



FILLING THE CACHE TO THE BRIM — Unalakleet villagers rediscover the ancient tradition of ice-fishing, bringing home sled loads of fresh trout. — Photo by EMILY IVANOFF BROWN

# Paradise of the North—

## *Unalakleet Folks Busy Icefishing*

By EMILY IVANOFF BROWN

Unalakleet was once the largest Eskimo village on the Seward Peninsula of the Northwest coast of the Bering Sea. It is located on a wide sandspit of the Unalakleet River. Its mouth serves as an entrance and outlet to the inland valley where many kinds of fishes spawn. Similarly, the valley is traversed by a meandering path to make a way for the swarming fish and land animals during the winter and summer.

No wonder, Dr. Carl O. Lind, a medical doctor, described the Unalakleet area as an ideal site

for a settlement when he first came and lived there in 1902; he named it a "Paradise of the North."

So too, the first Inupiak chief, a migrant leader with his followers, as they emigrated southward from the Northern Alaska, settled at Unalakleet, The Unalik Eskimo village; since that time his people survived on the countless variety of fishes and land animals. Today the place is still a Paradise of the North, however, during the summer much of the salmon is sold to the Japanese buyers.

During the fall and winter,

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# Unalakleet Icefishing for Trout...

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the smaller fish (trout, ling-cod and white fish) are available. the tomcods and smelts spawn in January and are accessible at the mouth of the river. In addition, the grayling and trout congregate in the deepest part of a river which is usually located above the ford beneath the high bank.

Every able person goes fishing through the river with his snow-go vehicles. During the weekends, the professionals and other workers in town leave their offices and spend the two days in the wilderness. Most of the people have furnished log cabins.

If anyone wishes to get married during the weekend he would not be able to find the U.S. Commissioner in town unless he had been notified earlier. Just before I left, one such official, Lowell Anagick, and his wife Betty caught 30 trout by jigging their hooks through the ice porthole.

How in the dickens did they sense that there are trout in the ice capsules of the river? This idea of knowing where to locate survival food is a traditional heritage. Wilfred Ryan and his wife Eva, nee Eva Ivanoff last year discovered this forgotten method of fishing. One day then came home with a sled load of fresh trout; immediately, the news swept over every housetop like Santa Claus' visit within a span of a few hours.

Next morning, on Sunday, there was a caravan of snow-gos milling around the slowest driver heading toward the fishing grounds. On and on, everyday, Unalakleet fishermen filled their caches to the brim. Of course the white-collar professionals may have had to buy fresh trout to grace their tables. When I came home to Unalakleet I had fresh trout morning, noon and night.

I reminisced about similar fishing expeditions my parents and others had done fifty years ago at Shaktoolik, Alaska, a village 28 miles west of Unalakleet. Traveling by dog teams instead of snow-gos, they fished from the ice mounds in which many trout hibernate. At Unalakleet the news caused excitement.

I heard from my friends that the husbands and their wives had quarrels every morning over who would use the snow-go for fishing. I'm pretty sure some of the wives had the first preference and did not come home for several days then living in their own cabins. I think I would do the same thing if I had the chance.

Well ... my son Leonard tried to persuade me to stay home, but I always had my own way. I went fishing wearing everybody's boots, pants, and underwear and fur mittens. I must have weighed about 200 pounds because I couldn't walk straight over the snow banks. I wobbled down to the ice-table and was given an opening (hole) and a box to lay my bulk down.

My niece Eva Ryan who was fishing near me hooked all the fish, it seems; do you know why? Because I couldn't tell whether the smelts were hitched onto my hook or not so I must have jigged them off. I blame the bearskin mittens I wore. They made me feel like a hibernating bear, so I took them off and when I jigged my hook again, I began to catch the weightless smelts.

Thereafter, Eva caught 200 smelts and I caught 25. The temperature registered at 24° below zero that day and regardless of its impact on me, I did not get too cold. It was a beautiful experience.



JIGGLING A HOOK THROUGH AN ICE PORTHOLE — A youngster catches a fair share of trout, ling cod, whitefish, and smelt. Weekends see the entire village turn out on snow-gos, headed for the fishing grounds.

— Photo by EMILY IVANOFF BROWN

The rest of the week my family ceased to fuss over me and this gave me lots of physical exercise which affected my appetite. I would eat twice as much and besides my friends would serve Christmas cookies and fruit cake or Eskimo ice cream. I gained ten pounds in two weeks but the food tasted so good, all fresh food right from the cache of the wilderness.

A visitor never gets bored in our village. There is something going on every day and night of the Christmas week. It is amazing how the people get around in their village; blizzard or cold spell doesn't keep them at home. The young people had winter games, and I guess you could call it an imitative Eskimo festival. The spacious Covenant Hi Gymnasium housed participants and their guests. Eskimos never worry about the passing of the time. The games lasted until 4:00 A.M.

The next day of the blizzard, wind blowing at 45-50 miles an hour did not alter the Mayor's plan of a business meeting. Since it was to be an important political one, most of the people attended. I asked my son, Leonard, "Did the people walk over to the Junior High School (a distance of ¼ of a mile from the center of the village)?" "Snow-gos, Mom, the place was just packed."

Every mid-winter, the people vote for their councilmen and a mayor. This year a turn-over sprouted by voting for the women leaders: Agnes Baptists, nee Agnes Ivanoff, President; Mrs. Pleasant, Secretary; and Mrs. Isabelle Millet, Treasurer. Their former President, Frank Degnan, received ten points less than a lady opponent. This is not a disgraceful step down for Frank because he has done very well in the past.

He promoted and motivated his people's awareness of what of what leadership means: politically, he paved the way as to how, when and what the political techniques have been and are associated with, and what and how the cooperative political body can achieve power and appraise their economic needs

and finally make judgments on the local problems.

Through Degnan's know-how in technical management, Unalakleet has had some improvements made. One area was housing. Bureau of Indian Affairs successfully instigated a housing program for the native people in the Eskimo communities. It was a plan by which people built their own houses and not only was it a successful venture, but it was an educational pursuit, especially in carpentry.

The women of the village had a large part in erecting the packaged houses. While their husbands and sons went fishing, they did the painting and other kinds of finishings in a cooperative fashion. They were paid for doing manual jobs as well. Last fall when each mother moved into her new home, I am pretty sure a house-warming of a cup of tea and cookies were served, and they talked for hours of their experience.

This project covers three generations: from an igloo dwelling; next, a change of housing to a log cabin; and most recently to a conventional type of a home.

The physical structure of a building will live through an era of fifty or sixty years. But in contrast, the Eskimo, Indian and Aleut heritage will stand forever in the hearts of the first inhabitants of our great land. And finally, only God can rebuild man's spiritual aspect.