

by Martin Nissen

The Women Kayakers of Greenland

*'That it is a boy makes me thankful
He, when he grows up, will fare in kayak
Were it just a daughter, never could she
fare in kayak
Were it just a daughter there would be
little room for joy'*

*'ernikulungmat tipaitsoKaunga
KaKugo inerune KajartortásaoK.
arnakasiugune sajartorneK
ajordluinasaoK, arnakasiugpat
tipaitsutiginaviångilarput.'*

This was a Greenlandic lullaby that the women would sing to their newborn sons. It was written down by a pastor's wife, Louise Jensen, in Southwest Greenland in 1850. The song illustrates the importance of a hunter who could supply the family with food and skin for clothes. Apart from revealing that starvation was a real threat back in the mid-nineteenth century, the saying also points to a clear pattern of gender-dependent roles when it came to kayaking. Contrary to the boys, women played a key role in the kayak-building process. However, they were not traditionally raised as kayak hunters. Though it was said to bring bad luck if women ventured to sea in a kayak, women commonly took great pride in other tasks related to kayaks. Skinning the kayak was a practice of utmost importance, and sewing, especially the section of the aft deck right behind the cockpit, was a feat of needlework and a job of honor reserved only for the best seamstresses. A poorly sewn kayak could mean life or death for the kayak hunter.

When the man was out hunting, the woman would frequently be scouting the horizon to see if her husband was on his way home and if he had a catch. Even from a long distance, she could



Ellen Thalbitzer, one of the early European women to take up kayaking in Greenland, here paddles Ammassalik Fjord, East Greenland, in 1906.

Photo courtesy of Danish Polar Center

tell by his movements and his paddling style which hunter was the father of her children. Even when he was facing shore, thus covering a possible prey on the back deck, she could tell by the look of his shape if he was returning home empty-handed—his posture would reveal it. As soon as a mammal was landed, the woman would resume her role in the hunting endeavor while the proud rank kayaker would carry his kayak to the rack. While female paddlers were a rare sight in Greenland waters, a few women defied tradition and made the kayak part of their everyday work. Even if descriptions of these women are scarce and sporadic, this article addresses a few female paddlers spread out over almost a century.

The first European who managed to reach Ammassalik on the east coast of Greenland was captain Gustav Holm

who, in 1884, led an expedition from South Greenland, 600 miles (1000 kilometers) up the east coast to the settlement of Ammassalik (Tasiilaq). Members of the expedition, known as the umiaq expedition, had their umiaqs built in South Greenland and were accompanied by some of the very best South Greenland kayak hunters to provide food on the yearlong journey. In his diary, Holm reports that there were two girls on the southeast coast who hunt from kayaks. He is told that it is not unusual that girls were raised as kayak hunters if there were no sons in the near family or if too many men had lost their lives in kayaks.

Greenlander Oline Mathiasen was the first-ever midwife in East Greenland. Her father died in a kayak accident and her mother passed away when she was six years old. After her mother's funeral,

history

Photos courtesy of Danish Polar Center



Astrid Nissen (no relation to the author) in her own kayak, 1920.

some of the children, including Oline, went missing. When people went looking for them, they were found trying to dig their way down to Oline's mother. As Oline was fatherless, the first manager of the Ammassalik colony, Johan Petersen, took her under his wing. After studying in Denmark, she returned to Ammassalik in 1904. From 1905 to 1950 she worked as the East Greenland midwife, managing the whole district before she passed away in 1965 at the age of 80. To travel around the district, she used her kayak in the summer and skis during winter. She sometimes paddled 30 miles (50 kilometers) to the settlements, which required stamina and strong paddling skills in ice-filled waters. One winter day, on her way to the settlement of Tinitiqilaaq in the Sermelik fjord, she encountered a polar bear and killed it on the way to helping a woman in urgent need—Oline was a woman of many skills.

The growing population in the district saw a need for more health care and Danish nurse Signe Rink (b.1909) was summoned to run the program from 1932 to 1946. Reliable transportation was an important aspect of her job, and outside her house in Tasiilaq, Signe had an umiak and a kayak placed high on the rack out of reach of her 12 sled dogs that were invaluable when getting around the district during winter. "The Greenlanders call me Piniartorsuaq (great hunter)," Signe said with pride.

The year after Signe settled, Danish nurse Sara Helms (b.1911) came to Greenland to help her with the health-

THE ORIGINAL BRITISH SEA KAYAK

VALLEY
THE ORIGINAL BRITISH SEA KAYAK



For your nearest Valley dealer go to: www.valleyseakayaks.com





An unnamed Danish woman in Greenland in 1925.

care program. Sara followed Signe around the district on dog sled, by umiaq and also in a kayak when needed.

The first couple of years, the general health of the East Greenlanders was good and Signe and Sara witnessed the seminomadic hunting community in harmony with nature. There was enough prey and everyone looked after each other. In 1935, an influenza epidemic struck, killing nine percent of the adults and leaving 123 kids fatherless. Coupled with tuberculosis and plague the following years, the importance and workload of the caregivers increased considerably.

The local hunters built Sara a kayak and also trained her to use it. She tried to master the roll under the supervision of the hunters, but she never quite succeeded rolling on her own. From a diary entry of dated June 2, 1935, Sara Helms writes of a day when she and the Rosing family were out on a trip in the umiaq. After a piece of sea ice shredded the umiaq, water soon flooded into it. Somehow they managed to get the umiaq onto a drifting piece of ice. As usual, the women had brought along their sewing kit, so it did not take long before the rent was sewn, the umiaq was recoated with seal fat inside and out, and they were able to continue the trip.

Among the locals in the Ammassalik district, there was a woman in the settlement of Isortoq who also paddled a kayak back in the 1930s when Signe Vest and Sara Helms were there. According to Sara, Rebekka was a keen kayaker and a good help when learning or talking about kayaking. Sara left Greenland

in 1963 and Rebekka died in 1981.

In 1980, at the age of 80, Sara and her husband went back to Ammassalik for a six-month period. The people of Tasiilaq had certainly not forgotten their "mother" and soon her old kayak frame was dug out—they had kept it as a memory of her. Having been unused for 26 years, the frame was no longer skin-covered and had a note on it saying: "Don't touch—it's Sara's." Sara brought the kayak with her to Denmark, where it made a nice adornment to her house in the city of Horsens. In 1981 she started studying eskimology at the University of Copenhagen where she graduated at age 77 in 1989. Her thesis was titled *Welfare for Widows and Children in East Greenland*. Sara Helms died in 1999 and her kayak was kindly offered to the local paddling club, Horsens Kajakklub, where it now decorates the hall.

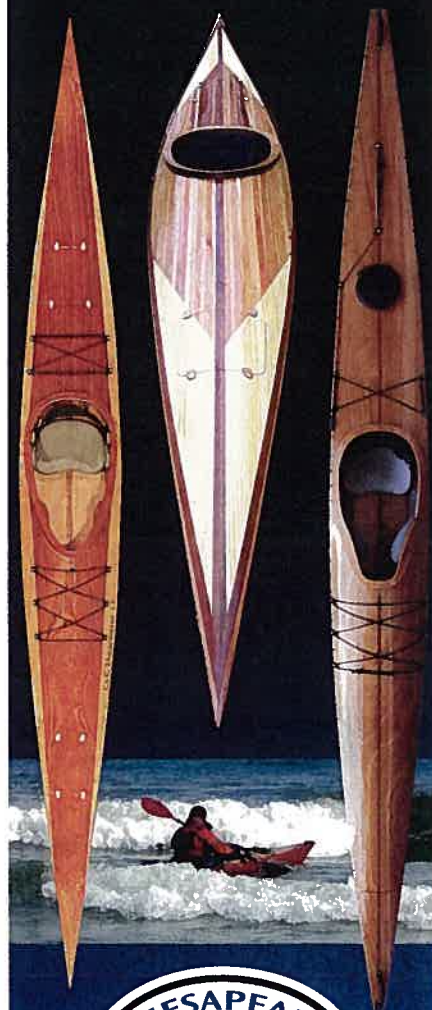
Though they were few and far between, female paddlers did exist in Greenland. In 2005, a century after Oline Mathiasen worked as a midwife in East Greenland, the Tasiilaq kayak club, Tsaqqit Tasiilaq, was officially inducted into the National Greenland Kayaking Association, Qaannat Kattuffiat. During that time, the club was chaired by a woman, Susanne Jars, making a nice finale to a century of female paddlers on the remote east coast of Greenland.

SK

Martin Nissen builds Greenland-style kayaks and paddles in Copenhagen, Denmark. He can be reached via his web site: www.greenlandpaddle.com

LIGHT YET STRONG

*Elegant Designs
Exceptional Performance*



The best boats YOU can build.™

PLANS AND KITS FOR
KAYAKS, CANOES,
ROWING CRAFT,
DINGHIES, SAILBOATS,
AND MORE!

www.clcboats.com

410.267.0137

ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND