

## GERALD JAMES THOMPSON (1932–2019)

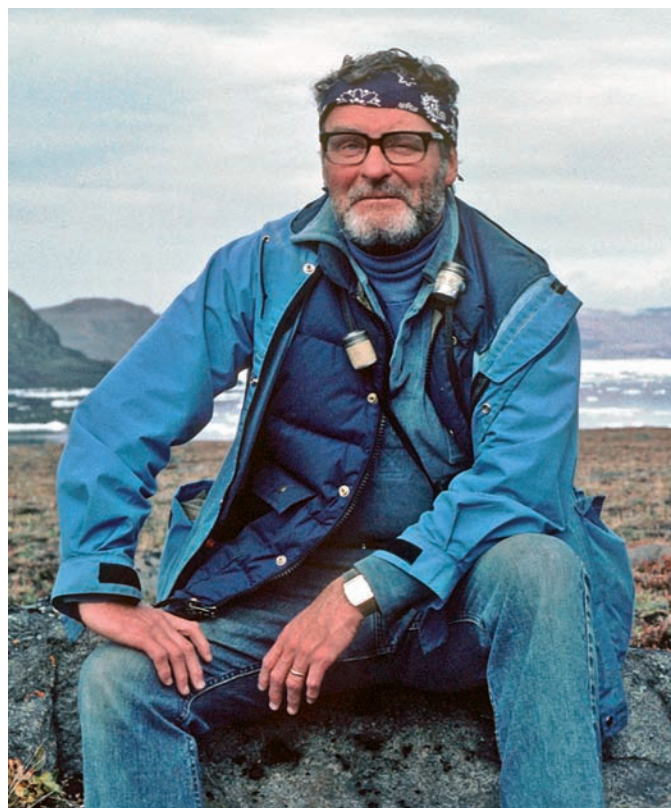
The Arctic Institute of North America (AINA) lost one of its longest serving and most influential employees with the passing of Gerald (Gerry) Thompson on 27 April 2019. As associate director, Gerry served the Institute well owing to his deep dedication, collegial personality, and adaptability as AINA settled into its mandate to advance the study of the North American and circumpolar Arctic through the natural and social sciences, arts, and humanities. It can be argued that during Gerry's lengthy tenure (1965–95), beginning during AINA's formative years, he shaped much of the Institute's direction, character, and permanence. For one whose work was officially focused on financial administration, Gerry proved to be exceptionally dynamic. He took an interest in projects and assisted researchers and students at the university and in the field. Successive executive directors at AINA were grateful for his outstanding competence as he provided unflinching support for the directions that each took the Institute. For this reason, it has been impossible for only one of Gerry's colleagues to adequately express the enormous impact he had on the Institute. The following obituary is a compilation of the words contributed by a number of those whose knowledge of Gerry, personally and professionally, offers a glimpse into his remarkable character.

Ken de la Barre, former director of the Montreal Office of the Institute, grew up with Gerry and the two went on to build their careers together at AINA. He states:

My friendship with Gerry began when we were both about 14 or so in Montreal playing hockey in laneways and baseball in public parks. We graduated from there to playing peewee and junior league football—sometimes even playing against each other on different teams—as well as softball in summer and skiing in winter. In later years we both ended up going to Concordia University, generally taking the same kinds of night courses that eventually led to commerce degrees. By then, we were both working as accountants or as managers in a variety of businesses.

We also had started families and our wives and children had become best friends, vacationing and renting summer cottages and winter ski chalets together. At some point Gerry and I became interested in running marathons—me as an occasional runner and Gerry a dedicated marathoner, especially for races in Hawaii!

In 1962, I joined the Arctic Institute of North America, then located at McGill University. As executive officer, I was mostly responsible for financial and administrative matters, but I also overlooked a variety of research activities, including the operations of two very active and unique field research stations: the Kluane Lake Research Station (KLRS), located in Yukon and another on Devon Island in the Canadian High Arctic.



Gerry Thompson (Photo by Karen McCullough).

This was a time when AINA was becoming involved in the organization and management of a variety of conferences, many of them leading to multiyear research projects, such as the SCOR/SCAR Polar Oceans conference, the North Water Project, the International Northern Libraries Colloquy meetings, the Mountain Medicine and High Altitude Physiology conferences (which led to multiyear field research projects at KLRS), the Man in the North project, and the series of Northern Population Workshops held in various parts of Canada and abroad.

It soon became clear that we/I desperately needed some help. So I reached out to my best friend Gerry Thompson. I promised him that the position would be incredibly varied and that he would be meeting and working with fascinating people (and actually participating in field research projects), among other duties. The only “minor” drawback was that he would likely be paid less than he was already making! (I tried to compensate by explaining that I had joined under very similar circumstances and had never regretted it—forgetting to mention that my wife had taken a part-time job.) He accepted the post, thereby saving my bacon, as the saying goes, and the rest is history.

For example, I remember one occasion when AINA was managing a large seismology research project

involving setting up a string of monitoring stations reaching from the Great Lakes up through northern Ontario. One of the university teams was not familiar with working in an isolated environment and Gerry was charged with organizing the camp, something he himself had almost no experience with. The feedback from the university team was that they were delighted to have “such an experienced wilderness guide to support their work.” If only they knew!

Gerry fitted immediately into the AINA culture. Among his many (understated) talents were his people skills. To illustrate, he was able to negotiate with a variety of McGill University administrators who, so to speak, were our landlords, providing us with our own building and free space. They also offered us free access to the use of their computerized accounting system and eventually became our publisher through very favourable arrangements with McGill-Queen’s University Press.

His forte was being able to deal with and be helpful to everyone who came through our doors; for example, dealing with students asking for suggestions on equipment they needed or information about our two research stations, as well as interacting with the Institute’s distinguished international Board of Governors. The Board was especially important when AINA’s often dire financial situation was being discussed!

When the decision was made in 1975–76 to move from Montreal to the University of Calgary, it fell largely into Gerry’s lap to visualize, arrange, and oversee the numerous elements of that task; in particular, the logistics of moving the Institute’s renowned Arctic library. During that period and fortunately for AINA, he also made the decision to move his family to Calgary. He became, in effect, the only experienced person familiar with AINA’s operations in Montreal who transferred on a permanent basis to Calgary.

The Institute’s Board Chairman at the time, R.G.S. Currie, described all the events surrounding the move in a report: “*The Year That Was*.” On the inside cover he wrote: “To Gerry for hanging in there,” and “It couldn’t be done without you.” Truer words were never spoken!

The move from McGill to the University of Calgary in 1975–76 was not an easy transition and involved a multitude of challenges. But Peter Schledermann recalls that members of the University of Calgary’s Northern Studies Group (NSG) were excited about the possibilities the establishment of the Institute offered and quickly contacted Gerry. Schledermann, who was faculty in the Department of Archaeology and head of the NSG, was struck by Gerry’s obvious commitment to building the Institute in its new home. Later Schledermann became executive director. He states:

As a newly minted professor, I had just obtained a substantial contract with the Polar Gas Project aimed

at conducting an archaeological site survey along the proposed pipeline. Before long, Gerry arranged for AINA to provide the logistic management of the project and I became a research associate of the Institute in 1976. Over the years, I never failed to marvel at Gerry’s ability to organize the growing multitude of activities AINA was involved with while keeping track of the Institute’s financial obligations.

When I became the executive director in 1979, I was only able to undertake a long-term archaeological project on Ellesmere Island because of Gerry, who basically stepped in as acting director each summer when I, together with students and research associates, disappeared into the Far North. On one occasion during the summer of 1982, when the Ellesmere Project was run by Dr. Karen McCullough (later editor of *Arctic*), Gerry accompanied me to Ellesmere Island where we undertook a weeklong archaeological coastal survey, during which we carried and relayed our gear accompanied by clouds of mosquitos. We had a great time!

Gerry was well established at AINA when Mike Robinson became executive director (1986–2000). The two quickly established a remarkable partnership as the Institute’s activities and influence continued to grow. Mike states:

Gerry Thompson was the first AINA staffer I met on my first day at work in July 1986, as I began my new job as executive director. “Hi, Dr. Robinson, I’m Gerry Thompson, your second in command, sir!” I quickly explained that I wasn’t a PhD, and that he should call me Mike, as long as I could call him Gerry. “Right you are, Mike.” And so we were Gerry and Mike for the next 14 years. In that entire time we never had an argument. It was a remarkable partnership, made even more so as I was 15 years younger than Gerry and just putting together my first large research project. In all of this work, he was a tireless guide and old fashioned “pencil and paper” accountant, who kept track of the pennies so the dollars never went missing.

During that time, AINA solidified its northern Canadian research activities in the social sciences and welcomed a new generation of graduate students in a variety of participatory action research (PAR) projects that ranged across the Canadian North from Fort McPherson and Inuvik in the Mackenzie Delta, to Déljine and Whati in the Sahtu, to Fort McKay in northern Alberta, and Murmansk, Lovozero, and Yona on Russia’s Kola Peninsula. Gerry played a key role in stewarding and accounting for research funds for each of these projects and worked closely with AINA’s Dené, Inuvialuit, Cree, Métis, and Sámi partners in the work. His fundamentally decent, low key, and competent telephone manner made him a respected partner in each community, even though his work base was Calgary. Occasionally our community partners came to Calgary,

and a visit to the AINA offices was always a top priority, “So we can meet Gerry!”

In my entire AINA career there was only one dispute between staff that really required my intervention. And it was a doozy. It was my first day back at work after a wonderful August holiday of family camping and fishing on the west coast of Nootka Island. I arrived at my AINA desk to find the top completely bare except for two sealed white envelopes. Both were addressed to me, awaiting opening. One bore Gerry’s unmistakable handwriting, the other that of Gordon Hodgson, the editor of *Arctic*. I opened Gerry’s first—it was his formal resignation, effective immediately. The other was Gordon’s resignation—also effective immediately. Needless to say, losing the chief financial officer and the *Arctic* editor in one day would be a matter of major impact.

I quickly walked down to Gerry’s office and saw that he had just arrived and was hanging up his jacket. He briefed me in detail on a dispute, now a week old, with Gordon. I said that I’d next speak with the editor, and that I wanted all three of us to go to lunch in the Faculty Club at 12 noon sharp. We did. We lunched. We all talked. Both men were glad I was back. And somehow, they both spontaneously apologized to one another. We had desserts and walked back to AINA. I remember Gerry waving at Murray Fraser, the new President of the University of Calgary, as we approached the MacKimmie Library building. Professor Fraser, already a friend of AINA, called out: “How did the summer go, Arctic explorers?” With a big smile, Gerry called back, “Never better, Mr. President!”

The last time I saw Gerry was in 2012, in Vancouver. He called me up at the Bill Reid Gallery of Northwest Coast Art where I was the startup executive director and asked me to lunch. We had a wonderful opportunity to catch-up with one another, and he asked me who was the financial officer of the new gallery? I introduced him to Fanny Chow after lunch, and I noticed they both immediately went off to coffee somewhere. About an hour later the two accountants returned to the gallery with beaming faces. They told me they had a wonderful time getting to know one another and exchanging “Mike and money” stories. After Gerry left, Fanny told me that he was a very kind spirit. And that was the Gerry I knew.

One of Gerry’s many duties was to manage the administration of AINA’s two field stations. As often as his work allowed him, Gerry made field trips to projects and field stations over the years, most often to KLRS with his family. During those visits Gerry had many adventures with station manager Andy Williams. Williams remembers Gerry and family:

Back in the day, Carole [Williams] and I were paid 400 bucks a month to run the base, quite adequate,

on the understanding that everybody would pitch in to help. Families were allowed to stay for free if they contributed to running the base. Gerry, then, would do a whole raft of stuff: wash dishes, dig outhouse holes, whatever. Doreen [Thompson], a splendid cook, would help Carole in the kitchen, often providing for 50 people. The children would stand radio-watch, you might recall that Walter [Wood] insisted on 10-minute position reports when the aircraft were en route. Thus, we provided access to a northern environment for hundreds of young Canadians.

All of the contributors here agree that Gerry was an important figure in the growth and success of AINA, largely as the result of his dedication and personality. Peter Schledermann states, “I will always remember Gerry for his ability to resolve conflict situations and for his kindness to students and co-workers. No one knew the organizational history of the Institute better than Gerry, and his commitment to AINA was unmatched.” Mike Robinson agrees and adds, “He was consistently kind, committed to Northerners and all of their joint ventures with AINA, a friend to all strugglers in the world of Arctic science, and a steady hand with the financial issues, typical and atypical, in the realm of research institutes and academe. Simply put, AINA couldn’t have had better financial administration in its formative Calgary years.”

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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