

Arctic Survival —

Warm, Attractive - the Parka, Most Valued Arctic Wear

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Published in Tundra Times
Jan. 21, 1963

The ancient Natives of Alaska, in adapting to their environment in the frigid climate of the Arctic, devised a garment that has served extremely well down through the ages. The severe climate in which they lived urgently called for clothing that would withstand very low temperatures, often times accompanied by high winds. Out of this great necessity the northern people developed the parka, a garment that is near perfect for Arctic wear.

PARKA RECOGNIZED

Not until relatively recent past has the value of the parka, as an Arctic or cold weather garment, been recognized by non-natives. They not only have found that it is warm for winter garment but distinctive in that it could be a beautiful attire. The parka naturally lends itself to ornamental trimmings that enhances its beauty.

The ancient people of the Arctic must have had to experiment at length before they arrived at the most suitable material for parkas. Ultimately the common choice became the skin of the caribou. The animal was plentiful and the parka made from it proved to be light, warm, and quite easily obtained.

OTHER MATERIALS

Other parka materials were used, one of which were skins of ground squirrels. These little animals were plentiful in the Arctic and could be snared quite easily as they emerged from their burrows. The meat was used for food.

Squirrels were taken at the approach of fall season when the fur of the animal took on a gray cast which the natives considered as prime for parkas and which they thought, and rightly so, beautiful.

As a result, squirrel skin parkas, although quite warm, were mainly used for ceremonial attire on such occasions as the whaling celebrations and other events.

Another was siksikpak, or hoary marmot skin, that was for parka material. This animal was not hunted extensively because it was usually found on rocky hills in remote areas. Parkas made from marmot skins were usually for luxury and for leisure attire. This skin made fine parka material. It was very warm and had lasting qualities, but it was rather heavy in weight.

GREAT INNOVATION

The hood of the parka was the most important innovation. The protection of the face in below zero temperature was of great necessity and the hood provided that in a most efficient manner. It made frostbite less frequent.

In designing the hood the natives found that fur trimming or ruff around the hood served a great purpose. It kept the warm body heat from escaping too rapidly from the face area.

Women, when making the hood, left some open space under the chin. This was done for a reason. Warm body heat rose through it and up the face area. In very cold weather this was made more effective by tying a belt just above the hips around the parka to allow no draft from the parka hem and up through the neck opening. Greatest body heat is generated in the trunk area of the body.

When one found it necessary to go directly against the wind

in below freezing weather one averted his face to one side or the other, away from the wind and thus allowed the body heat to continue to radiate up his face.

WHITE CALICO ADAPTED

When civilization made its advent into Alaska, one of the things that took the fancy of the Eskimo hunters was white calico cloth. They wasted no time in adapting it to use as an aid in hunting. They had their wives sew it into parka covers that made them less conspicuous as they stalked their quarry.

During the Second World War, United States, Russia, and other countries made effective use of their furnishing their soldiers with white uniforms when they fought in countries where there was snow.

PRECISE THICKNESS

Having found that caribou skin was most ideal for general wear, the hunters began to take caribou at the approach of fall weather. In August the hair of the caribou grew to the thickness or length of one inch, considered as ideal for main parka wear.

Fawns, soon after they were dropped in spring were taken for inner parkas. The natives thought them most necessary, because air space between the layers provided additional insulation. Squirrel skins were sometimes used for this purpose.

Fresh skins were simply hung on racks to dry thoroughly in the weather. It was the job of the woman to prepare them for parkas.

EKOON

The tanning of the skins was begun. The main tool for this purpose was the ekoon, or scraper. Ekoon was highly thought of by women owners. They felt that it was one property they could afford to be fussy about and they practiced this privilege to the fullest extent. The grip handle on the ekoon has to be precisely carved by the husband to fit the hand of his wife. If it didn't have the right feel, he was told to carve corrections to it. The grip had to be exactly right.

As a result, it was rare that a woman borrowed another's ekoon because it rarely ever fitted the hand of another. Owners considered them of vital importance as well as personal.

The women took a scraper that had a dull edge for preliminary softening of the stiffly dried skin. After this an ekoon with sharp flint edge was employed to remove the layer of tissue next to the skin.

PUMICE PROCESS

After this was removed, the next process followed. Finely ground pumice was sprinkled on the skin and the ekoon was applied using the pumice as an abrasive. After this application was completed, the caribou skin was quite supple and pliant.

To make it even more supple, the women dampened the skin with water, after which the skin was rolled tightly and allowed to stand until the dampness thoroughly permeated the skin.

The skin was then unrolled and allowed to dry. The ekoon was again applied, this time to crack the epidermis of the caribou skin.

PLEASANT SOUND

This process had a pleasant sound as the woman applied the ekoon to the skin. With each firm push of the scraper the epidermis cracked with a resulting sound of multiple sharp cracking noises, something like

muffled pop-corn popping. This process did not affect hair roots because the cracks traveled around them.

This was done covering every area of the skin. After that the dull scraper was again applied to make the skin thoroughly pliant.

PLIANT MATERIAL NEEDED

There was a reason for making supple and pliant clothing and that reason was freedom of movement by the wearer. The hunter did not wish to be encumbered by stiff and clumsy clothes, especially by his parka. In cases of emergency he needed freedom of movement if quick action was called for.

Having finished the tanning of the caribou skin the woman commenced to cut patterns for the parka, using the ulu, or woman's knife. This was done skillfully and quickly because the woman had been trained to do this by her mother ever since she was a young girl.

The patterns were sewn

together with caribou sinew. Wolverine or wolf fur was sewn to the hood of the inner parka and wolf ruff to the outer or main parka.

As a finishing touch narrow strips of wolverine fur were sewn around the hem of the parka, and around the sleeve ends. These fur trimmings also helped to keep the body heat from escaping too rapidly.

Men's parkas were made to mid-thigh length so it would not hamper their movements. Women's parkas were made to mid-calf length.

DRAMATIC CONTRIBUTION

When the caribou parka was completed, it was superb apparel for Arctic climate. It was warm pliant, and above all light and unencumbering. The natives, especially the hunters, demanded parkas that were light and warm because often they took home game, such as dragging seals on the ice or snow.

In the drama of survival in

Brown Seeks House

The TUNDRA TIMES has learned that Fairbanks Democrat Fred Brown will file as a candidate for the Alaska State House of Representatives shortly after these issues reach the newsstands today.

Brown will be the second candidate to file in the 17th House District, with others reportedly to follow soon.

Brown, now an attorney, has spent most of his life in the Fairbanks area. He has worked on several political campaigns in the Interior in the past ten years, but this is his own first try for public office.

Fred Brown graduated from the University of Alaska in 1964 in electrical engineering, and has worked in communications and broadcasting in Fairbanks and Anchorage. He attended graduate and professional schools in California and New York.

Previously quite active in party caucuses and conventions, Brown is expected to maintain a low profile in the upcoming District Conventions and State Convention of the Democratic party, to be held in April and May.

Brown is currently a member of the Board of Directors of the Eskimo, Indian, Aleut Publishing Company, which publishes the Tundra Times.

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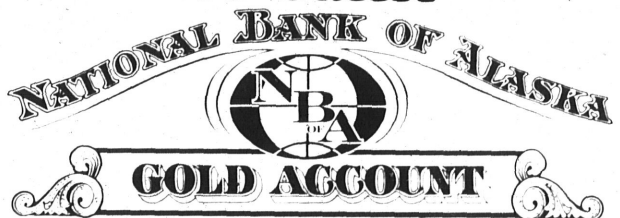
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