

VILLAGE STAGES FESTIVE RITE

Ancient Village of Pt. Hope Celebrates Its Old Whaling Tradition

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Point Hope is an ancient Eskimo village located on the Northwest coast of Alaska, 130 miles north of the Arctic Circle. It is situated on a jutting peninsula, with the Bering Sea to the south and the Arctic Ocean to the north.

The village is so old that earlier sites have been discovered six feet below the tundra. For as long as Point Hope has existed, the men have hunted whales with their small and sturdy skin boats.

At the end of the whaling season, which usually begins in March or April and lasts through May, the villagers host three days of feasts and festivities in celebration for the success of the season.

As they have done for thousands of years, the people of Point Hope held a whale celebration in the year 1969. The biggest event of the year began on June 11 and continued for a period of three days.

Months of preparation were consumed by everyone in the

village for the celebration. New mukluks, mittens, and parkys were sewn by the women. The men had spent weeks camping on the ice flows and beaches in hunting the bowhead whale.

The whales were butchered. The bones had been scraped and cleaned. Muktuk and meat was prepared and preserved. No portion of the precious catch could be wasted.

This season, two crews had caught whales. Captain Allen Rock, brother of Times editor Howard Rock, killed two whales. Whaling Captain Amos Lane and his crew killed one whale.

The Point Hope whalers are divided into two rival groups, which engage in friendly com-

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BACKGROUND ATMOSPHERE—Venerable elders of Point Hope village are chanting and drumming the traditional whaling songs of the Oungasaqsikaaq whalers, or the south village portion. Its friendly whaling rivals, the Qaqmaq-tuuq, the north portion, has its own whaling celebration grounds. The Oungasaqsikaaq, Amos

Lane, caught a small whale last May and thus the celebration on his grounds. The nalukatuk, a circular oogruk or walrus skin blanket used to toss performers into the air by a circle of people, is traditionally placed in front of the elder singers and drummers.

—THOMAS RICHARDS, JR. Photograph

Celebration . . .

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petition to obtain the largest whale catch. The groups have two separate celebration grounds, with events continuing simultaneously at both camps.

Allen Rock belongs to the Qaqmaqtuuq, or North Faction, and Amos Lane is of the Oungasaksikaaq, meaning South Faction.

Wednesday morning, the two crews elevated their skin boats at the two camps and unfurled flags, indicating the number of whales caught by each faction.

Throughout the afternoon, the villagers greeted nearly 50 visitors who had arrived for the celebration. People came from Cape Lisbourne, Kivalina, Barrow Noatak, Kotzebue, and as far away as Fairbanks to witness the event.

During the evening, the men of the village gathered at the old Episcopal Mission, founded in the late 19th Century, in a thanksgiving service for the success of the whale hunt.

Early the following morning, the two crews began constructing the celebration grounds at their respective factions. Windbreaks were erected as protection from the frigid breeze. The skin boat was placed in the center of the windbreak as the place of honor for the village elders.

Villagers arrived and seated themselves, awaiting distribution of the whale meat and muktuk. As is the custom, the successful whaling crews share their catch with the rest of the village.

The venerable elders of the village were the first to receive any meat. Next, portions were given to those in the village who assisted the crew. Anyone who aided in butchering a whale, or cooking for the crews, was given a generous share of the meat.

The next group considered in the distribution were the remainder of the villagers. Then, the captain of the whaling crew will call for strangers, or visitors, to receive a share.

The food obtained from the whale includes a wide variety of meat. Mikeaq, or sour meat, is one of the larger quantities of whale products. This is made by placing the whale in barrels.

The Mikeaq is naturally fermented for a period of ten to twelve days, during which time it is occasionally stirred. It is then preserved in a cool storage place.

Perhaps the most relished delicacy from the whale is the flipper. When the whale is butchered, the flippers are cut off first and kept in cold storage until the feast. This is eaten raw, as is the meat which is frozen when it is freshly butchered.

The quaq, or frozen meat, is another one of the staple items in the Eskimo diet.

The most well known of whale products is the muktuk, which is inclusive of the black skin and a layer of blubber. Some of this is aged, as is the Mikeaq. Most of the muktuk, however, is preserved and consumed either raw or cooked.

The blubber, and its oil by-product, is utilized as a seasoning. It is used to flavor caribou meat and dried fish, as well as a wide variety of Eskimo foods.

Other whale products include baleen, once widely used in the construction of women's girdles, which is now made into baskets and other native artwork.

Another part of the whale which is heavily utilized is the bones. Wood is scarce and whale bones are seen everywhere. They serve as clothesline and dog posts, drying racks, trail markers, and even in the construction of the few remaining sod houses.

The whale is so much a part of the economy of Point Hope that it truly justifies a large scale celebration.

The final and largest day of the celebration came Friday. The townspeople awoke at 5:00 a.m. that morning and began preparations for the big feast.

The windbreaks were again erected. This time a second windbreak was set up at each of the celebration grounds. Here the women of the village cooked over open fires and camp stoves while the men sat at the larger windbreak and ate.

The feast began with a breakfast of cornmeal, bacon, eggs, donuts, and coffee and continued throughout the entire day.

The Qaqmaqtuuq and Oungasaksikaaq factions were again in competition. Only this time they competed to see who could feed the most food to the most people. Villagers and visitors walked between Alan Rock's celebration grounds and Amos Lane's camp, eating meal after meal.

Cartons of cigarettes were placed before the men for their smoking pleasure. Huge platters of whale meat, caribou meat, boiled intestines, tongue, raw and cooked muktuk, liver, Miqeaq, blubber, flipper, and more donuts and coffee were served.

As soon as this was consumed, more food was placed before everyone. Later, whale kidneys, boiled heart, and other delicacies were featured. Even the Naloaqmeo, meaning the White visitors, were surprised to find themselves pleasantly burping.

They were at first apologetic, but after learning that the old Eskimos considered a burp to be a compliment for a fine meal, many began to burp proudly.

Despite the cold rain, which began early in the morning and lasted through noon, no one complained of the cold.

The pace began to quicken as the Nalukatuk was started. The walrus-skin blanket was brought out and fastened taut to whale bone posts. In the nalukatuk, similar to a trampoline, the villagers draw the blanket tight and power the jumper high into the air.

At first, the village youngsters warmed up on the blanket. Later the older villagers displayed their skills, tossing and twisting, kicking their feet, and performing 360 degree turns from the blanket.

One young visitor from Kotzebue tested her skills on the blanket, jumping three times. First, she landed on her posterior. On the second attempt, she landed on her belly. On the third try, she landed on her knees. Undaunted, she walked off with a smile.

The nalukatuk has been an integral part of the whaling feast ever since its ancient inception. To the Eskimo, it is much more than a walrus hide. It is a representation of the joy that is the whale celebration.

The nalukatuk which began at Amos Lane's celebration grounds, was moved to Allen Rock's camp where the sport was repeated.

After the blanket toss, a desert of Eskimo ice cream, cake, and jello was served. Then, the villagers returned to their homes for several hours of rest.

Friday evening, the townspeople assembled at the Episcopal Mission for the Eskimo dance. These consisted mostly of the saiyak, or motion dance. The men danced individually first, then with the women, until everyone eventually joined in the dance.

Drummers maintained the beat until 1:00 a.m., when refreshments of muktuk and quaq were served. The dance was adjourned, and the villagers returned to their homes to sleep through the night and most of the next day.

Many of the visitors departed Saturday, bringing home muktuk, miqeaq, and other foods.

Most left with firm resolve to return next year. Undoubtedly there will be a celebration next year and for many years to come. The Eskimos of Point Hope, as most of Alaska's native peoples, possess a sense of history and are determined to keep their culture alive.