

# Eskimo Boy Discovers New World in Taste of His First Orange

by Howard Rock

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I ate a section of the wonderful fruit and wrapped the remainder in a cloth and tucked it carefully in the folds of my little parka I was using for a pillow.

The cloth was smudged but it was the only thing I could find to wrap my precious possession. The paper bag in which the fruit had come had disappeared.

The piece I ate was so wonderfully succulent that I wanted more. I resisted the temptation, reasoning that the fruit would be the only one I would have for the remainder of the year. I wanted to make it last as long as possible.

The rest of the family was asleep but I felt wide awake. The excitement of the day was still fresh in my mind. The wonderful new taste of the fruit I had eaten for the first time earlier that day lingered in my mind and there was the surprisingly pleasant memory of a huge man, very dark in complexion.

The day had been full of new things I had learned and then there was the wonderful fruit tucked in the folds of my parka. I could smell its tempting aroma and it was terribly hard to resist.

## Ship Sighted

Early that morning, one of the men in Tikiqag (Point Hope) had sighted a ship on the south horizon and had made a dramatic and joyous shout of, "AHYII! AHYII!"

This manner of announcing the coming of a ship had become

traditional ever since whaling vessels began to come north in the 1880s. It never failed to bring people out of their sod igloos and they would join in the heralding, including the children.

## Contagious Expectancy

This was the time for contagious expectancy, especially among the children. It meant precious treats such as candy and apples they had learned to like. To the adults it meant trading for things like underwear, towels, soap, flour, sugar, tea, coffee and beans.

Excitement reigned supreme among the children and I was caught in the tide of this happy situation. My mother, Keshorna, although less excited, wanted my father to get some towels and soap. She glanced at me and an enlightened expression spread across her face. I wondered why.

"I just thought of something Weyahok. Our little son here can talk the language of those white people and I think he would be good at trading artifacts for soap and things," mother speculated.

## The Linguist

Father chuckled, amused. "That is true, but I doubt whether his knowledge of the language is enough," father mused. "You know, he might be able to do it at that."

My excitement rose to such a pitch that I could hear my heartbeat.

"Why don't you take him with you when you go aboard ship. You can do it can't you, son?" mother queried.

"I can do it, mother!" I blurted anxiously.

I didn't want to miss the exciting opportunity because it would be the very first time I would be on a ship. At the same time, I kept feeling that my knowledge of the English language was very limited. All I could say at the time was, "I don't know," "How are you," "Yes Sir," "No sir," "Hello," "Thank you sir," and a few single words like "soap."

I decided to accommodate my parents and use them as much as possible because my anxiety to go aboard ship was overpowering.

"Well, son, I'll take you with me when we go to the ship, and don't be afraid to talk to the people when we go aboard," father said.

"I won't be afraid, father," I answered quickly.

I was going aboard ship and how exciting it was!

Some years later, mother told me that I had just turned 7 years

old when this was happening.

## Impatient Wait

We watched the ship as it came nearer. It was a tiny column on the southern horizon at first. Every once in a while, a great column of black smoke would pour out of it and drift slowly to the right, blown by a southeast wind.

I waited impatiently, along with other children for the ship to anchor. It would anchor on the lea side of the spit beyond the north beach.

As soon as my father told me that he was going to take me with him, I lost no time telling my young friends that I was going to the ship. They didn't believe me.

"You're too small to go; besides our parents don't allow little children aboard," they told me.

"You watch and see. My father is going to take me and he said he would," I answered.



Howard Rock  
1911 to 1976

"Besides, I'm going to talk to the people on the ship in their language."

"You can't talk their language."

"I can, too. Listen: 'I don't know.' You see, I can talk like a white man," I said proudly.

"What does that mean?"

(Continued on Page Twenty-Six)

## Arctic Survival series

(Continued from Page Twenty-Two)

"It means, amuy (I don't know)." I translated.

### Wonderful Sight

The ship came closer and closer. It was a beautiful day, a rare day at Tikiaq. The wind was blowing moderately. The vessel had its sails up. Black smoke kept issuing from a black stack which meant that the ship was also using its auxiliary steam engine.

"Umiakpuk munna Cutter Bearngumaruk! ("The ship is the Cutter Bear!"), someone shouted.

Cutter Bear—the famous Coast Guard ship that had made many a memorable voyage into the Arctic—the ship the Tikiaq people had learned to regard with affection.

Although I didn't know it at the time, The Bear had rescued stranded whalers and did many missions of mercy and provided medical attention to the Eskimos.

As the Cutter approached with its sails ballooning, it was a wonderful sight. The black smoke that rolled out of its stack added a dramatic touch. She rode the moderately heavy seas rolling just enough to make it seem to move like a slow-swinging inverted pendulum.

### Beautiful Vessel

The Bear made a swing around the west point of the spit to an-

chor beyond the north beach. As she edged slowly shoreward, her sails were taken down and men could be seen working precariously on the spars.

When the ship came to the point of anchorage, she looked massive and beautiful. Its anchor dropped in the water with a great splash. She began to roll perceptibly easily in the gentle swells.

"How can such a great ship like that stay afloat," I thought in wonderment.

### Preparations to Board

Most of the villagers gathered on the north beach. My father and several other people had dragged our umiak close to the edge of the water. I didn't dare to leave my father's side. I didn't want to be left behind.

The skinboat was launched three-quarters of the way into the gentle swells. The people boarded and my father lifted me into the boat near the stern. I was going aboard the Cutter Bear!

My excitement was boundless and I was about the only boy my age going to the ship. A feeling of uneasiness overtook me as I thought about my ability to speak English. There was no other way out but to try to speak it because I had promised my parents.

### An Awesome Sight

The men in our umiak paddled and my father steered it directly toward the ship. Our boat seasawed over the gentle swells as we moved steadily. The great bulk of the Cutter Bear grew with the receding distance. The size of it was astounding to a boy my age.

At last we were next to the great ship. I looked at its massive

sides and watched the green water lapping up and down. The wooden siding looked solid and impervious to the sea. I looked up at the masts and the height of them seemed unbelievable. As they moved toward us with the roll of the ship, it looked as if they would be too heavy and might tip the vessel over.

Many men of the crew were lined up along the railing watching us and the other umiaks that had come out from the village. Some of them had great beards which reminded me of Archdeacon Hudson Stuck, whom I had met about two years earlier and whom I was afraid of because of his beard.

One of the sailors threw a line into our boat and one of our men

made it fast. A ladder of rope and wood had been lowered down the side of the ship on which we were to board. I wondered how I would manage to go up on it. The rungs seemed too far apart for my tiny legs.

### Aboard!

A fine looking man who was wearing a different kind of a hat, apparently wondered also how I was going to get aboard. He shouted something and threw a rope down to my father and made motions to have him tie the line around my chest. Father did so. He then lifted me next to the side of the ship and strong arms pulled me up hand over hand. I was aboard!

As soon as the sailor put me down on the clean deck, I said: "Thank you sir. How are you?"

The man was apparently taken by complete surprise. He broke into an explosive laughter and said in a loud voice something to the effect:

"Hey men, this little boy can speak English!"

Several men gathered around me at once in curiosity. They began to talk and asked questions almost all of which I could not understand. I caught a word here and there.

The conversation, to the best of my recollection, went on something on this manner:

(Continued on Page Twenty-Seven)

# Arctic Survival series

(Continued from Page Twenty-Six)

## Disjointed Conversation

"What is your name, little boy?"

"I don't know."

A loud laughter followed.

"How do you like this ship?"

"I don't know."

"Do you like oranges, little boy?"

"No sir."

"Bring some oranges for this boy," said the man with the distinctive hat. "I don't think he understands what they are."

"Yes sir," I said.

The men laughed again and one of them tousled my hair.

## Wonderful Fruit

A man, who apparently went after something, came back with a paper bag. He put his hand into it and pulled out a large orange ball. It looked beautiful but I didn't know what it was.

He peeled it and then pulled it apart in halves. He pulled off a section and put it in his mouth. He pulled off another and gave it to me.

"Here, little boy. Eat it," the man said.

I knew what he meant and I put the piece of the fruit in my mouth. It had a taste I had never known before. It was juicy, succulent and wonderful. I smiled at the sailor.

"You liked that didn't you, little boy," he said with a wide grin.

"Thank you sir," I answered, still smiling at him.

(To Be Continued)