

'Whale Is Very Large Sea Animal'-

'So Is Everything from Whale, Very Important Food, Event'

(EDITOR'S NOTE: Grace Slwooko is temporarily living in Nome, Alaska. Grace's home village is Gambell on St. Lawrence Island.)

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Whale is a very, very large sea animal. It is so big that its bones are used as frames for Eskimo homes in Alaska. So is everything from the whale, very important as food and event.

Out in St. Lawrence Island, the sod homes with whale bone frames are called "nengloos." But in other places they are "igloos."

Over in St. Lawrence Island, whaling used to be the very livelihood of people. But now, of course, lots of things have changed, so we don't build sod-whale bone framed homes anymore.

As time goes on we are turning more and more modern but we still hunt whales but with

powerful equipment of the White man that came a century before, which brought more powerful and convenient tools.

And so are the ceremonies. They are not sacred anymore as the knowledge of education comes along. Even when we don't keep the sacred times for whaling, we still caught them. But still someone has to urge the young men to meet the challenge of hunting life on the ice.

So the story of whaling and ceremonies was a whole lifetime of Eskimo on St. Lawrence Island. In the gray early morning hours in April, there is likely to be people hurrying around to the ice shores of Northwest of our island home as the whales are so close at this time. They soon will be gone, maybe in a week.

As the days come on, more and more boats are out in the sea with sails up. Pretty soon someone's sails are down. There is excitement. News spread like

a fire. Soon everyone is out running around. All except pregnant women. They stay in the house.

That will make a whale hard to get away. That is why the expectant mothers stay in their houses.

And when the wind is favorable just as this time, someone is likely to be blessed with a great kill.

A young man is rightly urged when an uncle, or an elderly man of his tribe, is urging him to exercise hard to meet the great challenge. There in the ocean the greatest sea-mammal is caught only by an alert aim of a young man when the whale comes up somewhere close by the boat, close enough and within the range of a hand thrown harpoon.

The harpooner is preferably a younger brother of a captain of the boat. But he better not be a husband of an expectant mother as he can only make the

(Continued on Page 6)

'Whale Is'...

Continued from page 2

whale stronger.

It is very true, too, even now.

Then as soon as it is known that a long line of boats is formed, meaning that the whale has been killed a mile or two down at the sea, it is barely seen. But by close watch by the people of the village, it is known to all that whale has been killed and now is being towed into the shore ice. The boats are far out. It will take hours to get home with the whale.

And all the boats, sometimes 12 of them, towing with young walrus hide rope.

Every strong arm is needed to bring the whale which weighs tons to the shore.

Catching a whale used to be so great an event to Eskimos that they handle it very sacredly, and it certainly is as the whale is captured in the ocean.

And it is the very livelihood of the Eskimos. It is killed in the ocean with much courage and skill.

And soon they came to the landing at the ice shore, to the place of a certain captain who is blest with the whale.

As soon as it is known who the man is, the married women of the tribe make their way to the home of the man who caught the whale. With tears in their eyes, they walk to the home. Humble women have a right reason to go.

There, by the home of the captain, they sit on the whale bones singing some whaling songs, and at the chorus they repeat the name of the captain and the harpooner who had bravely thrown the harpoon at the great whale.

This goes on throughout the time the men are cutting the flippers and the tail flukes.

First the wife of the captain meet the boat approaching the ice shore. She is dressed in a special costume she has just for this occasion. On her hair, she is also wearing something special. She also has a dish of some food specially fixed for this time.

As the boat comes, she reaches out to give the dish of food to the harpooner as he approach the ice shore with his paddle raised up. He receives it and takes one piece, a mouthful, and passes it on to all the crew and to the captain.

When the dish comes back, the harpooner gets on the ice shore. He and the captain are wearing their special visors, kept just for this occasion.

They make their way to the captain's house with seal skin pokes, again a special thing and a special way. As they arrive, they put the pokes on the Eskimo tent that is made up like the top of a Eskimo house. This is never done at any other time, only when whales are caught.

All this time women are chanting the songs repeating the names of the captain and the harpooner who so heroically did his job.

All the time the women sang until the flipper mungtuk is cut in the light of the western sky after sunset. If this is done at all, it is done only when a whale is caught. If this is violated, some curse is likely to come.

All the other ceremonies were very sacred.