the current situation of Alaska Native cultures and the indigenous people of the Russian parties?*

ESB: No, I've never been on the Russian side. However, I think that things are in a lot better shape in Alaska. Just because everything in Alaska is in better shape than in Russia. But what I know about them is secondhand.

RM: *OK. Is there anything else that you'd like to comment on about the anthropology of the North and your work here?*

ESB: Well, all I can say about my work is that I've enjoyed it immensely. I have learned a lot. I hope that if I can communicate my interest to other people some of them might find it interesting also.

RM: *Do you have any plans for your next project?*

ESB: Well, I have one in the advanced stages right now, a book titled *Social Life in Northwest Alaska: The Structure of Iñupiaq Eskimo Nations* [Burch 2006]. I have already proofread the edited manuscript, but the galleys won't be ready for awhile. Proofreading them, and particularly indexing the book, will take much of my time for nearly a year; it's a long and complex book. Then there

are several other projects. The Spencer project is now on hold, but I expect it to be the next one I'll tackle. Another one on hold is an historical study of caribou populations in northwestern Alaska. And I have been thinking about writing a book on world view. And finally, I want to write a book about my research on the Caribou Inuit, in the central Canadian subarctic. That ought to keep me busy for a while.

RM: *Do you have any advice for anthropologists just starting out who want to work in the North?*

ESB: No. You know, I'm sort of out of touch with young people because I'm not teaching. And since I hardly do any fieldwork any more because all the people who know what I want to learn are dead, I don't know what's going on in the villages.

RM: *Thank you so much for your time.*

ESB: You're welcome.

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