

# Howard Rock never forgot his first fishing lesson from Mumangeena

by Howard Rock

"Mother, go and tell that uncle of yours to come down and help us bring these sacks of fish to the igloo. That lazy walrus hasn't given me a peace of mind since he married me," Aunt Mumangeena said with impatience.

As an afterthought she added, "And bring that little sled by the meat rack."

Aunt Mumangeena's temper had been smoldering the past few days. Her husband, Nayukuk, had lapsed into one of his periods of laziness. She had asked him that morning to chip thin ice next to the flowing waters of the Kukpuk River so we would not break through as we fished.

"That sharp pain on my back is back again. I can't move," Nayukuk had said touching his left ribs with his hand.

When Uncle Nayukuk complained of such pains I was inclined to believe him for he did it with great seriousness. The pain, real or otherwise, was reflected in his rather sad eyes. This feeling of sympathy for my uncle's ills was partially quashed by Mumangeena who had said to me privately, "Your uncle never had a sick day in his life."

The fishing trip that morning was an exciting one for me because it was to be the very first time I would fish for grayling. My lack of experience apparently made Mumangeena think that we would not get many. Nevertheless she picked up three gunny sacks.

"We will probably need only one, but, you know, Mother, I'm known to be a good fisherman when it comes to hooking grayling," she had said with an air of satisfaction. "And what a pleasure I'll get out of teaching you how to fish, Mother. You must pay strict attention to everything I do. This is going to be part of your training to be a hunter."

I was a boy 9 years old, and after living with Nayukuk and Mumangeena for two years, I'd gotten used to being called "Mother" by my aunt. She had been devoted to my grandmother for whom I was named. Aunt Mumangeena had a strong sense of family ties.

We had been staying in a little sod igloo that belonged to the family on my mother's side. Mumangeena had told me that it was built by our ancestors generations before. When it became rundown it was repaired by some member of the family.

We left the igloo just before full daylight. The sky was overcast with light snow falling. It was early in October, and the ice had formed on the river except in places where the current was swift. The edge of the ice was usually thin next to open water. It was chipped away so it would be safe for the fishermen.

This was the river where traditional grayling fishing was done each year during the month of October. There were about 30 people who had camped that fall waiting for the right time to fish. Few people had preceded us heading for locations known to be choice spots for hooking grayling. We walked to an area across from a bluff.

"This is one of the finest places to fish," Aunt Mumangeena said. She chipped away the thin ice with a sounding rod we had taken along. Standing about 3 feet from the edge of the ice Mumangeena began to get ready to show me how to fish.

Our poles were made of willows about 5 feet in length. The lines were made of baleen (from the bowhead whale), shaved round and polished, and the leaders were made of seagull quill sections. The hook was of ivory with a metal barb, and the bait was



nothing but a piece of yellow cloth or yarn. Some people used red.

"Now, Mother, watch carefully how this is done. When you learn to do it properly it will never fail you. This is the way it's done," Mumangeena said seriously.

She cast her line into the water. As the hook sank she undulated it by flexing the fishpole.

"When the fish bites you simply haul it out and land it on the ice far enough so it won't jump back in the water. You do it like this."

She made a sweeping motion with the fishpole, and as she did so she emitted a happy scream and out came a grayling on a hook!

"Mother, this is the finest lesson I've ever given anyone in my life!" she said. And indeed it was. She hooked the fish without expecting it.

I began to hook for grayling following my aunt's instruction as best I could. I sank my hook and undulated it. Suddenly I felt a heavy jerk and pulled out. I had caught my first grayling!

I was very excited, and I shouted, "I got one, Aunt Mumangeena! I got one!"

My aunt was beside herself. She chatted happily all day on everything that came to her mind, especially about my first grayling. It had a significant meaning for her.

"I knew it all the time, Mother. You are going to be one of the finest hunters alive. This should convince your parents that you are going to be one. We'll save the fish and give it to them when we get back."

After my first grayling, of course, I fished eagerly for more. I became quite a fisherman as the hours passed

and surprised my aunt with my newly found prowess. As it turned out I caught most of the fish. Mumangeena wasted no time to talk about me to people who happened to pass by:

"Take a look at Mother's pile of fish. I'm as good or better than anyone when it comes to fishing, but you'd never know it from the way he kept hooking grayling today. It's unbelievable. This is the first time he has ever fished in his life. And Mother is such a little boy, too."

Aunt Mumangeena was the most carefree person during that day. It was amusing to listen to her. She would let out little cries of pleasure every time a grayling bit. She even talked to the fish she caught.

"My you're a nice big one. In a couple of days you will make wonderful *gorq* (frozen fish or meat, usually with seal oil) for us."

When it was around 4 in the afternoon Mumangeena said, "We better put the fish in the sacks now and get ready to go home. Where is the first one you caught, Mother? I'll tie a piece of this yarn around its tail so we'll know which one it is. We have to save it for your parents."

Our haul filled two sacks and a quarter, a fine catch for a little boy and his doting aunt. But Mumangeena's carefree manner seemed to fade as we filled the sacks. She had forgotten about Uncle Nayukuk's lapse into laziness during the day, but now she was back to reality.

"We'll never be able to get these home by ourselves. I can never depend on that man when we need him most. These unthinkable lapses of his are the most exasperating things I ever experienced. I could scream and go com-

pletely mad. Whether he likes it or not he will have to help us."

Aunt Mumangeena then directed me to go after Uncle Nayukuk. As soon as I was told I ran to the little sod igloo which was not far. As I ran I wondered why Nayukuk didn't fish with us because I had found it thrilling and fun. I'd asked Mumangeena why and she answered, "It's undignified for a hunter to fish. It is usually done by women and children."

When I walked into the tiny igloo Uncle Nayukuk was sitting on the floor on a reindeer skin in the left corner of the room. He didn't seem to be doing anything, but it looked as if he'd been meditating.

"Aunt Mumangeena wants you to come down and help bring the fish home," I said excitedly. "We caught over two sacks full, and I caught most of them."

The only motion was when his eyes focused on me briefly. Then he looked down at his feet which were crossed, one over the other. Without looking up he said quietly, "I'm making hooks for you and your aunt."

I was surprised at what he said because I didn't see any evidence of hook-making, but I didn't question him. My aunt, more than once, had told me never to question my elders because they were much wiser than I. I wondered if Uncle Nayukuk was doing the wise thing. It was plain that he was not about to come to help my aunt and me. It was disturbing.

I went out and got the little sled from near the meat rack and started pushing it along the banks of the Kukpuk River until I came to a rather sharp incline that was covered with snow.

I pushed the sled with a run, got on

the runner and slid down until it stopped on the snow covered ice of the river. Then I pushed it along till I reached Mumangeena. She had caught a few more fish while I was gone. She asked incredulously, "Is that—man—coming?"

"I don't know. He said he was making hooks for us," I answered. "I didn't see him doing any—"

"Stop that, Mother! How many times have I told you never to talk about your elders in that manner?" my aunt cut me short.

She emitted a hiss and then spluttered, "That lazy—lazy!"

She didn't finish the exclamation. She apparently ran out of names to call Uncle Nayukuk. We struggled to load the fish into the small sled. A gunny sack full of grayling was far too much weight for me to handle. Aunt Mumangeena was not much stronger. She was only about 4 feet, 9 inches tall and none too robust. Her legs were very bowed, and they bothered her when she tired to lift things.

We managed to load the sled, though, and began to push it toward our igloo. It was quite easy until we came to the incline on which I came sliding. As hard as we pushed, we couldn't make it up the incline. Aunt Mumangeena became more frustrated by the minute. She exclaimed as she strained against the sled, "That man! Where is—that man? Mother, don't push anymore. I'll go get that—man! I'll—"

She started climbing up the incline. She slipped twice, and that didn't help her frustration. She spluttered and emitted something that sounded like a sob. I ran and helped her up. She was close to tears, and she was pitifully grateful as she said, "I don't know what I'd do without you, Mother. Stay here and watch the sled. Some loose dogs might get it."

She went toward the igloo with determination. Her bowed legs made her waddle as she hurried along. She entered the igloo quickly. It was not hard to imagine what went on in there.

Aunt Mumangeena was somewhat more agitated than previous times. I knew there was nothing gentle on her part. After about five minutes Nayukuk emerged, quickly followed by his wife. She was apparently still flinging words at her husband.

The harried man briskly walked to the rack and picked up a rope. He started toward me at a fast walk. When he reached the top of the incline he didn't bother to come down. He threw one end of the rope, and I knew what he wanted. I tied it to the front end of the sled. Nayukuk began to pull on the rope, hand over hand.

I was amazed at his strength. I was also a little frightened because Uncle Nayukuk seemed to be angry. I had never seen him display any temper. Whatever Aunt Mumangeena had said had stung him deeply. He quickly dragged the sled to the side of the rack, picking up the sacks bodily and tossing them in quick succession in an amazing display of strength.

"Wait! Leave the small sack in the sled," Mumangeena instructed. The sack was sailing up to the rack at that moment.

Nayukuk stalked off without a word and entered the igloo. My aunt did not say another word. It was unmistakable that she had said enough. She looked at me and gave me an amused smile.

"I'm too short to reach the top of the rack, Mother. We'll have to get these few fish in the sack for dinner."

We leaned the little sled against one of the rack posts, and my aunt instructed me to climb up. It was difficult because the sled didn't reach the crosspieces of the rack. Finally I managed to make it up and toss the small sack down.

"Come down now, and be careful, Mother," my aunt said. "I'll steady the sled for you while you do."

I dangled over the edge of the rack, my feet blindly feeling for the top of the sled. I touched it with my left foot and stepped down, and as I did I felt the sled swing to the left, and I lost

my footing.

The sudden give made my body drop, and I lost my grip on the rack. I felt myself falling backward. I felt something on my right hip. I hit the ground with a jarring thump on my head. My aunt had broken my fall with her shoulder.

I looked around and saw Aunt Mumangeena sprawled on the snow. She crawled over to me and asked anxiously, "Are you hurt, Mother?"

I didn't answer. My eyes stung with tears but I didn't cry aloud. Mumangeena sat me up and hugged me, and then she looked me straight in the eye. A slow smile spread over her face. In the next instant she was laughing.

"Yes, Mother, as long as you keep living with Nayukuk and me, I guess days like this one will go on happening," she said amused. Then she said soberly, "If that thing in there was as normal as any other man, things like this wouldn't happen."

"Mother, ever since I married the lazy walrus — he really reminds me of one, you know — my life has been one abnormal happening after another. I have wanted to live like any woman in our village, but it's impossible the way that man is. He forces the comical events without meaning to, of course, but sometimes I wonder."

"I'm forced to laugh sometimes because he makes them happen without a smile on his face or without saying a word. See what I mean, Mother? Just like this silly accident we just had. Like I just said, this need not happen if he was like any other man."

"Sometimes I wonder what will happen tomorrow. Don't you ever doubt it? He will cause something to happen," predicted Aunt Mumangeena as we sat on the snow after sprawling. "Let's go now, and I'll cook dinner," she said wearily.

When we entered, Nayukuk was sitting in the corner cleaning his 30-30 rifle. This usually meant that he would go hunting the following day. This should have heartened Aunt Mumangeena, but she was definitely uneasy. It was plain what she had said to her husband earlier in the day was weighing heavily on her conscience.

She didn't seem to know just how to undo the damage. Her tirades must

have been extraordinarily stinging. Mumangeena boiled some grayling for dinner. She was self-consciously quiet, something that was completely out of her nature. We ate in silence. There was a tenseness in our little igloo.

I felt uncomfortable and wished that my aunt would start chattering as usual.

When the meal was over, Nayukuk settled back to his seat. He wiped his rifle carefully — almost lovingly. He had always taken great care of it. He put it up on the gunrack. Then he began to rummage in a little box where he kept his files and carving tools. He picked out pieces of ivory and began to work. He was making hooks now, and he worked on them through the evening.

As he worked the atmosphere in the little household seemed to become easier. Mumangeena began to make overtures of making conversation.

"I started to show Mother how to fish this morning, and the most unexpected thing happened," she said with a nervous chuckle. "I was going to show him how to land a grayling when, at that instant one bit the hook. That was the best lesson Mother will probably get all his life."

Nayukuk kept working on the hooks without seeming to hear. He then surprised my aunt and me by saying, "I find it hard to believe that it really happened that way."

Mumangeena looked at me, her eyes wide with surprise. I hastened to answer: "It really happened that way, Uncle Nayukuk."

"It really happened that way," echoed Aunt Mumangeena and then laughed easily.

This brief exchange seemed to clear the air of tenseness completely. Mumangeena resumed her usual chatter. The familiar light-heartedness of it was there, and a surge of contentment filled the little household.

Nayukuk was now polishing the new hooks. He attached one to the fishpole I used and gave it to me. There was a faint smile on his face. It made me feel that I had the best uncle in the world.

He attached the other hook to my aunt's fishpole and gave it to her. She received it with a smile that was filled with sentiment. She did not say a word.

Aunt Mumangeena and I looked at our new hooks. They were delicately and beautifully carved — as if they were made with loving care.

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