

# RECORDS OF THE FIFTH THULE EXPEDITION IN DANISH ARCHIVES

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## ABSTRACT

The first part of the essay is a guide to the major collections of Fifth Thule Expedition photographs, documents, maps, and objects at six Danish museums and archives, including directions for online access where available. The second section is an overview of the expedition's photographic legacy, created principally by Leo Hansen and Therkel Mathiassen, with minor contributions from others.

## INTRODUCTION

Knud Rasmussen, who initiated and conducted the Fifth Thule Expedition (FTE), spent his early childhood years in Ilulissat, Greenland, but at the age of twelve he moved to Denmark to attend a boarding school (Michelsen, *this issue*). In the same way that Rasmussen's upbringing was influenced by elements from Greenlandic and Danish cultures, the FTE was rooted in the ethos of both countries. Its Greenlandic roots were in Indigenous language, strong interest in culture and oral tradition, and the use of Indigenous-derived techniques for travel and survival in the Arctic that contributed to the realization of the expedition plans and to the richness of its ethnographic results. Yet Rasmussen's Danish background was as important to the FTE success as his Greenlandic one, albeit in a completely different way. The organizational and scientific elements of the FTE, as well as its financial basis, were the products of Rasmussen's experiences and of his broad social networks in Denmark.

Arising from this dual foundation, the outcomes of the FTE have differed in these two critical areas; they also were differently distributed between Greenland and Denmark. In the spirit of Rasmussen's journey, the Greenlandic people took their first steps to reestablish their age-old connection with the Inuit and Yupiit peoples across northern North America. That contact has strengthened over the years and in 1980 resulted in the establishment of the Inuit Circumpolar Conference (ICC), today the Inuit Circumpolar Council. Yet almost all the expedition's scientific "products," including its field

records and published articles and reports, were produced and circulated in Danish or in English—while collections of objects, documents, photographs, films, and maps assembled by the FTE are found primarily in Danish archives and museums. The distribution and availability of these diverse collections is the topic of this article.

Various materials resulting from the FTE work (namely artifacts, photographs, documents, and maps) were not handed over to the National Museum of Denmark (NMD) en masse after the expedition was completed but followed several paths. As a rule of thumb, ethnographic and archaeological objects collected by FTE members were given to the Nationalmuseet (NMD) (see Mathiassen 1945). Rasmussen's field diaries from the FTE years were deposited in the Royal Danish Library; most of the expedition photographs are currently stored at the Danish Arctic Institute (also at NMD); and his personal documents ended up at the Knud Rasmussen Archive after his passing in 1933.

However, this general rule of distribution was not that simple! The following sections provide brief overviews of the relevant institutions and their collections. A detailed register of all the expedition's records has been prepared and is available at the Danish Arctic Institute website (<https://arktiskinstitut.dk/index.php?id=111&L=1>). As a special supplement to this general overview, this article provides a brief introduction to the FTE photographic collections and its prime photographers.

## MAJOR COLLECTIONS OF FIFTH THULE EXPEDITION ARCHIVAL MATERIALS

### HM THE QUEEN'S REFERENCE LIBRARY

*Contact information: Christian VIII's Palace, Amalienborg, DK-1257 Copenhagen, Denmark. Librarian: Nanna Claudius Bergoe, nb@kosa.dk. www.kongernessamling.dk/en/hm-the-queens-reference-library/*

The Danish King Christian X (1870–1947) was the official patron of the FTE, and Knud Rasmussen's first obligation as the head of the expedition was to send reports and other official information to the royal family. Hence, in the Queen's Reference Library there is a collection of final reports from the expedition, including the finished and draft summary report written by Rasmussen, the official "Expedition Report to the King," and individual reports of the FTE members (Kaj Birket-Smith, Therkel Mathiasen, Peter Freuchen, all in Danish). In addition, the library contains an extensive collection of letters exchanged between Rasmussen and the royal family, as well as the telegrams he sent to the king during the expedition's travel in North America, mainly from Alaska.

### KNUD RASMUSSEN ARCHIVE

*Contact information: Industrimuseet, Torvet 1, DK-3300 Frederiksvaerk, Denmark. www.knudrasmus.dk*

The Knud Rasmussen Archive was originally located in a small public library near Rasmussen's country house in Hundested but was later moved to a central location in the nearby town of Frederiksvaerk, about 12 km to the east. In his last years, Rasmussen lived in the family house at Hundested that was subsequently transformed into a museum, and the Knud Rasmussen Archive contains almost everything that was left behind there when he died in 1933. The archive is quite extensive (Fig. 1), with an emphasis on records of the trading station in Thule for the years 1910 to 1933. The FTE materials are richly represented by reports and correspondence prior to and during the expedition, including much information pertaining to practical matters such as funding, filming, publications, appointments with authorities, and more. The archive is very well-organized and its full finding aid (catalog) of over 280 pages (Tiemroth 1996, in Danish) is accessible for download ([http://img.kb.dk/ha/reg/rasmussen\\_papirer.pdf](http://img.kb.dk/ha/reg/rasmussen_papirer.pdf)). However, new collec-

tions of documents have been accessioned after 1996 that are not listed in this catalog; updated information may be obtained directly from the archive staff. The Knud Rasmussen Archive also has a photographic collection ([www.arkiv.dk](http://www.arkiv.dk)), discussed below.

### ROYAL DANISH LIBRARY

*Contact information: Det Kongelige Bibliotek, Soeren Kierkegaards Plads 1, DK-1221 Copenhagen, Denmark. www.kb.dk*

The Royal Danish Library was created as a merger of four separate libraries; today its main branch is in downtown Copenhagen. The library has a small but valuable collection of records pertaining to the FTE, most importantly all of Rasmussen's personal expedition diaries (Fig. 2). These include 11 handwritten diaries and 21 handwritten booklets with ethnographic and other notes, as well as about 120 photographs from the expedition.

There are two online pathways to the Royal Danish Library's FTE collections:

- Go to [www.kb.dk/editions/any/2009/jul/editions/da/](http://www.kb.dk/editions/any/2009/jul/editions/da/). In the search box type: 5. Thuleekspedition
- The Tiemroth (1996) catalog (pp. 267–275) is accessible at [http://img.kb.dk/ha/reg/rasmussen\\_papirer.pdf](http://img.kb.dk/ha/reg/rasmussen_papirer.pdf)



*Figure 1. A section of Knud Rasmussen Archive, with books from his personal library in Frederiksvaerk. Photo: Bent Nielsen.*



*Figure 2. Knud Rasmussen's diary collection at the Royal Danish Library. Front page of one of the diaries with the text (in Danish) "Diary VIII. The East Cape-travel. Knud Rasmussen." Photo: Bent Nielsen.*

#### NATIONAL MUSEUM OF DENMARK

*Contact information: Nationalmuseet, Ny Vestergade 10, 1471 Copenhagen, Denmark. Senior Researcher, Curator Martin Appelt. [www.natmus.dk/](http://www.natmus.dk/)*

Located in the center of Copenhagen, the NMD houses the majority of the collections gathered during the FTE fieldwork. Included are some 11,000 archaeological artifacts, 3,100 ethnographical artifacts, 1,975 photographs, more than 150 drawings by Canadian and Alaskan Inuit, and the original notebooks of Kaj Birket-Smith and Therkel Mathiassen (see Griebel et al., *this issue*; Sonne, *this issue*; Schwalbe et al., *this issue*; Appelt et al., *this issue*).

In 2019 the museum fully digitized the FTE photographic collection, tagged with available metadata. All ethnographic objects and drawings have been photographed as well and are recorded in the museum's internal database; in 2020 the archaeological artifacts were supposed to be added as well. At this time, only a small portion of the massive FTE ethnographic collection may be accessible via the museum website, the one specifically related to Indigenous clothing (<http://skinddragter.natmus.dk>). In the coming years, the rest of the FTE collections are to be digitally published and made accessible on the museum site.

#### DANISH ARCTIC INSTITUTE

*Contact information: Strandgade 102, 1401 Copenhagen, Denmark. Email: [arkiverne@arktisk.dk](mailto:arkiverne@arktisk.dk); [www.arktiskinstitut.dk](http://www.arktiskinstitut.dk)*

The Danish Arctic Institute (DAI) is in downtown Copenhagen, in a historical building that for many centuries belonged to the Royal Greenlandic Trade Company (Fig. 3). The institute's archival holdings are first and foremost concentrated on Danish Arctic explorations and polar expeditions. The most remarkable holdings are the photographic collection, which includes more than 200,000 historical images from Greenland and other parts of the Arctic (Fig. 4).

Unfortunately, all information provided for individual items is in Danish only. English-reading users have to select "English" and choose either the "Document Archive," "Photo Collections," or "Art, Graphics, and Map Archive."

To search specifically for photographs from the FTE, visitors have to access another site ([www.arktiskebilleder.dk](http://www.arktiskebilleder.dk)), and uncheck "Arktisk kunst og genstande" and "Arktisk lyd" (but leave "Arktiske fotografier" checked). The search under "5. thule ekspedition" yields 1,061 individual photographic entries, available either as thumbnails or as larger images. One may also use other search terms for photographs, such as place names, people's names, and expedition activities.



*Figure 3. Historical building that once belonged to the Royal Greenlandic Trade Company and now houses the Danish Arctic Institute in Copenhagen. Photo: Bent Nielsen.*





Figure 4. Photo collection storage at the Danish Arctic Institute. Photo: Bent Nielsen.

GREENLAND NATIONAL MUSEUM AND ARCHIVES  
(NUNATTA KATERSUGAASIVIA ALLAGAATEQARFIALU)

*Contact information: Manutooq 1, P.O. Box 1090, 3900 Nuuk, Greenland. Email: [arkiv@arkiv.gl](mailto:arkiv@arkiv.gl); <https://en.nka.gl/the-archive>*

The Greenland National Archive is on the campus of Ilisimatusarfik/University of Greenland on the northern outskirts of Nuuk. Even though the archive has no physical collections from the FTE, the staff has undertaken to transcribe and translate Jacob Olsen's expedition diaries and notebooks (Fig. 5, left and right). Jacob Olsen, a Kalaallit (Greenlandic Inuit) man, served as an assistant, interpreter, and dogsled driver; he also meticulously filled many small notebooks with field observations, local myths, and his own diary, all in the Greenlandic (Kalaallit) language (see Kleist, *this issue*). It was published in 1927 as a small book using the old (West) Greenlandic orthography of the era (Olsen 1927). According to the museum plans, the text will be transcribed and converted to modern Greenlandic orthography, translated into English, and

published. The book is expected to be released in 2021, marking the 100th anniversary of the start of the FTE.

## PHOTOGRAPHY FROM THE FIFTH THULE EXPEDITION

Photographic documentation was an important part of Knud Rasmussen's concept for the FTE, and he included images from the trip in all his subsequent publications. Readers of his English-language popular travel book, *Across Arctic America* (Rasmussen [1927] 1999) are familiar with some of these iconic photographs, such as "The first man to greet us in these new lands" (p. 3), "Arnarulunguaq, the young Eskimo woman from Greenland" (p. 158), and "Leo Hansen, the film photographer" (p. 243). Rasmussen was aware that photographs convey messages that cannot be told in words, but as far as we know, he never operated the camera himself. While the expedition was based in eastern Canada, archaeologist Therkel Mathiasen served as its prime photographer. When Rasmussen and his two companions,



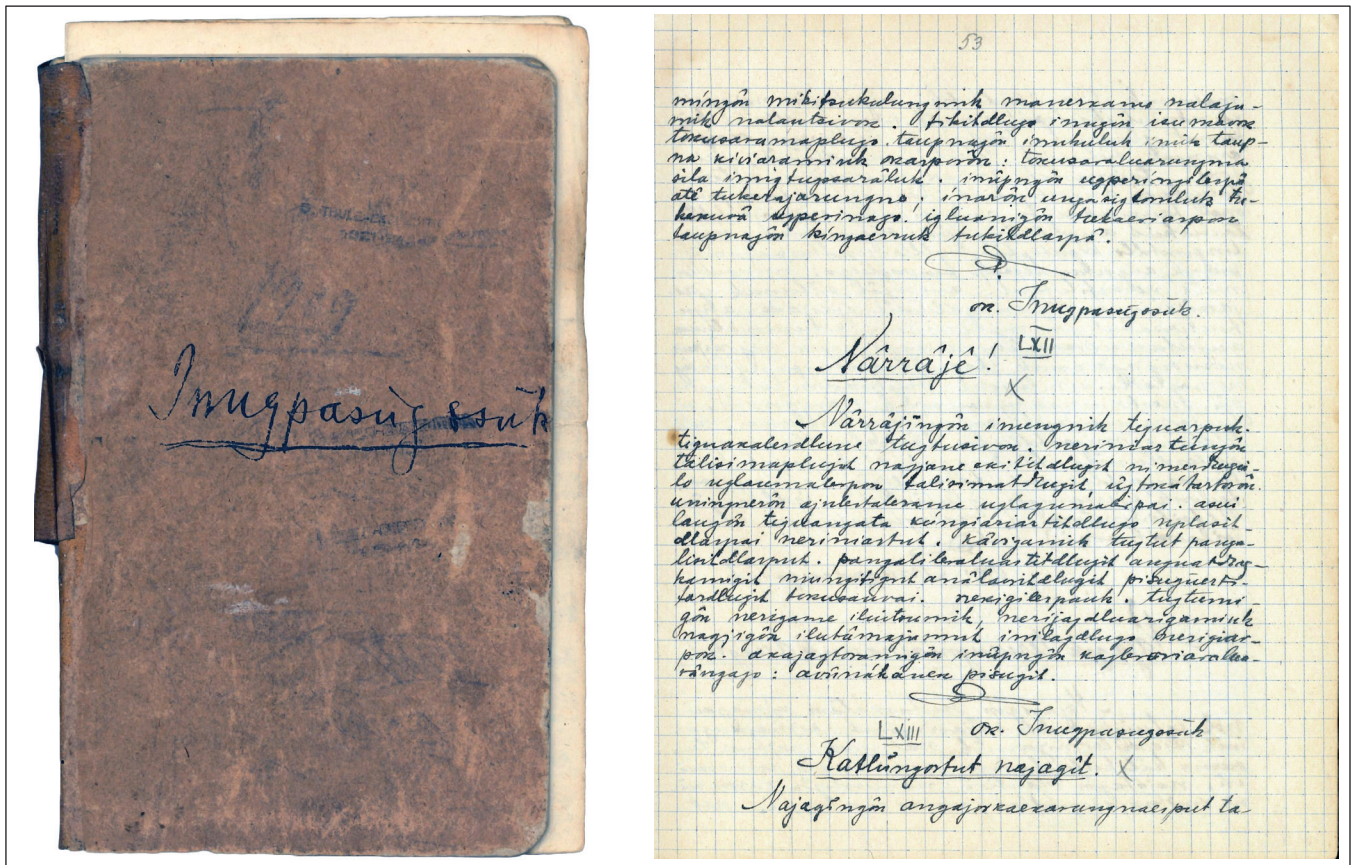


Figure 5. Cover (left) and a page (right) from Jacob Olsen's notebook at the Greenland National Archives (Nunatta Katersugaasivia Allagaaterqarfialu, NKA) in Nuuk. Photo: Bent Nielsen.

Qavigarssuaq Miteq and Arnarulunnguaq, left for the long sled journey to Bering Strait, Rasmussen engaged a professional Danish photographer, Leo Hansen, to join them (MacKenzie and Stenport, *this issue*). Hansen rendezvoused with Rasmussen and two Inughuit at the Hudson's Bay Company post on Kent Peninsula in the central Canadian Arctic in November 1923 and traveled with them for the rest of their route to Nome, Alaska, and then to Seattle, New York, and Washington, DC, recording hundreds of still images along the way (on Hansen's movie camera work, see MacKenzie and Stenport, *this issue*). Hence, most of the photos from the FTE were taken by Leo Hansen's camera.

No one knows at this time the precise total of the photographs taken on the expedition: the number is close to 2,000 or even more, which provide an extensive visual documentary record (Figs. 6, 7, 8). Comparison of the four main collections in Danish archives shows a great deal of overlap and demonstrates that the information linked to the images is not always accurate. The Danish Arctic Institute holds 1,061 images from the FTE, based

on its website ([www.arktiskebilleder.dk/](http://www.arktiskebilleder.dk/)). This number comes from a compilation of several original collections that have been donated to the institute by descendants of the FTE members and others with close connections to FTE participants. If one takes a further step to examine the original prints, negatives, and identifying information, some intriguing discrepancies are evident. For example, there are listings for several photographers and their output in the DAI collection (Table 1), besides

Table 1: Photographs from the Fifth Thule Expedition at the Danish Arctic Institute, by photographer

Leo Hansen	611
Therkel Mathiassen	369
Knud Rasmussen	11
Kaj Birket-Smith	3
Helge Bangsted	3
Holger Dan Møller	4
Harald Lindow	2
Unknown	58
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,061</b>



Figures 6, 7, and 8. These three photos were published as illustrations to Knud Rasmussen's *Across Arctic America* (1999), but the text did not provide the photographers' names. From the Danish Arctic Institute's archive, we know that the first photo (p00101) was taken by Therkel Mathiassen and the other two (p00039 and 24692) by Leo Hansen.



Figure 6. "The first man to greet us in these new lands" (Rasmussen 1999:3). Danish Arctic Institute #p00101. Photo: Therkel Mathiassen.

Figure 8. "Leo Hansen, the film photographer" (Rasmussen 1999:243). Danish Arctic Institute, #24692. Photo: Leo Hansen.



Figure 7. "Arnarulunnguaq, the young Eskimo woman from Greenland" (Rasmussen 1999:158). Danish Arctic Institute #p00039. Photo: Leo Hansen.



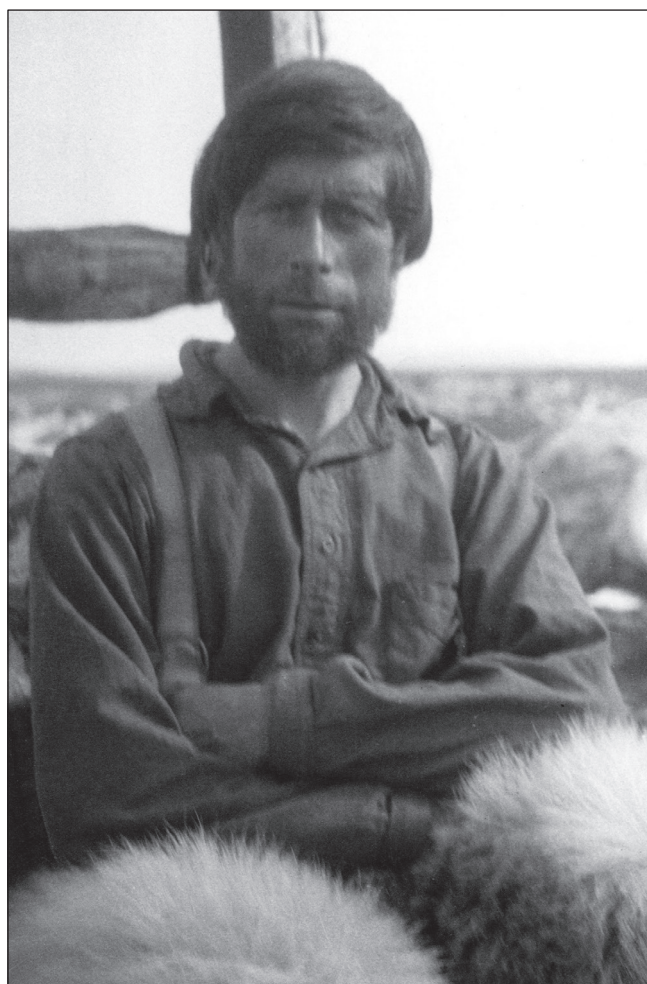


Hansen and Mathiassen. Broadly speaking, this information is not surprising, since Hansen and Mathiassen were the designated photographers on the FTE and are credited with the majority of the images in the DAI collection for 1923–1924 and 1921–1923, respectively. But who were the other people?

Danish photographers Harald Lindow and Holger Dan Møller did not participate in the expedition and were only present to photograph its departure from Copenhagen in 1921 and its return three years later. More puzzling are the three images credited to Helge Bangsted, three to Kaj Birket-Smith, and 11 to Knud Rasmussen himself. Of course, we may assume that, from time to time, Mathiassen or Hansen gave instructions to a colleague about how to “click the button.” A second possibility, which I find more likely, is that many years later, some descendant family members provided the Danish Arctic Institute with collections of their “grandfather’s photos from the Fifth Thule Expedition,” supposing that

“grandfather” might personally have taken the pictures but not knowing the full circumstances. For example, according to the institute’s records, an album donated by Helge Bangsted’s family has an attribution that it “comes from the expedition participant Helge Bangsted, who is also a photographer for some of the photos. Leo Hansen, Therkel Mathiassen, et al. are photographers for the other images.” One picture from that album, in this instance labeled “photographer unknown,” is shown in Fig. 9, left.

Turning to the other Danish archives, besides the DAI and NMD, Knud Rasmussen’s House has a small but interesting collection of about 60 expedition photographs, of which approximately half are portraits of the explorer himself (Fig. 9, right). Some of these are repeated in other collections, but in most instances the photographer is unknown. The photographs are accessible at [www.arkiv.dk](http://www.arkiv.dk), although a search on “5. thule ekspedition” will also provide access to 129 photos, of which about half are from Greenland and other venues not related to the FTE.



*Figure 9. Two photos by “unknown” photographers of Knud Rasmussen in the field. Left: Danish Arctic Institute, #p48892. Right: Knud Rasmussen Archive B10075. As far as we know, this is the only portrait of Rasmussen with a beard.*

The Royal Danish Library's photo collection is accessible online ([www.kb.dk/editions/any/2009/jul/editions/en/](http://www.kb.dk/editions/any/2009/jul/editions/en/)). A search for "5. Thuleekspedition" yields 120 entries and for "5. thule ekspedition" 118 entries; however, only about 75 of these images are actually related to the FTE. A number of beautiful portraits of Inuit are a highlight of the Royal Danish Library (RDL) collection, and one photo is remarkable thanks to its content and caption: "The Eskimo-Members of the 5th Thule-expedition after they were home in Thule. They have got decorated by the Danish King for their work on the Expedition" (Neg. 88643; see Fig. 8 in Kleist, *this issue*). There are additional pictures of the expedition's departure from and arrival to Denmark, and here the work of another photographer is represented, Copenhagen journalist Holger Damgaard. Most of the photographs at the RDL are labeled on the back as donations from Peter Freuchen's family.

As mentioned above, the NMD possesses almost 2,000 Fifth Thule photographs. A small portion of this collection is of special interest because it introduces an American commercial photographer and filmmaker, Earl Rossman,<sup>1</sup> and his contribution to the FTE documentation along with his Inupiat assistant Roy, whose last name was not even recorded (see Krupnik's comment to Bronshtein, *this issue*). Early on the morning of 17 September 1924, Knud Rasmussen was ready to board the *Teddy Bear* in Nome to set out for East Cape in Chukotka, then the Soviet Union, when Rossman and his assistant Roy appeared on the dock to record the event. Rasmussen later wrote in a telegram from Teller to Leo Hansen: "Now Rossman is leaving us—and he wants the young Eskimo to photograph for us. I don't believe in this arrangement much" (Rasmussen—DAI, Arktisk Institut A 075/1).

However, it appears that Rasmussen relented, since the NMD's set of 30 photos of Rasmussen's brief excursion to Siberia (a portion of it is also available at the DAI) includes several attributed to Roy (Fig. 10, top, bottom; also Fig. 6 in Shokarev, *this issue*). Hansen himself did not accompany Rasmussen on this final leg of the expedition; so all "Siberian" photos might have been taken by Roy. Unfortunately, all we know is his first name, and that he was a young "Eskimo" (Inupiaq?) man, and came with Rossman from Nome.<sup>2</sup>

The abovementioned collections constitute the photographic legacy of the FTE as it exists today. Hopefully, thanks to the renewed focus on the expedition during its 100th anniversary, some new collections of historical documents and photos may be recovered in descendants' store rooms and attics to expand the wealth of the FTE resources preserved in Danish archives.

## NOTES

1. On Rossman, note the following short entry in the online catalog of Karl Thiele Photographic Collection, 1924–1926, Alaska State Library (<https://alaska.libraryhost.com/repositories/2/resources/357>):

Earl Rossman recorded his Alaska experiences in the book, *Black Sunlight; a Log of the Arctic* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1926). In 1923, after photographing Southeast Alaska natives and losing the motion picture footage in a sinking boat, Rossman decided to see more of Alaska and photograph Eskimo life. Assisted by Governor Scott C. Bone and Karl Thiele, Rossman traveled to Nome and Barrow (today's Utqiagvik) with William T. Lopp on the vessel, *Boxer*. The plan to produce a motion picture film of Eskimo life had problems with the participants. However, the contacts made by Rossman in the North led to photography work on the Detroit Arctic Expedition of 1926 headed by Captain Sir Hubert Wilkins, but only one photo of this work is included in the Collection.

2. When this issue was in the final stage of preparation, it was brought to my attention that "Roy" may have been Robert Mayokok (1903–1983), an Alaska Native who later became a well-known artist. Born in Wales and orphaned during the flu epidemic of 1918, Mayokok published a short popular memoir, *Eskimo Life: Told by an Eskimo Artist*, in which he stated that he "made three or four trips to eastern Siberia, once with Knud Rasmussen, the Danish scientist and explorer" (Mayokok 1951:i). An Inupiaq resident of Nome in 1924 when he was twenty-one years old, Mayokok is an obvious candidate to be the "young Eskimo named Roy" who accompanied Rasmussen to Chukotka. I am grateful to Knud Michelsen, Igor Krupnik, Aron Crowell, and Ken Pratt for this information.





*Figure 10. Two photos from “Roy’s Collection” at the National Museum of Denmark taken during Rasmussen’s short trip to Chukotka in September 1924. Top: East Cape (Cape Dezhnev) is at the right edge of the photo, and approximately in the middle, on a high cliff, is the Yupik village of Naukan (#2741). Bottom: People ventured onto the shore ice in front of the village of Naukan to greet Rasmussen’s boat (2676).*

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