

Arctic Survival—

Whale Hunt Ended in Tragedy; Boys Saved by Clothing

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"When I came up out of the water, I saw my father. He was bleeding around the head. He was holding on to a floating paddle," said Weyahok sadly.

He was telling about the tragedy that happened when he was around 13 years old. He had never liked to tell about it because it had affected him profoundly.

It had been around the middle of May. The ever exciting whale hunt was in progress. Chief Attungowruk, as well as another crew, had gotten whales and every crew was still trying to get more meat for the coming year.

Anticipation

"There had been a considerable excitement, especially for me, sometime before the whaling season started," said Weyahok. "One evening my father, Kakairnok, said to me, 'my son, you are growing up and you should start to do what men do. How would you like it if I took you on as a member of my crew—'"

"Needless to say, I was the happiest boy in the village. The anticipation of whale hunting with my father and his crew was very exciting. Another happy thought was that I would be in company of two other boys, Akniachak, around 16 years of age and a veteran of three was going to do this so Koonook who was a bit younger than I was and who was going whaling for the first time also.

"Mother was excited also but a little worried at the same time. She had said to me, 'I will make you some warm clothing to wear.' She had told Koonook's mother that she was going to do this so Koonook was to have warm clothing also. Akniachak already had his from the past season."

Heavy Clothing

Weyahok's mother had made him a parka of heavy winter caribou skin and a pair of knee-length pants of the same material. Koonook's mother had done the same for him. The parkas and pants were not much for looks, but they were very warm.

The season was now half over and Kakairnok and his crew had not had any luck.

"One day, just before midnight, my father said to us, 'We are not doing very well here. I think we should move our camp up north away from the other crews. We might do better up there.'"

"We broke camp and loaded our gear in the umiak and started north, paddling along the edge of a lead. We passed two whaling camps along the way. Beyond the last camp was the shore ice that jutted out seaward. When we rounded it, we must have been over a mile away from the last whaling camp we passed.

Whale Surfaces

"We were leisurely cruising along about 90 feet from the shore ice looking for a suitable place to set up camp, when a larger than average sized whale surfaced about 75 feet directly ahead of us.

"Father looked back to us quickly and motioned for us to paddle. The crew consisted of my father, Kakairnok, two other men, one of which was the helmsman, a woman who prepared meals, and three of us boys.

"We started to paddle after the whale with all the energy we could muster to catch up with it, on one of three or four series of surfaces it makes to breathe. We caught up on the third surfacing and my father raised his whale harpoon.

"My father's whale harpoon had a stout wooden shaft fastened to a bone shank rounded to a dull point at the end. On the end of the shank was the harpoon head of sharpened slate made out of ivory and it had a blade of sharpened slate fitted at the point. The harpoon head itself was fastened to long, stout walrus hide rawhide thong. The other end was fastened to three seal skin floats.

"My father struck and plunged the harpoon deep into the kidney area of the whale. He used the momentum of the umiak to help him. The helmsman had swung the umiak more than 45 degrees angle to the whale, considered by the whalers as a safe angle.

Umiak Hit

"The whale's tail must have shifted sharply beneath us the moment of the strike," continued

Weyahok. "The great flukes suddenly rose out of the water hitting our umiak just forward of the mid beam. There was a sickening feeling of being lifted into the air by a great force underneath.

"There was sounds of wood snapping, mingled with the scream of the woman member of the crew. The great force under us seemed to cease and then I felt myself sailing through the air. I seemed to sail for long moments and I felt the impact of the water when I came down. I went under for what seemed a long time. I swallowed some water.

Wounded Father

"Finally I felt air around my head. I gasped for breath. I saw our umiak upside down. There was no shape to it. It looked like a deflated seal skin float. To the left of it, I saw my father! He was bleeding badly around the head. He saw me and shouted 'Eqneeng, (Son), try to make it to the ice. Try hard! Son, I cannot make it. My bones are broken! Hurry, son, try to make it to the ice!' I could see my father clinging to a floating paddle with his left hand. His other arm must have been badly injured.

"I could not swim but I tried to do what my father told me to do. 'Use your arms and hand and paddle with them!' father shouted.

"The ice was about 125 feet away. The whale had thrown us outward. My right knee was hurting me terribly.

Father Encourages

"All the while I could hear father encouraging me," Weyahok continued. "I suddenly noticed Koonook and Akniachak. They were also trying to make it to the ice. Koonook was whimpering. They were both ahead of me to my right. Akniachak was making good progress.

"Father kept encouraging us. I could no longer hear the woman's screams. When I was a few feet away from the ice, I could no longer hear my father's voice.

Saved

"Akniachak had reached the ice and was scrambling up out of the water. I had passed Koonook without noticing him. Akniachak began to encourage me and

soon I was close enough for him to reach me and pull me out. Koonook was still about 20 feet out. He was crying, 'I can't make it, I can't make it!'

"I was crying as I encouraged him because when I looked out over the water, there was no sign of life. These were only remnants of the broken umiak floating out to sea. I had lost my father — my good father! . . .

"Koonook was giving up but Akniachak and I kept shouting to him to keep trying. He seemed to get a renewed strength. His stiffened limbs were giving him great difficulty but somehow he managed to come close enough for us to reach him and pulled him out. He was crying and shuddering greatly.

"When we got him we began to walk him around holding him by his arms. He didn't want to walk and said he wanted to lie down but we kept walking him. My knee kept hurting. When I looked at it, it had been cruelly skinned with great bruises around them. Whatever happened, I was fortunate that my leg had not been broken, otherwise, I probably would not have made it."

Grief

Weyahok became quiet and bowed his head. He could not talk any longer. A great emotion had overtaken him. This was the reason he had never liked to talk about the tragedy. He had wanted to be like him because he had worshipped. He wanted to be strong like his father.

Weyahok did become strong when he reached manhood, both in will and physical strength. He was known as the strongest man in the village in his day. He used it in his hunting and it made him a man of great endurance. He was a challenge to the great rigors of the Arctic. He used it with care without ever overextending himself. His fellow hunters knew his strength and they treated him accordingly.

He never bragged about his strength. Instead, he smiled and laughed. His children knew it was there. The very tone of his voice became law and they obeyed him.

While Strikes

After a long silence, Weyahok continued:

"I have never stopped thinking about the strangeness of us three boys of having saved ourselves while all our adults perished. The whale must have injured everyone of the adults by the great force of its flukes. I don't remember hearing the two men. They must have been knocked out or killed outright. All I could hear was my father as he encouraged me, and the other boys, and the woman's screams.

"We had started walking Koonook towards the camp to the south. We walked slowly at first because our limbs were stiff. Soon our blood circulation came to normal and we started hurrying. I had a hard time keeping up with the boys because of my injured knee.

"Before we reached the camp they spotted us and one man came running, sensing trouble. We told him what happened and he ran back. There was a flurry of activity and they launched their umiak at once and started paddling north in hopes of finding someone alive. They didn't find anyone alive, of course.

Courier

"When we reached the camp, one man had remained. He had been instructed to give us dry clothes. He was a young man and he had been told to carry the news to the village after he got the story from us.

"While we were putting on our dry clothes, the young man started for the village about three miles east on the run. When we finished putting our clothes on, we started for home.

"We hurried as fast as we could but the young man ahead steadily pulled away from us. I was a drag on the other boys because of my injured knee.

"When we approached the village we could see people walking toward the beach and when we reached it they surrounded us. Many women were weeping. My mother had come forward and took me in her arms. She was dry-eyed. She had been stricken with silent grief.

Saddened Village

The village was saddened as it had never been before. All the people in it knew those that were lost intimately. They grieved over Kakairnok. He was a fine hunter — a fine man. His loss would be felt in the whole community because he had helped to sustain it with his considerable skill as a hunter.

His loss to his immediate family was a deadening blow. Weyahok felt it most keenly because he had worshipped his father. Since he was the only boy, he felt that the responsibility of taking care of the family would fall on his shoulders. He was too young as yet to be fully effective as a hunter.

Chief Attungowruk of the village, almost at once invited Weyahok to join his crew. The Chief had caught a whale earlier and told him that he would be given a full share of the whale as a crew member. He instructed his crew to give the Kakairnok family a portion of their share.

Attungowruk caught another whale that season, in fact two days after Weyahok joined the crew, so the young hunter was able to provide his family with ample food for the coming year.

"It always amazed me," Weyahok continued, "to think back how we were able to save ourselves when we couldn't swim. I used to wade in the lagoon up to my waist and up to my neck once in a while but I never learned to swim.

Saved by Clothes

— When the whale struck our
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