

"So Hago"

By Maria Bolanz

(Continued from last week, the poignant story of a Tlingit woman, Chin Kley, separated from her infant son at his birth and dying from tuberculosis in a hospital far from the spruce forests and snow-capped mountains of her homeland. Her loneliness and homesickness impels her to write letters to her little son, telling him of the rich heritage of the Tlingit people.)

Chapter 5

March 18

Ah-h-h, my son, do you know the eulachons are running now in Nass River? It is the time for them. We all go there in our boats, sailing first through a part of the open ocean, then up the Portland Canal, where the green cliffs striated longitudinally with sliding snow meet the water's edge, until we reach Kincolith Village, where we turn and enter into the mouth of the Nass. We always go a short ways up into the Nass so that we can get into the midst of the run. The eulachons run now in March in the Nass and later, in May, in the Stikine River.

They are very important to us, for without the eulachon and his grease I do not know what we should do. They are something like smelt, and are very rich and fat. It is this fat we render out and call eulachon grease.

At the Nass now many of our people are gathered and are working through the sunrises and sunsets that you can count on one hand to get the work done. This is a great gathering time for our people, and all of us, even the children, work. We grow very tired, but we cannot stop. In the midst of a run they are so thick you can pick them up with your hands. I know as children we would play as we worked, and we always picked them up out of the water with our hands, and put them into the boiling water. How we laughed at the slippery, silvery fish! The men used nets to get them, and how busy they were, for they must get enough fish for our use throughout the whole year!

Some eulachons we ate fresh there; others the women smoked or dried, and still others were put into great wooden tubs in which water was kept boiling. The tubs were placed over hot

rocks held together by clay, and under which a fire burned. In this boiling water the fat was rendered out of the fish. As the fat came to the top it was skimmed to one side with a wide board and dipped out. Then it was added again to fresh boiling water and stirred constantly with a wooden paddle.

Day and night, with all of us camped on the shore of the Nass, this would go on. There was nothing but activity and bustle. Women worked as they carried their babies on their backs, and the children were scolded because they got in the way or were not doing their tasks. It was never quiet, for this was the time to work. The grease must be rendered over and over again in several boiling waters, and re-skimmed so that we get only the best, and then skimmed off and put into baskets or wooden containers that we have made for the purpose of storing it.

It is usually cold at this time at the Nass. There is snow on the ground and the winds are strong, but with the fire burning beneath the rocks, and the steaming kettles of grease, there is much warmth about it. The men are bare to the waist, and they sweat as they labor. The children fall in and get soaking wet, and they are scolded and their clothes are put near the fire to dry. The babies cry because they are hungry, and the smoke from the alder which is being burned to smoke fish gets in their eyes, and the steam from the grease moistens their faces. Sometimes a woman will nurse her child as she works, for there is no time to stop. The dogs from the neighboring villages on the Nass come barking and begging. The old women kick them away, and they howl.

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In these different groups we work this way until the eulachon run is ended. Then the cache of fish that they have smoked in camp, and the fish that they have dried there, are stored away on boats and will be taken home and used throughout the year. The grease is safely put away and everything is well secured on the boats, for the trip back can be very rough, especially after we leave the Portland Canal and are for a half day upon open ocean and must pass Five Points where the rocks are.

This grease which we love so well is thick, but never hard unless it is put outside in the cold. When kept inside it is still a liquid but slow to run, like the white man's syrup. It is creamy and opaque. Boxes and boxes are stored away, for we eat plenty of this grease with our food, and if we are ill we drink a cup of it plain. It is strong, and thus there is strength in it. Without grease not only Tlingits but all other Indians of Alaska could not live.