

Writings of Tundra Times founder Howard Rock reveal his feelings

Editor's note: The Tundra Times is reprinting some of the writings of our late founder, Howard Rock, because we believe his comments offer much for people even today.

by Howard Rock

The first thing I became aware of was that I was cold.

You might think an Eskimo born in the Arctic would be immune to cold, but that is not true. It is my first memory, and I think it was meant to be that way because a child of the Arctic must know how to cope with its dangers.

In the old days it was said that at birth, a male child of an Eskimo family at Tikiaq was immersed in the frigid water of a little lagoon a mile east of the village. This was the ritual a mother performed to initiate her son to the rigors of the Arctic climate. It was supposed to toughen him against the cold as he hunted during his manhood; to help him to survive in a frozen land where others could not live.

I came into a world that was vastly different — Tikiaq, now called Point Hope — is an ancient Eskimo settlement in the far northwestern part of Alaska. It is believed to be one of the oldest continuously inhabited sites in America.

Many centuries ago my people learned to cope with its fierce winters by sewing ingenious fur clothing and building snug houses of sod and driftwood. They also built remarkable boats framed with driftwood and covered with watertight skins and learned to hunt the big bowhead whales that migrated through the icy sea.

The village flourished on this industry with almost no interruption until 1886 when the first Yankee whaling station was based there. My great uncle, Chief Attungowruk, imposed a demarcation line between Point Hope and Jabbertown, a colony of many races that grew up around the American camp.

The line kept the outsiders from whaling in Eskimo waters but it didn't protect our people from the vices of the newcomers or the diseases they brought with them. The demoralizing period that followed threatened to destroy the village, but the decline in commercial whaling and with it, the American station, came just in time.

There followed an unusual missionary-physician, Dr. John Driggs, who believed in preservation of Eskimo hunting traditions and by the time I was born, people had pretty much settled back into their old ways.

A few frame houses began to replace the igloos and some white man's foods were becoming popular, but basically my people lived off the land as they always had — and as they still do today.

It seems as if nature carefully planned Point Hope and worked out a system of spacing a succession of animals to be hunted. In winter — February and March — giant polar bears are taken. In spring the small white whales migrate north past our coast preceeding the big bowhead whales which our people start hunting in mid-April. Whale meat and muktuk, the skin and fat of the whale, are traditionally the favorite Eskimo foods and a 40-ton bowhead is a welcome catch.

The few oogrugs, large bearded seal, start showing up about the time whaling season is over. They come more and more until, in late spring, there will be quite a few of them. In that time, too, the eider ducks fly north in flocks.

When the ice begins to break up, the walrus start coming, migrating toward Barrow. They like to get up on large cakes of ice and sun themselves and sleep. That's when the people get them. And once in a while in summer there will be stragglers traveling leisurely by the village. These are nice, welcome things.

And, of course, there are seal year round and caribou, too, and the fishing is good. Before the whaling season, sometimes in March, great schools of



tomcod come by. The people fish for them with a line and four hooks and lots of times all four hooks would come up with a little tomcod. There are also white fish, salmon, Arctic char, herring and smelt from the lakes and tiny crab by the hundreds.

Blessed with such bounty, Point Hope is and was a successful and prosperous village. When I was young, however, there were some periods during the winter when weather conditions were very bad and my father and the other men would go hunting day after day and come back with no game.

We had *sigluaks*, underground storage areas dug into the permafrost, but sometimes, especially when the village didn't get many whales in spring, most of the caches would be quite empty.

With us, the children, it was a glorious day when father returned with game during such periods. We knew we would have more to eat, but before we even partook of the meal we felt pangs of disappointment. My mother gave much of our food away.

I remember one time father came home with two seals. After they had thawed out in the house, mother started cutting them to pieces and asked me and my sister and brother to take them to certain families.

"Take this over to Samaroona's." Or, "Take this to your aunt."

"Mother, you're not leaving enough meat for us," I worried. "We'll be out of meat again very soon."

"You keep quiet and take that meat to your cousin," she said, and she saved only a few days supply for our family. It happened many times but always the next day someone would knock on our door with maybe a piece of caribou or oogrug or polarbear.

This was the reciprocal system my people had used for ages. They took care for one another in times of need

and the giver often received more than he gave.

Winter temperatures sometimes fell to 45 degrees below zero with sharp winds. Warm clothing, too, was important for survival. It was usually made as inexpensively as possible, sewed by the women of caribou or reindeer skins which they had tanned by hand. Sometimes mother would be busy and some of us would suffer from lack of footwear, although she didn't neglect us. She kept mending our little mukluks but there were six or seven of us and of course my mother's main chore was to clothe my father properly because he was our hunter.

I was prone to be a sickly child. My mother told me that I had almost died soon after my birth.

"When I took you to church, you used to start crying and wouldn't breathe anymore," she told me. "I used to have to take you out into the fresh air, turn you upside down and into the wind, and then you would start to breathe again."

One of the most pleasant memories under the sober setting of my young life was of my older sister Kaipuk. She later died during an epidemic in Seattle where she went to study nurse's training.

Kaipuk was the blithe spirit in our household. She laughed and joked and she had a quick genuine smile that was disarming. Being aware of my sickly nature, she took to me and took care of me. When I ached she sympathized and cooed me into feeling better. And when I felt better she was happy. She made my clothes and carried me around with her and her sisterly love was intense. This along with her help in caring for me, gave me the will to go on, and I became stronger.

When I was 7 years old, it was decided I would live with my Aunt Mumangeena and her husband Nayukuk. This was mostly through Aunt Mumangeena's insistence, but I didn't mind the arrangement too much because Aunt Mumangeena loved me and because my parent's house was crowded.

My uncle didn't seem to mind one way or the other. He was not a smiling man but once in a while he would smile at me and that made me feel good. He was not a talking man either, but he would say a few words to me occasionally. He said them gently as if he wanted to take my hand and walk on a beach. In spite of Uncle Nayukuk's reticence, I felt at home with him. It must have been unspoken devotion between us.

My mother rarely gave demonstrations of her love but when she did it was a glorious experience; stunning and complete. My father's attitude toward me was warmer. He tended to tease me and point out any faults in a comical manner. When I caught on he would lift me up bodily and say, "but that's the way you do, my son."

My sickly nature had stunted my growth. So much so that my younger brother, Allen, was taller than I, and much to my embarrassment and chagrin he took a rather sadistic pleasure in knocking me down in front of people. Before doing it he would say, "Look, I am stronger than my older brother."

When I felt better, however, I could outdo him in one thing: I could outrace him and leave him far behind. Allen was a strong, chubby boy and slow of foot.

Very early in life I became a regular pest in wanting to go to school. I didn't have any idea what school was, but Kaipuk attended along with my older sister Helen and I listened to

everything they had to say about it; how the teacher was and how the children behaved.

One day Kaipuk was saying one of the boys had broken wind audibly during class. The teacher had gotten angry and scolded the boy and the boy had cried.

"The teacher won't let you go to school because you're too little and too young," Kaipuk insisted, but finally it was arranged.

"One day, soon after you became 3 years old, you had become such a bother I let your sisters take you," Mother recalled in later years. She said she wondered how I would get along and how I would behave. She was outside our igloo when class let out and she said I started running ahead of my sisters shouting something she couldn't hear.

"You kept shouting and running all the way, falling down twice as you did and when I was able to understand you, you shouted, 'Ahkahng! Ahkahng! Nillingitchoonga skooluk-mi!' — 'Mother! Mother! I didn't let out air in school!'"

The incident was a constant source of amusement through the years.

Keshorna, who was generously endowed with a sense of humor, said to me after I returned home from college and military service, "I see now that you have learned a few things more than what you learned on your first day of school."

The first Point Hope school left much to be desired. It was a brave new pioneering effort of the Episcopal Church which apparently had many

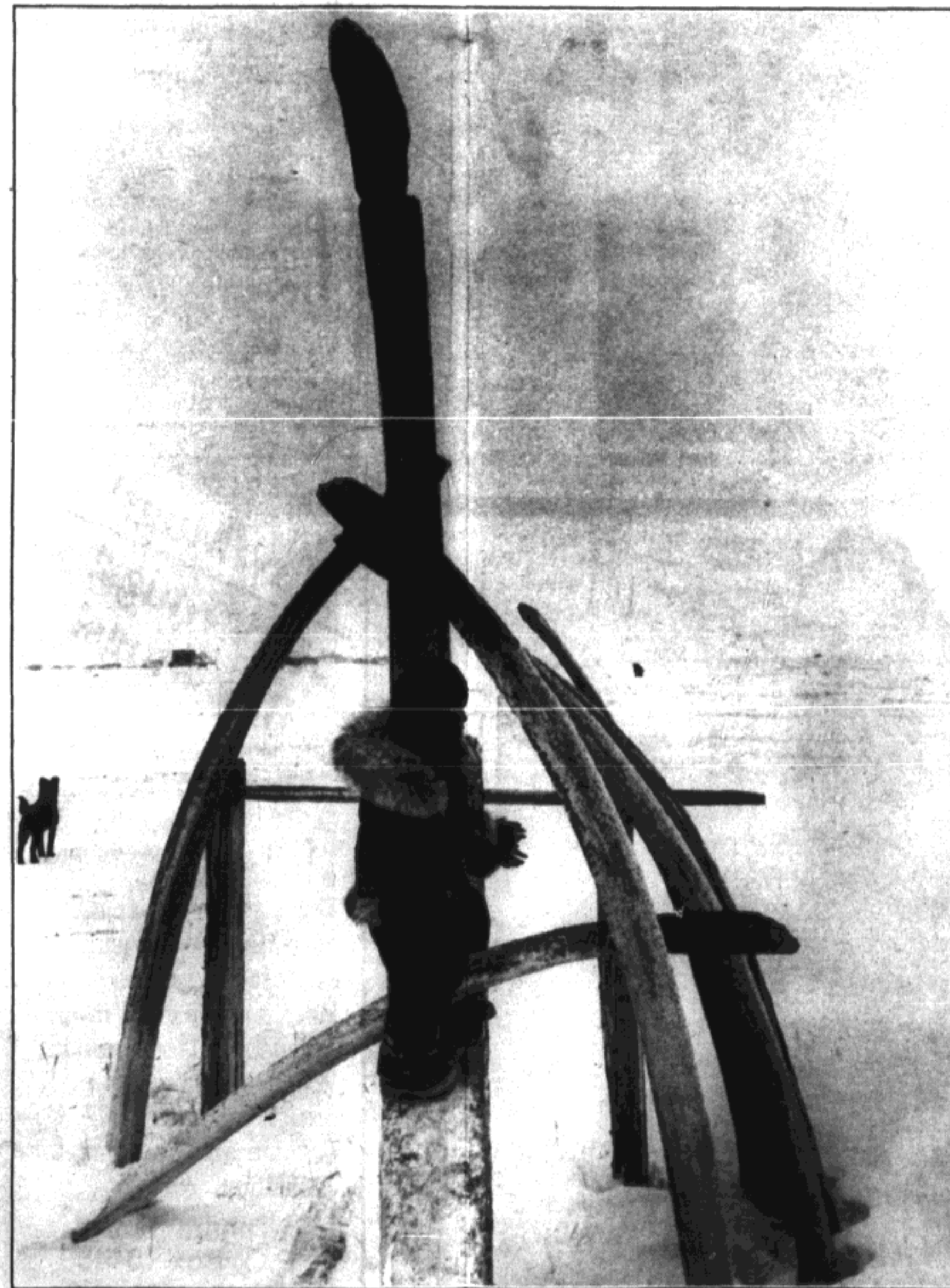
difficulties, especially getting teachers to stay over a year. Whether the mission teachers kept records of the pupils seems rather doubtful because of what happened to me.

I was in the second grade for three years without realizing I was supposed to be advanced. My parents, not knowing the school procedure either, did not know the difference.

I was apparently bright enough because by the time I was in my third year of second grade I could memorize just about every second grade lesson. Then an observant teacher finally noticed I was a rather exceptional second grader and advanced me to third grade. After about three months in that class he again advanced me to fourth grade. I had finally caught up somewhat in my grade schooling.

With the other boys I enjoyed some school periods when the teacher happened to be out of the room by blowing spitballs through the femur bone of an Arctic owl. The principle was the jet propelled spitball. We cut the femur bone about six inches long and whittled a stick so it would be jammed into the hollow space of the bone about three-eighths of an inch from the end of the blowgun.

Owl femur bone propulsion required two spitballs. After selecting a target, usually a bully boy in the room, we would jam the stick with a quick motion into the bone. The sudden buildup of air pressure would eject the forward spitball with a pop. Such pranks were discovered by the teachers and



discouraged. The boys blamed the girls who never liked them anyway.

I have many pleasant memories of my early school days but there were trying times. My family and people in the village have told me that I was a

discouraged. The boys blamed the girls who never liked them anyway. I have many pleasant memories of my early school days but there were trying times. My family and people in the village have told me that I was a

...and it took me quite a while to realize that the Tundra Times, although always suffering from a lack of subscribers or a sizeable circulation was, nevertheless, a mass media.

very different child among the children with whom I grew up.

I tended to be a loner, very quiet but quite intense in what I was trying to do. Of course I never knew I was rather an "oddball" among them. Often I wondered why other children ignored me and my family tended to do the same.

My ability to pick up my lessons more quickly than my classmates did not help matters and I didn't take to sports as the others. If I participated, as I sometimes did in Eskimo football, I did as well as anyone my age.

When I got over my sickness I became very strong for my size. I even donned boxing gloves a few times for the fun of it and, although my defense left much to be desired, I could hit. But I never did try to develop my physical strength, even toward sports where I could have excelled.

In his lifetime, my father, Weyahok, had the reputation of being the strongest man in Point Hope and this trait showed up in my older brother, Eebrulik, and my younger brother, Allen. After I reached the age of 11 and began to develop, Allen could no longer outmuscle me.

My strength later stood me in good stead, especially when I was unexpectedly attacked by a six-foot white man in Seattle. I started working him over with my fists and he landed in the hospital for two weeks. My reward — a huge blackeye and terribly swollen hands.

But knowing I had this strength simply enabled me to get along rather well because people had occasions to hear about it and leave me alone. This left me much to my oddball tendencies.

Instead of participating in sports or hunting, I spent hours in the small school library looking up excerpts from the lives of famous artists. I was a target of ridicule for this and later in high school when I persisted in playing the classics on the school phonograph instead of the Western music other students preferred. I never knew why I had this propensity for the arts. I was simply different.

At 14 I left home to attend White Mountain Vocational School up the river from Golovin near Nome. I wanted to go because I was curious about the white men. How did they live? What were their homes like? How did they think? Also, I had heard that White Mountain was a lot better school than Point Hope and there would be young people from many other places.

I stayed at White Mountain seven years without going home. I thought

way to Seattle where I intended to become an artist.

I very much enjoyed my art studies and when I had to get out of college I didn't want to. I'd been existing for three years at the University of Washington on \$900 a year, but I just couldn't handle the thing any longer so I had to quit.

I found a job in a downtown Seattle jewelry store where the manager asked me if I could do some etching on ivory. I told him I'd never tried it but I would. I did etching for a brooch or bracelet pieces for 25 cents each.

When the war came along I was 4-F for a year or so because my eyesight wasn't too good and other things. But after a while they seemed to get more anxious for men. Some people were saying "They just feel your skin and if you're warm, you're in!"

I was drafted at Ft. Lewis, Wash., where they gave us all kinds of aptitude tests. I told them I was an Eskimo and an artist and I thought I would be good at camouflage in the Aleutians. I'd gotten good grades in instruments and radio so they made me a high speed code operator and sent me to South Africa.

When I came back I started doing jewelry work again without much relish. I kept getting homesick for Alaska all those years and once in a while when I'd hear somebody was in from the North I'd locate him. I enjoyed seeing somebody from home no matter from where in Alaska. That was always a pleasant experience but I never really considered going back. I was thinking of making some kind of a living in art and I didn't know exactly what I would do up there.

Then in 1961 friends gave me a chance to go home and I took it. They were artists from Banbridge Island near Seattle and they wanted to live for a while in a real Eskimo village. I told them about Point Hope and I tagged along for a vacation. I bought some paints and brushes and canvas before I went and started to paint.

At the time I landed in Point Hope they said, "Well, you came just in time to help us." I was mystified but after I stayed a while I became aware of the Atomic Energy Commission's plan to detonate atomic devices in the area. They wanted to create a harbor on Cape Thompson which is about 30 miles southeast of Point Hope.

Really I was amazed at the knowledge the villagers had already gained. They had never gotten any education beyond fifth grade but they were talking about atomic fall-out and contamination of the animals and the

possible effect on the reproduction systems of their women. I didn't know much more about it than they did but I was the only one who had more training and I read everything I could find.

Finally the village decided to write a letter to Secretary of the Interior Stuart Udall. Point Hope was a pretty remote area to spring a letter of that importance and, of course, at that time Washington seemed a million miles away; impersonal.

The village council designated me to write the letter and, with the prodding and encouragement of LaVerne Madigan, director of the Association on American Indian Affairs, I had the feeling this would be important. There wasn't any typewriter in the village, as I recall. I think I wrote it longhand.

The letter gave AAIA something to jump on and they started to help us. The blast was finally called off but the Atomic Energy Commission was still playing around with it.

At a council meeting we'd had with Mrs. Madigan at Point Hope, I brought up the possibility of a newsletter or a newspaper without thinking I'd ever be physically involved. I didn't have much idea where I would go next but I was thinking of art as a source of income because I'd just had my first art show and it had been quite a success. Still, I was fascinated with the idea of a paper because I realized the need for it and finally I became editor.

It was a very worrisome thing to try and keep the *Tundra Times* going because we never knew when or from where the money was going to come, and it took me quite a while to realize that the *Tundra Times*, although always suffering from a lack of subscribers or a sizeable circulation was, nevertheless, a mass media.

The Native situation, their problems, the land questions, the questions of sanitation and the very miserable housing and health problems had never been published in Alaskan news media, and after the *Tundra Times* started, Congress got ahold of these things. Our efforts began to get direct results from Congress and with the help of the Native leadership which came along, we were able to change a great deal.

We have come a long way from the beginning, now, although much of what we had in the beginning is still valid and useful to us. I realized long ago that Alaska could not always be all Native. You just can't help but absorb some of the things the white people from everywhere have brought with them — the modern culture. But over the years our paper has pointed out that our own cultures are also very rich and useful in the environment, which is very different from anything else in the world.

I have told people Alaska will never be like New York, although some people would like it to be. Our culture has things that are influencing the white folks and it has worked very well for us because it is attuned to our environment.

It is fortunate that our leaders are still young. They'll be around for a long time to come and yet they have had experience in the old ways. They sprang from such difficult areas and coped with the problems of Arctic survival which are profound. This process developed sound reason and ways of approach that are becoming handy tools for the modern day. And this would be a fine thing to hang on to. Something to remember. Even though one of our leaders may become president of the United States one day, I would still like to see him come home and eat muktuk.