

the Arctic Slope Whaling Complex —

Two-thousand years of sharing

By ROSITA WORL

While the United States is commemorating its bicentennial Thanksgiving, the Northern Eskimos celebrated their second millenium with their traditional Redistribution Feast which they have held since time immemorial. The essence of Thanksgiving is no where better demonstrated than in the series of contemporary Redistribution Feasts hosted in the summer "Nalukataq", Thanksgiving and Christmas, and also in some locales when the first "slush ice" in the ocean forms. The ceremony which predated Thanksgiving by two

thousand years is an occasion where community members gather to share in a traditional potluck-type dinner and receive their share of the whales which were caught in the early spring and fall. The solidarity of the community is reaffirmed through the ceremony. The patterns of cooperation and sharing among the North Slope Inupiat led to their conquest of the Arctic environment which has been variously described as hostile, barren, and desolate. In the early spring, the Association of Whaling Captains, an organization which

evolved from the aboriginal "gargi", a men's meeting house, meets to determine the ruler governing the hunt and to decide how the whale will be distributed among the community and the rulers of the hunt.

Today the Redistribution Feast has incorporated Western religious elements and is held on Thanksgiving Day and Christmas in community churches. This past Thanksgiving feast celebrated in the Barrow Presbyterian Church was organized by two elders, Lloyd Ahvakana, a whaling captain

himself, and Thomas Simmonds. The Church Deacons, Alice Solomon, Edna Leavitt, Rhoda Pikok, Marie Neakok, Bertha Leavitt, Jonathan Aiken, Clayborne Tunik and Billy Oyagak assisted the 30 servers in the distribution of muktuk, whale meat and fish to approximately 400 community members. The Assembly of God Church hosted their feast serving over 300 people. The activities were headed by Charlie Edwardsen Sr., Gilford Mongoyak, Baxter Adams, and Arnold Brower Sr. who is also a whaling captain. Mary Stotts and Eunice Teenik

directed the distribution with 14 servers. Fortunately, the Spring and Fall Whaling seasons had been successful since there was no sharing of caribou. Each family received approximately 100 pounds of muktuk, whale meat, and fish. For the first time, the distribution of caribou and caribou soup was absent due to the caribou crisis which limited the taking of caribou.

The fabric of the Inupiat society has been based on sharing its natural resources, and it will undoubtedly be the basis for their continuing occupation of the Arctic.