

Remembering fish camp, thoughts of good food

by Enid J. Brown

Editor's Note: This is part one of a two part series submitted by Ms. Brown. Look in the next issue for the rest of her story.

I can remember waking up to the sounds of buzzing mosquitoes and bumblebees just on the other side of the canvas tent wall. The sound of a crackling fire and the sizzle of bacon in the cast iron frying pan. The hollering and the scolding of the seagulls flying overhead. I can remember looking up to see the brilliant sun shining through the tent and the mosquito tent inside.

I remember the anticipation of sinking my teeth into some of Mom's delicious sourdough hot-cakes and the inevitable rolled oats "mush" interspersed with the occasional corn meal. Looking around for the smelly, greasy "B-12" mosquito dope, so that I wouldn't be eaten alive by the voracious bugs as soon as I stepped out of the tent. Going directly to the stainless steel basin to wash my face and hands, reapplying the bug dope, and then waiting for my breakfast to be done.

More anticipation, this time for the next scheduled event: the gathering of our main staple – FISH! By mid-morning everyone was in the boats, on the way to look for a school of fish to seine. There were usually two or three people who scouted for the fish, walking slowly and a little way back from the beach so as not to scare the fish. When they reached agreement that a certain spot was the right place, they carefully backtracked to the waiting boats.

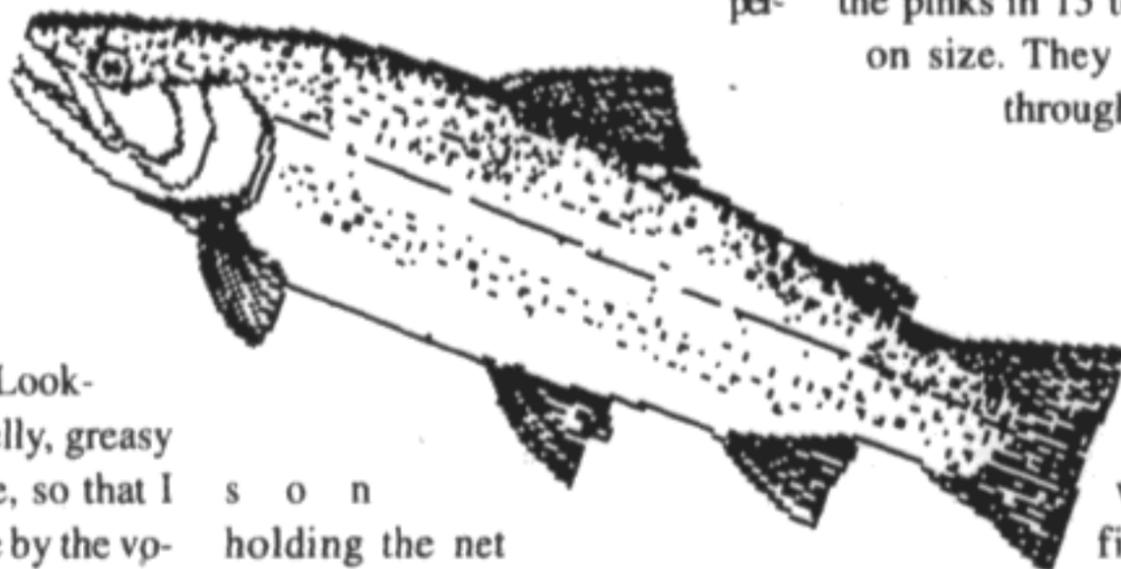
Only one boat was used for the

actual seining, what we call "qaaq-chaq." The person with the strongest arms and back was the designated rower. Another person waited for the signal to let out the net and watched to make sure it didn't tangle or get caught on the way out of the boat and into the river. Once the net was completely out, that person grabbed a long stick and started pounding the water to try to keep the fish from escaping through the hole between the net and the boat.

In the meantime, the people on the beach would throw rocks between the net and the boat, again to keep the fish escapement

to a minimum. Then the anchor

per-



soon holding the net on the beach started slowly hauling in the net as he walked down the river bank.

Simultaneously, the rower headed toward the beach so that the net could be brought in. Sometimes this was hard to do as the net might contain hundreds of fish, all fighting to get out. Finally, one or two people would run out to help bring in the boat. The rower would let go of the oars, quickly untie the rope, jump out of the boat, and run toward the beach.

Now I calmly sit here writing, but at the time all this was happening, it was anything but calm! There was excitement, rushing and scurrying about, running, hollering, and much ado. Some-

times things seemed to be moving in slow motion, at other times everything was moving full blast.

Then, it was everybody to the net, to finish bringing it in. By then the water had come to life, the fish frantically fighting to stay alive, splashing water over everything and everybody. Before the difficult task of dividing and loading the fish into the boats began, there were a few moments of quiet thanksgiving and a little time for the fish to settle down.

The adults had been busy collecting willow branches – ones that were strong enough to hold the fish and supple enough to tie a knot or two. The chums were usually put in groups of ten and the pinks in 15 to 20, depending on size. They were skewered

through the gills and attached, so that the loading could be done more expeditiously.

While this was going on, a fire was started and some male "humpies" were being roasted over the fire,

a willow branch down the length of the body and anchored to the ground. Nothing like fresh fish roasted over an open fire, "nakuu," yum, yum! After smelling the fish cooking for what seemed like forever (remember how impatient we all were as kids?), it was finally time to eat! The scrumptious, crunchy fish skin holding together the most delicious, flaky, tasty fish. My mouth waters at the memory.

Note: Enid J. Brown is an Inupiaq originally from White Mountain, Alaska who is currently residing in Anchorage.