



# Farewell Putyuk

The passing of an Upper Kobuk legend

Clarence Putyuk Wood: a man more than tuned to the land; he was part of it.

BY NICK JANS



Clarence vaults a cut bank on a snowmobile two decades ago, with a loaded 16-foot basket sled behind.

“**W**E BETTER GET GOING,” ALVIN WILLIAMS SAID “Daylight’s burning.” A dozen of us stood with shovels and axes on a snow-covered knoll on the south side of the Kobuk River, five miles below the Inupiaq village of Ambler. Weathered wooden crosses rose through the drifts; before us, a rectangle of cleared ground. My companions had known Clarence Wood all their lives. I, the oldest and sole *naluagmiu*—white man—had known him four decades, as my traveling partner and friend. Most of the gravediggers had once been my students at the village school. We stood together in the deepening cold, 15 below zero and falling. The January sun sagged on the southern horizon, casting the Jade Mountains in shades that had no earthly name.

A trio of moose browsed in the willows a few hundred yards below us. I imagined Clarence watching, lips split in a half-grin, hips slouched forward, hands in pockets, Marlboro dangling. He murmured to me, *Well, at least I let you get cold one more time.* And gazed appreciatively down toward the moose and chin-

NICK JANS



One of many camps Nick Jans shared with Clarence over nearly four decades, and uncounted thousands of miles of wilderness travel.



pointed, *Pretty nice, that one cow. Faaat.*

"Eighty-two by forty-eight, right?" asked Luke, Clarence's son, furling his tape measure as Alvin and I marked the grave's boundaries. Roy Ramoth coaxed the portable generator to life, and Chris Coffin took first turn with the jackhammer. The frozen sandy silt yielded grudgingly, stiff as concrete. Ernie Tickett and Floyd Cleveland scrabbled with shovels. There was only room for three to work at a time, and even with switching off every few minutes and going all out, we knew we'd be finishing far past dark.

I'd come more than 4,000 miles from my winter home in north Florida to help send Clarence off on his last great adventure. As soon as I'd gotten the call from our mutual friend, ex-Iditarod musher John Cooper, I'd started packing my bags. The news, while a gut punch, held no surprise. Over the past years, Clarence had been fading—crippled by pain; mind clouded by opiates he'd been prescribed; vision and heart failing; once-lithe frame withered to a skeletal apparition beyond his 81 years. He could scarcely leave the house this past fall. He wasn't expected to see the new year, and in fact died a few days sooner, horribly burned after teetering and falling against a woodstove, then pulling a pan of scalding water down over himself as he struggled to rise—a hard end for a man who'd lived a hard life.

Inupiaq village funerals are hands-on, personal affairs. Everyone has lost a neighbor, relative, friend. The community swings into motion. Volunteer crews build the coffin; fashion cross and footboard; dress and lay out the body; dig the grave; cook for workers and visitors; help with the service and transportation. Together, we bear the weight of loss. For my part, I carried north a big box of artificial flowers and photos to brighten the service, pitched in with the grave crew, and delivered the eulogy.

Clarence Putyuk Wood: I first met him in 1979, when I was a 24-year-old



Members of the gravedigging crew chip through hard-frozen ground as the arctic day fades.

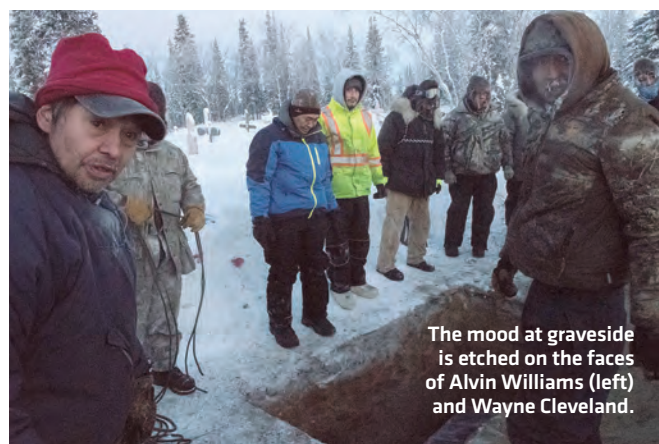




Female members of the Wood family stand together at Clarence's service.

kid green as spring willows, working as manager of the Ambler Trading Post—what Clarence would call “*Cheechako*” as he dismissively flicked thumb off a forefinger. Into the store he’d stride, wolfish eyes set above dark, frostbitten cheeks, speaking in low, breathy monosyllables. Always in a hurry somewhere, pausing to buy cigarettes, bullets, canned stuff, and pilot bread. I’d ask him where he was headed, and it was out into the country—far-sounding places with haunting names. He felt caged in the village, with all its comforts and certainties. The land pulled at him like a magnet. No matter if it was 40 below, or a blizzard, or spring breakup—he forged out and came back with his sled or boat full of caribou, bear, wolves, beaver, geese, and moose, which he shared through the community. In a hunter-gatherer culture where everyone was at least a competent outdoorsperson, his drive, ability, and largesse stood out. *Putyuk always get*, people would say, and nod.

I may not have known much, but I knew this was a guy I wanted to *malik*—follow—and learn from. I’d ask him to let me ride with him, and he’d laugh, *Ah, come on now, Nick!* Like it was the biggest joke he’d ever heard. But I kept asking, and finally traced his fresh-broken trail a hundred miles into the upper Noatak, where he found me freezing my ass off in a nylon tent at 20 below. Clarence called me over to his snug camp, fed and warmed me. I could feel him cocking an eyebrow. Finally, after I returned to Ambler from a five-year hiatus in Noatak village (where I landed my first teaching job) he started stopping by my cabin to visit, and invited me to tag along, an ironically reversed Tonto to his Lone Ranger.



The mood at graveside is etched on the faces of Alvin Williams (left) and Wayne Cleveland.

I discovered one thing right away: wherever we were going, it was fast. No matter the trail or the load he was pulling, he’d just grab the throttle and disappear toward the horizon, over the tussock-riddled, wind-scraped ground that laces the western Brooks Range. Thrashing up Iviisaaq Pass, I once watched his fully loaded basket sled hit a drift, complete a barrel roll and come down on its runners. Clarence never looked back. And every 10 or 20 miles, he’d wait for me to catch up. *What happened, you break down or something?* He’d bark, then roar off again in a spray of snow.

Not only did Clarence go fast, he ranged far, often alone, beyond the rim of the Kobuk valley. Places like the upper Noatak

NICK JANS



All that matters is that he was my friend. And as usual, Clarence stands somewhere ahead up the trail, Marlboro dangling from his lip as he knocks ice off his undercarriage, waiting for me to catch up.



Nick's usual view while traveling with Clarence in the vast arctic landscape—him disappearing toward the far horizon.

and Nigu Rivers, and a couple times a winter, all the way to Anaktuvuk Pass—275 miles without so much as an inhabited cabin, finding his way by memory and feel through some of the hardest country in Alaska. If you blew your engine or got stuck, *well, too bad, buddy*. He'd laugh at the maps I carried along. An inner compass was fused to his being, as if he were a raven, looking down on it all. One time in a whiteout, the kind where you can barely see your machine's skis, we were searching our way back to camp. He passed a nondescript clump of scrub willow and changed direction. A few miles later, there stood our tent.

Clarence wasn't just tuned to the land; he seemed hard-wired to its flow. One glance at a jumble of tracks and he'd know how many wolves, how many days, hours, or even minutes ago they'd passed, and if their bellies were full. I remember him standing in the dark, flaring his nostrils. *Bear real close*, he breathed. *I can smell 'em*. I peppered him with questions—not only about the country, but about Inupiaq culture past, present, and future, and what he thought or believed about the universe until he shrugged into exasperated silence. *Sometimes I don't know about you white people*, he muttered. One quiet morning in camp, somewhere up in the Noatak country, he offered what I'm sure he considered an overdue intervention. *Too much think about bullshit*, he shook his finger. *That's what make you nervous*.

I could keep telling stories—about the time I watched him drive his machine up a slope so steep it was almost a cliff; or when wet to our knees at 20 below, we fought through miles of



Clarence's son, Luke, steadies the cross as the grave is filled.

deadly ice down the John River; or the time he...ah, never mind. The memories flow over and through me, driven on a great, cold wind. All that matters is that he was my friend. And as usual, Clarence stands somewhere ahead up the trail, Marlboro dangling from his lip as he knocks ice off his undercarriage, waiting for me to catch up. 🐾

---

Nick Jans is a longtime contributing editor to *Alaska* and author of the award-winning collection of essays *The Giant's Hand: A Life in Arctic Alaska*, available from [nickjans.com](http://nickjans.com).