

# Whaling means hard work

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Tundra Times

In the past 10 years we have been engrossed with so much information about Inupiat whaling, that we can reverberate the hunt to any novice Alaskan as though we had been a whaler ourselves.

But there is one area that we seem to have overlooked -- the importance of women in Inupiat whaling.

Martha Aiken of Barrow, daughter of a long line of whaling captains and also the wife of a retired whaling captain, couldn't have said it better when she said "the role of a whaling captain's wife is a year-round job."

During the summer when most people are busy fishing, duck hunting and ugruk (bearded seal) hunting the whaling captain's wife is already thinking about Spring whaling.

"She must keep in mind the need for ugruk skins used for making the umiaq (boat). These skins are cut with the flippers intact.

"Once you cut the skins, you immediately begin preparing them," said Martha, "and you tend to them all summer by keeping them out of direct sunlight and covering them when it rains."

"Even on summer boating trips we keep an eye out for driftwood that can possibly be used for the front and back of the umiaq."

In the fall, a whaling captain's wife has to remember to save caribou legs to sew into maklaks for her husband's whaling attire. Besides sewing



Martha Aiken

the whaling captain's outfit, the wife sews the skins for the umiaq with the other women in the village.

Martha said her stepmother had made it a point to teach her how to sew the skins for the umiaq. The stitch used in

making the boat waterproof is quite an invention.

At the wake of spring, Martha said "The main thing a wife makes sure is to see if the husband has warm clothing because the men wear their

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clothing all the time; even while sleeping since you may be awakened to start chasing a whale at once, and he also needs a spare outfit in case the other one gets wet.

Prior to the launching of the whaling crew, the captain's wife makes certain that the ice cellar used for storing maktak and whale meat, is clean and ready.

Martha's stepmother always instructed her to keep the house ready at all times: "There must be water at the house -- ready for cooking at any moment." Her husband points out other things that need to be taken care of such as tents that need to be mended or the need for new canvas wind breakers.

After a whale has been caught, Martha has to make

sure that there is enough water to last throughout the feast, since a feast is held in the captain's house as soon as there is enough maktak and whale meat brought onshore to begin feasting.

The feast usually lasts one day and everyone is invited.

It is here that a captain's wife's planning is crucial because she must have enough plates, pots for cooking, and ingredients for Eskimo doughnuts, coffee, and tea to feed the entire village.

As for the children, "I always want the children to be the first ones to receive fresh maktak," she said, and I give them the same amount of maktak as I would an adult."

She said it is important for a captain's wife to be respected both by the children and the adults. "This respect

comes only from being friendly and generous."

From the amount of tasks a captain's wife is required to perform, one would think that the captain's wife could do nothing but devote all of her time to these tasks but for Martha, this was only a small part of her life.

Besides raising her children, one of whom is Robert Aiken, Jr., a familiar face at the World Eskimo Indian Olympics, she has worked with the North Slope Borough School District as an Inupiaq teacher and later developing bilingual curriculum for the NSB schools and KBRW broadcasting.

Although women are a vital part of Inupiat whaling, Martha said that the men have to be commended for the quickness and bravery in times of extreme danger during whaling.