

The Passing of A Great Whaler

"Howard, I'm pretty sick and I'm pretty skinny."

Allen Rock, casually and calmly, said this to his brother over a long distance telephone before his death last week. He even chuckled a bit as he said it. The only sign of his suffering was his breath that was little bit short.

Allen was a man who wasn't easily cowered by any situation he had to meet during his life. When his brother saw him in his hospital bed a few days before he passed away, Allen was cheerful and he laughed easily. And this with all his limbs all but paralyzed.

"He was that way all the time. He smiled to the end," said his wife Frances.

Allen Rock was one of the great whalers of his village of Point Hope. Through the skills garnered from his father and his ancestors, he, along with his fellow hunters, caught mammoth bowhead whales that fed their villagers through the years. Tons of this muktuk and meat also found its way to Barrow, Nome, Kotzebue, Kivalina, Noatak and other villages. Generous amounts were also shipped to Fairbanks and Anchorage.

Allen's greatest moment of his whale hunting career came when he caught one on May 24, 1961—a 60 ton animal.

"That one almost got us," he said of himself and his crew.

Allen himself had struck the whale and thought it a one-shot catch.

"It started to turn turtle showing it was dead or dying," Allen recalled. "But all of a sudden, the great flukes sliced out of the water and headed straight for me at the bow of our umiak. They must have missed my head and the bow by about an inch. I felt the great wind swish. They threw water in my eyes with such force that I was blinded for a while."

The whale was subdued presently with the help of other whaling crews. It was the only whale caught that year. The whole village had gotten worried because the season was getting very late. The ice had begun to rot and break up with the warmth of spring. Very soon after the two days and nights of unceasing work cutting up the huge whale, the ice broke up and drifted out.

Allen Rock was a traditionalist as his ancestors were. The burning spirit within him was the whaling tradition and achieving its purpose was his life.

"Howard," he once said, "One of the greatest feelings a hunter can experience is to catch a whale—a big animal. You know then the people will eat."