



Jens Leavitt practises Inupiat dances as Clayborne Tunik looks on.

Barrow dancers perform

By BILL HESS

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It is good to Eskimo dance. So says 13-year-old Jens Leavitt of Barrow. "I just like it," he expounds. Leavitt is a member of the Barrow Dancers. "For the trips," Leavitt elaborates further when pushed for a reason why he likes it. As a dancer, he often journeyed far from Barrow to locations such as Nome, Sitka, Anchorage, Fairbanks, and San Diego, Calif.

Leavitt started dancing at age of nine. "We just joined in the practice," he remembers. "Then we got good. Then we started leaving for the Indian-Eskimo Olympics."

Martha Aiken, a respected elder of the group has been with it since it began about 15 years ago. "We didn't start until Clayborne and some others who already dance,

showed us how," she refers to Clayborne Tunik, who not only was a founder of the dance group, but is president of it today.

Others who helped teach an old tradition to young people included Pete and Isa Sovalik, Dick Bolt, Sr., Vincent Nageak. Rhoda Nageak, Johnny and Kate Tookak, Chester and Elizabeth Lampe and Roxie Ekowana.

Most of the dancers are young people of junior high and high school age, while adults do the singing and drumming.

As they travel, the dancers perform different types of dances, which help their audiences learn a little more about their culture, even if the audience is largely Inupiat itself. There are the action dances. "The action dance is really a fun dance," Aiken

explains.

"Anybody who wants can do it. Men follow the mens' motions; women follow the womens'. Women don't stamp their feet, men do. The men stamp their feet and stick their butts out," says Aiken. "They don't have motion in their arms like the women do. Unless they want to just joke and make everybody laugh."

Always, the dancers wear gloves. "It's a custom. I don't know the reason," Aiden says. "We'd feel lost without wearing gloves."

There are also motion dances, which Aiken explains are memorized dances passed on from a person who knows the meaning of the dances to another. Some describe animals, and some tell of activities.

There are special dances, (Continued on Page Seventeen)



Young Barrow Dancers (above) are joined by Mt. Edgecumbe students in an invitational. Earlier (below) they got a chuckle out of snapshots of a performance.



The Barrow Dancers in Action.

PHOTO BY BILL HESS

Barrow dancers

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like the bow dance. Aiken explains that it is not done often, but is used in a get-together between two villages which involves friendly competition, feasting and gift giving, and can last for weeks.

There are story dances, such as the one about a young athletic woman who could hunt as well as any man and who did not want to get married, but finally did because her grandmother was going to have the shaman turn her into a pet if she didn't.

Their audiences may learn a great deal from them, but the Barrow dancers learn much themselves. "When we went to San Diego," Aiken remembers, "some of the dancers had never been Outside before. They really enjoyed it. They couldn't believe they were out of Alaska! They saw prices that were real low. They saw all the things we don't have, like zoos. We were surprised to see that there were no tusks on the walrus at the zoo. We thought the walrus always has tusks!"

The dancers also have found that when they travel, they often can not find the food they like. "So we bring our own," Aiken explains. "Fish, caribou, and ugruk seal." Sometimes, they find food served that is just what they like. When they visited Sitka to perform at Mount Edgecumbe High School for students and alumni last February, a potlatch was held in their honor.

When they traveled to Fairbanks last month, they feasted

at the Fairbanks' Native Associations potlatch, where there was much good Native food.

It also takes a lot of money to fly as many as 17-20 dancers around Alaska. The dancers have received help from the North Slope Borough Committee on History and Culture, the North Slope Language Commission, the Alaska State Council on the Arts, and also have gotten help from groups inviting them to perform. Performers often meet many of their own expenses.

If some people look for complicated reasons the people of the North dance, Aiken's reason is simple. "Being Eskimo, it's only natural to like Eskimo dancing!" she explains.