

# The story of the missing whale bones

by Martha Ramoth

Chukchi News and Information Service

KOTZEBUE — I paced around the house, angry, frustrated. The garbage collectors had thrown away my whale bones by mistake.

**Inupiat Paltot  
People's Heritage**

## OPINION

That evening, I cried. In bed, I couldn't sleep for thinking about my loss, for this surely impeded my progress.

Almost two years ago, I had decided to learn traditional Inupiaq carving, a process that has ranged from talking with elders to gathering whale bones to exploring my heritage thousands of miles away.

Last year, for example, at the Museum of Natural History in New York City, I gazed through glass at carvings on walrus tusks. These works of pure craftsmanship carved by my ancestors in the late 1800s looked like pencil etchings on paper. The figurines symbolize the Inupiaq interpretation of the spirit world.

A half-man and half-wolf mask made of wood, ivory and fur with a mean and ferocious grin hung on the museum wall. A figure of a seal with a woman's face, which looked like a mermaid, lay on the cabinet with other small figures.

I could have easily spent hours in the museum studying the exhibits more closely. I never thought I would be learning about the Inupiat culture in New York City. I wished the exhibits were in Alaska, so other Natives could have access to them.

A few months later, back in Kotzebue, I did study a carving closely at the local National Guard office. This piece was collected in the 1930s by the late Muktuk Marston, who was the

At the same time, I looked around me to realize that our traditional carving skills are silently dying along with our elders. I want to help continue these skills in a small way and learn these methods from the elders. They know where, when and how to get the material for carving. With their wisdom and experience, our past and talent can continue.

That is why this past year, I began collecting materials for carving. It took

---

*... I looked around me to realize that our traditional carving skills are silently dying along with our elders. . . With their wisdom and experience, our past and talent can continue.*

---

brigadier general commander of the Western Alaska Territorial Guards. It depicts a man running a dogteam on top of a walrus tusk slightly bending over his sled.

His parka, detailed with patterned designs across the back looks like real fur. His dogs, all in individual positions, look as if they are running, but frozen right there. The team's harness, made of sinew and ivory rings to hold the dogs together, looks like a miniature harness. I remember these experiences as a realization that Inupiaq elders link us to our past.

a long time to compile the ivory, the baleen and the tools.

The hardest part, though, had been gathering my expensive and hard-to-find whale bones. This past summer, I had discovered an expired whale near Kotzebue on the beach and salvaged as many bones as I could. A friend helped me butcher the whale. I was fortunate to have his help for this hard work.

The whale emitted a foul odor, and the vertebrae were hard to cut. It took us four grueling hours to finish cutting and cleaning the whale. But I felt I had accomplished a major task and

now I had all I needed to start carving. Then came the shock of discovering that my whale bones had disappeared from my porch with the help of overzealous garbage collectors.

I was determined to find the whalebones. So the following morning, I went to the local dump to search for my bones. I circled the dump for more than an hour, looking over piles of smelling junk and refuse and feeling the ironic memory of the stench of gathering the bones on the beach in the first place.

As I was about to give up, I saw a bone sticking out of the rubble. The ashes around the bones were still warm and some of them had burned, but I took what I could salvage. The sun shone low on the horizon on that frigid brisk Arctic morning. But I did not feel the cold.

From a humble beginning with these kinds of unforeseen obstacles and much more to learn about carving, I am participating in a great traditional craft. One day, I hope to help link with our past and pass on that knowledge.

I will tell my children how I came to appreciate carving by realizing the value of our elders' knowledge and the story of the missing whale bones.

*Inupiaq Eskimo Martha Ramoth, who speaks her Native language fluently, grew up in Selawik and now lives in Kotzebue. She wrote this piece in a writing class at Chukchi College, a branch campus of the University of Alaska Fairbanks. Chukchi News and Information Service is a writing project of Chukchi College.*