

MEMORIES OF SANATORIUM INUIT ART

By Robert Williamson

When Hamilton's Mountain heritage became a headline on the Hamilton Spectator front page, it was a story opportunity I couldn't ignore. The Art Gallery of Hamilton has acquired the major collection of Inuit art from the former Hamilton TB Sanatorium on the west mountain. A flood of memories came racing back to me as editor of the Hamilton Health Sciences' 100th Anniversary book, "**Chedoke, More Than a Sanatorium**". An entire chapter was dedicated to the "Inuit Period" at the "San" during the 1950s and 60s when Tuberculosis reached epidemic proportions in the isolated Inuit communities of the Arctic. The government feared that the Eskimo population of Canada was becoming an endangered species.

1,274 Eastern Arctic Inuit patients from Baffin Island to Ellesmere Island, were treated at the Mountain San. As part of their therapy and to cope with boredom, they were encouraged to carve images of their Arctic experience in soapstone. Of all the stories assembled for the Chedoke book's Inuit chapter, two anecdotes told by Mountain residents have stuck in my memory.

Fred Lee who lived on the west mountain was a classmate of mine at McMaster University. He described how as a student he got a summer job in 1957 aboard the federal supply ship *C.D. Howe* used to carry TB-stricken Inuit to and from an assembly port for the Hamilton Sanatorium. Fred remembered that when the ship arrived at an Inuit village, there were two distinct movements of people. One wave was made up of family members who rushed down to the ship to greet returning patients who had been away for nearly two years. Another wave headed for the interior to avoid being tested and removed to the strange and foreign environment of a sanatorium perhaps never to return, like the thirty-seven Inuit who are buried in Hamilton's Woodland Cemetery.

My neighbour Jim Howson, grew up on Concession Street. As a teenager in 1961, he spent over a year in the San with spinal tuberculosis brought on by a tobogganing accident. He recalls how Inuit patients would trade their soapstone carvings for tobacco and toiletries. He collected a few carvings which he gave to his mother. After he was married she

gave the few little carvings away to friends who admired them, unaware of their intrinsic value. Today, the entire Chedoke collection of 75 sculptures, valued at more than \$300,000.00, is considered to be one of the most important Inuit collections in the country.



Fred Lee with an unidentified Inuit child on board the Department of Transport vessel C.D. Howe in an ice flow off the northern tip of Baffin Island. Photo: Fred Lee



Some of the Inuit soapstone carvings that were on display in the Chedoke Ewart Building 1992. HHS

Mountain Memories, written by **Robert Williamson** for the Hamilton Mountain Heritage Society, appears monthly. See Society's Website (Hamiltonheritage.ca) to purchase a copy of "**Chedoke, More Than a Sanatorium**".