

Six years in Togiak taught us much

by Marie Andrews
for the Tundra Times

The six years we spent in Togiak taught us a lot of useful things. We learned how to speak and understand the Yupik language, how to do bead work, skin sewing and basket weaving. How to pick the right kind of grass and cure it for later use.

You had to be very careful in doing this or the grass would get black splotches and be unfit for basket weaving.

After the grass dried we would tie them in small bunches and put them away in a dry place. Once cured by this method they would keep good until further use.

When we were ready to weave we would soak out just enough to soften for weaving. If left wet for too long it would get black spots and have to be discarded.

There were no balls for our games, so we would weave several out of the straw and fill them with small stones for weight and use them for softball. They broke often, and it kept us busy making more.

In good weather we would go beachcombing and walk for miles. When we got hungry we would start a fire on the beach, dig up some butter clams and boil them in seawater, along with seagull eggs we had picked in the tundra.

We learned which wild mushrooms to eat, how to find wild celery and which berries were the best. As I remember it, they were all tasty treats. Sometimes on our hikes we would see bears feeding on berries, but when they spotted us they would run the other way. Usually when out picking berries we would bang on our tin buckets every so often to scare them away.

In the fall my brothers would trap squirrels after the young had grown, and before they went into hibernation. We learned how to skin them, stretch, dry and cure them ready for use. The curing was done by hand, just by kneading and working the hides until



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they were soft.

We had beautiful parkas, made with fancy beadwork which we all took part in. Old Anuska would cut the pattern from pieces of white calfskin, and we would all help to sew the seams. Squirrel tails were used for tassels around the bottom.

I can remember how the Natives would cure seal and reindeer skins by soaking them in urine. After the hair all came off the skin would be scrubbed clean and the tanning process would begin. Once cured the women would take over and cut the hides for use.

When making soles for boots they would cut out a square and shape it for sewing, curve the sides and ends and start crimping. This they would do by using their teeth. It took a long time to get a pair of soles ready.

When the older women smiled you could see how their teeth were worn down from chewing on the tough hides and stained yellow from using *ickmik*. This was a wad of leaf tobacco chewed until it was soft, then dipped in a small container of fine ashes, obtained by burning *b'luk*, a type of fungus that grows on birch trees.

Some of the Natives had small decorated ivory cases for their *icmik* box, others just used their palm. The

custom was to roll the wad around in the ash with the tongue, then after use store it in the container until the next time.

Today every thing is done easily with special tools, and most of the younger generation don't know how life was in their grandparents' days. In looking back, I am thankful that I

experienced the old methods of doing things before they disappeared.

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