

## Arctic Survival—

# Drama, Suspense, Action in Hunt for Giant Bowhead

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Times Editor

This is the month — April. The traditional whale hunts, exciting and dangerous, will begin in widely separated communities in Alaska. The best known localities are, St. Lawrence Island, Point Hope, Point Lay, and Barrow.

Two communities stand out in this group for their vigorous pursuit of whaling — Point Hope and Barrow. These two villages have hunted whales for centuries past. There is an informal rivalry between them; they keep close tab on each other's take each spring.

And, too whaling conditions are more ideal at these two villages, especially Point Hope. There, water leads open comparatively close to the village; a mile to about five miles out.

This is the month when the mood of the communities change from the more or less, routine matters of the rest of the year. An air of excitement pervades them — a mixture of expectancy hope, safety.

This feeling of keen excitement at whaling time is a recurring mood. Its sense of dramatic atmosphere is the product of tradition gained through learning by experience, nerve, bravery. Thus, it has become a classic illustration of survival in the Arctic.

### The Hunt

The hunt is on. The whaling captains, their crews, their women, have made thorough preparations. Some of the umiaks have been recovered with new oogruk skins; warm clothing for the hunters has been sewn, by the women; weapons have been readied for instant use; whale cutting knives have been sharpened to a razor's edge, camping gear for the cook of the crew has been assembled.

Men, as they hunt for seal and polar bear, begin to look for something more — whales. One day a hunter, as he walks along an open lead sees an unmistakable and familiar sight — a whale surfacing with a great column of steaming breath shooting into the air.

### The Signal

He turns toward the village and hurries home. He shouts to the first person he comes across,

### "AGVIK!" (WHALE!)

This is the signal that had been waited for with tense expectancy. It is time for action; the time to transport the whaling umiak loaded with gear to the edge of the water lead.

Whaling captains begin to assemble their respective crews. Umiaks are placed on low, flat sleds especially made for transporting them, and are pulled by the crew or by a dogteam. An informal arc develops in which each crew dashes to the lead to be first to pick a most strategic location.

Once there, each crew picks out its whaling site, invariably a small ice cove. The reason; whales float up to them to rest. On many occasions whales are caught in these right at camp, but on the main they are taken on exciting chases and maneuvers.

### Continuous Vigil

Once the camp is set up, continuous vigil begins around the clock. While the crew sleeps in their warm winter clothes, one member helps watch. Another member takes his turn the next night.

Then around 2:15 A.M., a watchman sees a whale surface about 300 yards away. He quickly runs to the sleeping men and shakes each one vigorously, saying in a loud whisper, "AGVIK!"

### Fast Getaway

The crew awakes in an instant. They run to the umiak that had been readied for quick launching. A chute had been carved out for that purpose on the ice under the bow.

The men push the craft into the water on the run, each man boarding at his assigned position. All of this action takes about a minute or little more after the men are awakened.

The watchmen made sure to tell especially the captain, and the helmsmen where the whale had surfaced. From then on, it was largely up to the man who steered the umiak to place the crew at a most advantageous position from which the harpooner would strike.

### Hard Pursuit

At the outset, the crew paddled in unison with great vigor to overtake the whale. The helmsmen estimated the positions of the submerged animal

so the umiak would be behind, as close by as possible, on the wake or a little to one side or the other. The umiak must be kept out of the line of vision of the whale. (Its line of vision is about 45 degrees angle backwards in relation to its forward and back position.)

On this particular hunt, the great animal surfaced some 80 feet ahead of the umiak. The helmsman was almost correct in his calculations. The position was good!

As its nostrils cleared the surface of the water, the huge whale spewed forth with a loud whooshing noise a great column of steamy breath high into the air. The titan then went into a shallow dive.

It would surface again, then again. "We have time," thought the men in the umiak. They began to paddle swiftly, almost violently, but with precision.

### The Strike

On the second surface they had made a desired gain. On the third surface they would be in perfect position to strike. The helmsmen eased the umiak to the right and then to the left at about a 45 degree angle to the whale. As he did so, the monstrous whale surfaced once more.

The harpooner quickly put his paddle in the umiak, stood up, braced his feet and picked up his darting gun. He raised it over his head, pulled his arms back bending his body slightly backwards. For an instant he stood poised in that position, then, with a mighty effort, he threw the weapon aiming at his target beneath the water line. The umiak stopped abruptly as it bumped against the great black body of the whale.

### Weapon Worked

When the harpoon penetrated a foot, the trigger rod came in contact with the whale firing the powder charge that plunged the fuse bomb into the whale.

There was a small report and about three seconds later a dull explosion sounded from beneath the water. The fuse bomb had worked!

The great animal shuddered visibly, partially submerged, then it was still. The harpooner had stopped it with one shot. The explosion had severed the spine at the base of the skull, stopping

the whale instantly.

At the moment of the strike one of the two men directly behind the harpooner quickly threw an inflated seal skin float attached to a 150-foot harpoon line over the side. (When the harpooned whale is not stopped at once the long line is allowed to uncoil to its full length, but if the whale is stopped at once the inflated float is fastened a few feet of the harpoon to keep the whale from sinking.)

When the men heard the explosion, there was a noticeable tenseness among them. Each, in his mind, was asking, "Did we get it?"

### Turned Turtle

The answer came almost at once. The huge animal started to turn turtle very slowly. Tenseness increased. Will it keep going? The left front flapper broke the water and made a slow arc in the air and slowly submerged on the opposite side.

The men watched for a moment, one way or the other of the now exposed belly of the whale. It swayed slowly from side to side, then was still. The captain was now sure that a kill was made. After the dramatic pause, he shouted a loud triumphant yell, and was followed instantly by the rest of the crew. The intense silence was broken with happy sounds of shouts and back slaps.

### Sharing

Three whaling crews raced to the kill along the ice banks of the lead. The first one to reach it would be awarded the next choice portion of the whale after the captain and his crew had selected. Other crews would get their choices, according to their turns.

### The Tow

Additional seal skin floats were attached to the dead whale. A harpoon was plunged at the tip of the head and the four crews aligned themselves one after the other for the tow to the shore ice.

The tow began with loud happy sounds from all members of the four whaling crews. They sang and joked as they paddled hard, making interminably slow progress. But that did not matter to the hard working men. A whale had been taken, a big one. It meant food, good food and plenty of it, for everyone in the village.

### Great News

When the tow was completed the triumphant captain sent a messenger, a young man who was fleet of foot, to carry the great news to the village.

When the messenger reached the village, it was the women, children, and the aged who rejoiced. Even the dogs seemed to sense the good news as they let a chorus of yelps and howls.

Feverish activity began in the village. Women, young women, older boys, hitched their dogs and with teams made their way to the camp where the whale had been taken.

At the camp, the men made

ready to cut up the large whale. It would take about two days and nights to cut it up. "Dead men," or anchors, were chopped out in the ice for the block and tackle. Additional cooking tents were raised to accommodate the many people who would be working around the clock until the cutting was completed.

### Hopes

As the whale was cut and apportioned, it was loaded into sleds and taken to the village and put in underground food caches. Before the hauling was done, each team had made several trips to the cutting operation. Much food had been taken from just the one whale.

The season was young and the whaling crews were hopeful of getting more whales. If whaling conditions remained favorable, more whales would be taken. This whaling community had been known to take fourteen whales in one season.

### Drama of Survival

And so whaling remains as one of the great traditions in the Arctic Alaska — Whaling — exciting, challenging, exacting, dangerous. It is deeply woven into the lives of the people in the communities where it is pursued. Although, hunting of other animals is important, this great hunt had molded a way of life.

The hunt will go on until the last day of May. The whaling crews will debark and rest awhile. Around the first part of June, will come "Kahkrug" the whaling celebration. The village will gather in a body and give thanks. Great feasts will ensue and the people will dance.

Thus, the season will end, signifying the great drama of survival of man, in the Arctic.

## 8th Graders

Four eight-graders from Chalkyitsik are visiting Fairbanks and attending Lathrop High School where they will enroll as ninth-grade boarding-home students in September.

They are Kenny Jones, Simon Francis, Isabelle Salmon and Virginia Henry.

The four hosted four Lathrop High School sophomores at Chalkyitsik March 20 to March 30, including Jeff Coe, Ray Collins, Ginger Regan and Julie Manville. The exchange attempts to improve understanding between students and acquaint each with the other's environment.

"Fairbanks and the school system will not be so strange to the Chalkyitsik students when they become boarding-home students," said Vivian Moore of the Center for Northern Educational Research.

The Chalkyitsik students will attend classes with the Lathrop sophomores. The exchange project is funded under Title 4 of the Civil Rights Act and is part of the Alaska Educational Program for Inter-cultural Communications.

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