

Dr. Kenneth Toovak, Sr., a lifelong resident of Barrow, Alaska, died there in his 87th year on 19th November 2009. Over seven decades, he worked in many capacities in support of sciences, Arctic exploration and his community. Charles D. Brower, who since the 1880s had operated a whaling and trading post at the site of the U.S. contribution to the First International Polar Year (1881-84), noticed young Kenneth's unassuming manner and hard work by 1938, and began entrusting him with tasks of increasing responsibility, despite the fact that Toovak's education was limited to primary grades by obligations to his family.

Kenneth worked for Brower's store until signing on to the U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey in 1945. By then, his skills as a mechanic, shipwright, surveyor, and general problem-solver kept him in high demand. In 1946 he married Thelma Stein. By 1947, he was working for Arctic Contractors, assigned to drilling for oil in the Naval Petroleum Reserve No. 4 ("Pet 4," now known as NPR-A). In the early 1950s, Kenneth was one of several key persons to work for Puget Sound and Drake on the U.S. military's building the Distant Early Warning ("DEW" line) radar sites across northern Alaska.

When Max Brewer of the USGS persuaded the Navy to reserve space at the Barrow field station for year-round support of growing numbers of scientific investigators and their projects in the Arctic, he followed up by incorporating Kenneth Toovak, and several of Toovak's local colleagues, including Joe Ahgeak, Harry Brower, Sr, and Pete Sovalik into the staff of the facility that came to be known as the Naval Arctic Research Laboratory, NARL. Profound trust and friendship between Brewer and Toovak outlasted Brewer's tenure as director of the NARL, which ended in 1971.

Kenneth continued as a leader in community and intercultural collaboration with scientists at NARL under Brewer's successors until 1976, when he undertook oversight for Husky Oil's cleanup of NPR-A. From 1979 until the early 1990s, he worked for the North Slope Borough, notably founding its Search and Rescue Department. Retirement hardly slowed Kenneth's pace, as he accepted invitations to serve as Elder's Representative for conferences and advisory boards, including that of the Barrow Arctic Science Consortium. Honors kept pace with invitations. In 1998, the Sigma Xi Research Society recognized his lifetime of achievement. In 2000, Kenneth, along with other notable achievers Col. Norman Vaughan, Wilford Weeks, and Max Brewer were awarded memberships in the American Polar Society. In 2003, the University of Alaska Fairbanks conferred on Kenneth an honorary doctorate for tireless service to scientists.

Even a small sample of his worldwide acquaintances and admirers can recount Kenny's moments of great and small achievement for hours on end. Highlights might include his early prospecting expeditions for coal in behalf of Charles Brower; towing transport airplanes back onto runways; moving petroleum storage tanks without damaging them; surviving a plane crash on ice island T-3 near the North Pole; running cat trains upriver over Colville River ice in spring; developing means to penetrate and sample through maximum-thickness sea ice in winter; and numerous successfully concluded search and rescue operations.

Dr. Toovak's achievements illustrate abiding simultaneously by Iñupiaq values and expertise while contributing to scientific understanding. As a veteran of the Alaska Territorial Guard, and member of Presbyterian parish in Barrow, Kenny also bridged among military and civilian, religious and secular communities. His life personifies the generation of Northern Alaska Iñupiat who built their wartime and postwar activities into durable traditions and institutions.



Kenneth Toovak, Sr. (1923-2009) pictured on 10 May 2003, when he received his honorary doctorate from the University of Alaska Fairbanks (Photo: Dave Norton)