

Butchering is hard work!--

# Whaling in Kaktovik

## Intrigues Observer

By CYNTHIA WENTWORTH

These have been busy and happy times in Kaktovik because the people recently took two bowhead whales. The first, a 55-foot, 53 ton male, was taken on Wednesday afternoon September 28 by whaling captain Nolan Solomon and his crew. The second was taken on Saturday morning October 1 by Herman Aishanna's crew. It was a smaller, 30-foot female. Great excitement prevailed both times as the villagers saw the boat with the raised flag come to shore. A raised flag in a returning boat means a whale! Both whales were pulled in on the beach about a half mile from the village.

The first whale proved quite difficult to get to shore due to its size and to blizzard-like weather conditions. It took over 24 hours of non-stop hard work to get the huge mammal up onto the beach where it could be butchered. Several people stayed up all of the next night, too, cutting and sawing off chunks of muktuk and meat so that it would not spoil. A mechanical loader was used to lift the cut chunks into pickup trucks which took them to the village as fast as possible. Finally by 8 p.m. of the third day, all the salvageable blubber and meat had been removed from the whale. (A small portion was not removed because it was already unusable due to the time it took to get the whale onto the beach).

As the people were finishing the cutting on the first whale, they were startled by several cries of "Nanook!" Suddenly

two large polar bears appeared out of the night, and came straight down the beach toward the workers! Mothers cried "Where are the kids?!" and herded them into the pickup trucks and the tent. Several men grabbed their long-handled knives and started running towards the bears, waving the handles as clubs and trying to scare them. The loader and trucks "reved" their engines and shined their lights; the bears took off but were back about five minutes later--this time even closer. People shouted: "They must really be hungry! They're not afraid of anything!" The bears were again scared away, and two men left for the village to get their rifles. When the bears returned a third time, the guns were fired over their heads. Luckily this did the trick and the bears did not come back.

Getting the second whale up on shore was a cinch compared to moving the first whale. This "little" whale was on the beach at 1:30 p.m. and completely butchered by 6:30 p.m.! Practically the whole village was down to help cut, eat muktuk, and be part of the activity. One woman explained: "Now We'll really eat this winter!" The second whale was stripped completely to the bone: no meat or blubber had to be discarded.

A "cook tent" with a wood-burning stove was set up to provide the workers with cooked muktuk, whale meat, and hot coffee and tea. It was also a good place to get in out of the weather and warm cold hands.

After the second whale was cut

up and taken to the village, the work still wasn't completed. Once at the village, all the meat had to be cut into smaller pieces and divided among the crew and the 33 households. After one day of rest (Sunday) about twelve village people spent two full fourteen-hour days hauling the meat, muktuk and baleen from each whale into about 80 separate piles. To do this they put a big metal hook into each chunk and then lifted or dragged it. Since each piece was about a cubic foot in size and weighed around 30 pounds or more, this was no easy task. Freezing rain and wind on one day didn't help the working conditions either. But the workers maintained their cheerfulness and even managed to tease each other often. When they were finished working, each household had eight chunks from the big whale and five from the small one--in addition to the meat for the crews. The next day, one week from the day the first whale was caught, each household's share was delivered.

Throughout this week of whale activity, the village routine was altered substantially. School was let out for a day and a half. The store was not opened during the entire week. The regular bingo games and movies were cancelled. People were too excited and occupied with the whale to have time for these things.

Once a whale is gotten, hundreds of person-hours are required to take care of the meat. It is a cooperative effort, and anyone who is available to work is welcomed. This labor is not compensated with cash as are other village jobs: all help is volunteer. Furthermore, the meat is not given out to people according to how much they work. After the captain and crew have gotten their respective shares, it is divided equally among all households.