

'Give or Take a Century'

By MADELYN SHULMAN

'Give or Take a Century' by J.E. Senungetuk. The Indian Historical Press, 1971.

"In the setting sun, a man is sharply outlined with his tasks of ending the day's work, he is self-assured in his movements, as if he had gone through the same pattern repeatedly. Indeed he has, for he is a hunter returned from the hunt in the late evening at Wales, Alaska."

This is your introduction to Kingetkin, the village of Wales, by a young man of the Innupiat who sees his village partly through the dim, but memories of childhood. They are eyes which see the "the deep reds, oranges and yellows of the sun rays" dancing "between the cool colors of the skies overhead."

They are the eyes of an artist, a man of 20th century California whose childhood stretches through the generations of proud people of Kingetikin and other villages of the Northwest Alaska coast. He is an Eskimo of today.

As an artist, a college graduate, a resident of San Francisco for several years, Joseph Engasonwok Senungetuk is part of a new generation of Alaskan Eskimos—a generation with part of their lives outside Alaska.

Yet, this is a book about another, a very important part of Joseph Senungetuk—the people and traditions of his blood, the memories of his village childhood, his perceptions of the length and breadth and innate pride of the history of his people—the Innupiat (the real people) of Wales (Kingetkin).

In part, as a man who recognizes the alliance of the many native people of Alaska who have been dispossessed by the white man, Senungetuk chronicles the tales of all Alaska's people—the Aleut slaveries, the fierce Tlingit battles, the Eskimo epidemics that wiped out half of a people.

It ends on the note of today's impatience—that today's young Eskimo does not accept the white man's inherent good because of the talent of their transistor radios, that he recognizes he is part of that land—and any just law must recognize his ties, and rights, to the land and to its bounty.

"We who are the Natives of this land are sick with waiting for the changes and improvements that have been promised to us. We have been patient. We can be patient still. Just the same, we ask:

Give or take a century...how much longer must we wait.

This is the introduction to the Eskimo Chronicle, and its title. It begins, and ends, on this note. Yet, in the main it is the story of the Eskimo people of the Northwest, the villagers of the tiny village of Wales and especially the family of Willie Senungetuk—a man who made the transition from hunter to wage earner so that his sons might taste the fruits that white society offers.

In the language of the Abnaki Indians the word Eskimo means "eaters of raw meat." The people of the north call themselves the Innupiat—the real or original people. They are a people much misunderstood by the outside world.

As an Eskimo, an Innupiat Senungetuk resents the characterization of his homeland as a frozen, inhospitable, harsh, bar-

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ren land when he has seen its beauty in the summer, inherited his people's love for the land which gave them home, food and sustenance. He resents the uninformed "experts" of the world who have popularly typified his people as savages who rub noses, live in ice houses and exchange wives.

As a child, he remembers thinking, upon reading these books described people 'further north.' For he knew, of course, that this could not be his people, his wonderful warm families and villages, of which they spoke.

Strongest in this book, with its many pages of poetic English, is the story of Willie Senungetuk, Innupiat hunter of Wales and what he thought and did for the sake of his five children. His is a tradition of pride, of satisfaction and of physical hardship for the good of his family. Senungetuk writes with great love and perception of his parents and their generation—brainwashed by the missionary, putting aside much of their past to conform to the white man's idea of what is right, good and Godly.

The story of the Senungetuks is a chronicle that only an Eskimo, perhaps could write, someone whose memories of childhood are inextricably woven together with his father as hunter, the traditions of his people, the memories of a people who send their winter discards out on sleds pulled by their children—so that a careless sled dog would not upset a sled and dump their garbage on the land.

Joseph Senungetuk is also a talented artist who has included many of his beautiful works in his book. It is by all means a book worth reading. If it does not hang together as one book, many of its chapters hang separately so well that the book is worth reading for these chapters alone. A month after publication, "Give or Take a Century" is on its way to becoming an Alaskan classic.

NOTE: 'Give or Take a Century' is available for \$12.95 per copy by writing to the Indian Historian Press, Inc. 1451 Masonic Avenue, San Francisco, California 94117.