

Part Two: Senator Gruening, Assistant Enjoy

Walrus Carnival Events at Savoonga

By GEORGE SUNDBORG

Colorful Eskimo dancing and a simulated walrus hunt ended the busy schedule of events. The carnival was held at just the right time to permit the hunt. The ice was breaking up and beginning to move rapidly as the hunt progressed. The next day all of the board shelf of ice below the village had disappeared into Bering Sea.

Today one skin boat killed two walrus just a few miles from the village. Hunting had been poor up to now because the ice was too thick to permit the boats to move out easily.

Last year Savoonga hunters took 421 bull walrus. The walrus are taken mainly for their meat and the ivory furnished by their tusks. Although there are some 1,000 reindeer on the island, the St. Lawrence people are not much interested in them.

They prefer the old diet of walrus and seal meat and oil. Even the hide of the bull walrus is eaten.

Female hides are split and used as covers for skin boats which in the St. Lawrence dialect are not known as oomiaks but as anyaks. (Shoes or footwear are not mukluks here but kamucks.)

A promising new source of livelihood came to Savoonga a few years ago when the firm of Stuart C. Olson of Canaan, Conn., offered to pay \$75 apiece for male walrus hides, which therefore were of no cash value to hunters. The tanned hides, which are some two inches thick, are cut into buffing wheels for polishing purposes. The walrus hide has especially desirable qualities for buffing and polishing.

The Olson company sought to obtain 75 hides last year, but only about one-third that many were shipped, despite the large kill. Many were received in poor condition because of insufficient salting.

The Olson people wrote to the Savoonga people and to the Bureau of Indian Affairs complaining about the failure of the Eskimos to meet the order for hides of good quality. The firm is giving Savoonga "one last chance" this year.

But the outlook is not good at this time. Much of the salt which Stuart C. Olson shipped at great expense to Savoonga for proper preservation of the hides was used during the winter, according to report,

to help melt ice on the air strip.

The snow was so heavy there and the State-supplied equipment so inadequate that many Savoongans turned out with shovels to help clear the runway by hand in order that visitors could land for the Walrus Festival.

Here are a few vignettes of life at Savoonga, as observed by Senator Gruening and George Sundborg, his assistant, during their enjoyable stay:

THE VILLAGE CHIEF—Jerry Wongittilin, Sr., 34, is the president of the village council and unquestioned leader of the people of Savoonga. He is a quiet, smiling, thin-mustached man who was born at Gambell. He and his attractive, young looking wife have four children.

When I found an unusual decorated tusk among the ivory carvings on sale at the community store, it proved to be Jerry's work. The etching is not in black as is common but in red, green, blue, orange and black. The draftsmanship and perspective are such as would do credit to Picasso.

THE SNOW-GO—Transportation has been revolutionized by the introduction a few years ago of the fast-moving rubber tracked snow-go. They buzz everywhere around the village.

Hogarth Kingeekuk was our faithful chauffeur during our stay at the village. He always arrived with his snow-go, a sled with sleeping bag mat pulled behind it,

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whenever we were expected to travel to a new place or event.

The village has enforced a rule that on long trips, such as between Savoonga and Gambell, travelers on snow-gos must go in pairs, because a mechanical failure in the open could be fatal.

There are still many dog teams in the village. The dogs are a little slower, they eat somewhat more heavily, but they are absolutely dependable.

CLIMATE—Even in May with its long days the air is usually cold on St. Lawrence Island which is almost perpetually fanned by a stiff breeze right off the North Pole. At Gambell, the year-around average wind movement is 17 knots. Snow still lies very deep at Savoonga but it is getting mushy and the snow-go soon will not be able to make tracks.

DANCERS—Nick Wongitilin, 63 the father of the chief, is the leader of the drummers and singers. This man, who looks deceptively young, also dances very well. Tim Gologergen, who is the radio man for Wien Air Alaska and also captain of the Alaska National Guard unit, is an

especially skilled dancer. The women who dance are all quite old and we noticed all wore glasses. The single exception is Elaine Kingeekuk, 9, a most sober and cherubic dancing maiden.

THE ONLY WHITE BOY—Andy Perala, 13, is the son of the very able teachers at Savoonga, Stuart and Mary Perala, who will be leaving soon to teach in the Trust Territory of the Pacific after two years on St. Lawrence Island. Their departure will constitute a great loss to Alaska, but they say they will return.

Last year when he was only 12, Andy went out 12 times in the top boat of walrus hunters. He had only a single shot .22 rifle but killed three seals—a baby oogruk or mukluk, a baby spotted seal and a baby bearded seal.

This year he will carry a .222 and has advanced to No. 1 gun in the strict hierarchy of the skin boat crew. This year he will be sure to get a walrus, he says. I asked if there were any other white boys who hunted walrus here and Andy replied truthfully, "I am the only white boy in the village."

(TO BE CONTINUED)