

# Of Seals and Baskets—

## Bethel Pupils Creative Writers

Give the pupils an assignment, get them interested in it and let them go ahead in their own way and the results can be surprising—a bit startling—and then a bit more.

George Sparr, a teacher at the Kilbuck School operated by the State Department of Education at Bethel, Alaska, did just that and gave his young Eskimo sixth graders a creative writing assignment on any subject they were familiar with.

Obviously pleased with the results, Sparr and his superiors, Maxwell L. Fancher, superintendent, and Mrs. Elizabeth W. Suckling, elementary principal, decided to put the children's work into a mimeographed booklet.

In his foreword, George Sparr said in part:

"... Some bits of information included herein could be of value to you, whether or not you live in the valley of the Kuskokwim: you can fall through the ice in Montana—or Kansas.

"And all over the nation, hostesses are looking for unusual and exotic desserts: try agutak! Of course you won't be skinning a seal every week, but the know-how of it would serve you well, conversationally.

"May the winds blow gently and conditions be 'satisfactorial' if ever you happen our way."

**DON'T STARVE!**  
Sixth grader Cyrus Kinegak chose the subject, "How to Protect Yourself if Lost in a Blizzard," and came out stressing food a lot more than the blizzard. Cyrus writes:

"You can first think about having enough food to eat. Prepare enough food for more than one day's eating. Then check to see if the weather is satisfactory, and good for a journey. Check the dogs to see if they are ready for a journey. Check the dogs to see if everything is alright for traveling.

"If you want to keep warm in a blizzard walk around in a circle with blankets around you. Do not go far from camp! If you get too cold, get your sled and put it upside down then put your dogs under the sled for protection. Crawl under the sled

and get up with the dogs.

"When your under the sled, get out and cut blocks of snow and put it in the biggest hole of the sled opening.

"Make tea or something hot to drink. If you can't do that, drink hot milk with bread and butter or jam if you have any.

"Have something to eat. Anything just so it's food.

"Keep warm, stay near your shelter, try not to freeze, and don't starve."

**CUT FROM CHIN, AND...**  
Sixth grader Mike Joe chose to write on, "How to Skin a Seal."

"First, you get a seal. Either shoot it or spear it. And then get it to the land where it is a good place to put it on the beach if you are out in the ocean.

"Lay it on its back. Get a sharp knife. And cut it under a chin. Cut straight from the chin to the place where the seal goes to the toilet. Next, start spreading the skin from the meat. Cut so the tallow is on the skin and not on the meat.

"After you have taken the meat and stored it, take the tallow from the seal skin and put the tallow in a barrel and after you have taken the tallow hang the skin up on a wall or a wooden stretcher. Get some sharp wooden sticks that are about one foot long and put them around the side of a seal skin. Stretch tight..."

**STOP: YOU MELT THROUGH**  
Cyrus Kinegak, who seems to be a prolific writer, chose another subject, "How to Save Yourself if You Fall Through the Ice."

"Before you cross a frozen river, lake, or stream, always have a long round stick able to hold you up on anything. If you fall through the ice the pole will help you get out by putting the pole on top the ice on the two sides.

"When you put the pole across the opening put yourself up and get on the ice if you can. Don't bob up and down in the water, you might drown while you are bobbing up and down. Call for help if you can't make it to the land in the water.

"If you get onto the thin ice, you should spread your body flat on the ice. If you stand up on the ice, it will break and you'll fall through again. Go across the ice slowly. Look for the thickest ice. You can tell thick ice from thin ice. If you see blurry ice, it is thick. If the ice is clear enough to see through,

it is thin ice.

"If you get too slow on thin ice, you might melt a hole big enough for you to go through. Before crossing the ice, look for signs saying DANGER or THIN ICE or CAUTION.

"So be careful about falling through the ice."

**COMPLICATED WEAVERS**

or

**'A BASKET IS THERE'**

Carrie Alexie on "How to Weave a Coiled Grass Basket:"

"The materials you will need are: grass, beads, water pail, seal gut, crepe paper and strong shears.

"... Gather enough grass in the summer to make baskets all winter. This is a lot of grass for some people. But not so much for a lazy woman..."

"We wrap grass around grass here. This we call coil basket. To do this we hold twenty or thirty pieces of long dry grass in your left hand. In your right hand you have a long piece of strong thick yellow or orange grass which is the part you weave around the other grasses to cover them and the part you weave around each coil is tied to the last coil and the next coil so finally you have a wall and a basket is there.

"This yellow, thick, strong, grass you get in the fall of the year before it freezes. When everything is drying for the winter.

"Get as much of it as you can use. After your basket is finished use beads to decorate.

"Or sometimes, if you are a complicated weaver you weave the design in the basket as you weave. Most Eskimos are complicated weavers. Use seal gut for weaved design. Color it with crepe paper water or not."

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