

Nikka the Leader Met Violent Death from Young Dogs

Reprinted from Tundra Times
January 20, 1964

By HOWARD ROCK
Times Editor

Although I didn't know what it was, I began to have a terrible feeling that something was very wrong as I approached our little house. My father, Weyahok, and my mother, Keshorna, had preceded me going home. I saw them working over something. But I couldn't make it out from a distance.

I ran to them and then I knew! There, laying on his side was Nikka, my faithful friend, pal, and companion. He followed me with his eyes and weakly wagged his tail.

Nikka was our great lead dog and he was the pet of the family. He laid there apparently unable to move. I was shocked beyond words because Nikka was covered with blood. He had been terribly wounded.

Sunday Game

It was a Sunday late in June. We had gone to church that morning. It was a beautiful day. Sunday games after the evening meal had become customary in the village and that Sunday was no exception. The younger people had taken sides and were playing an Eskimo football game. The people had gathered on the south beach side of the village to watch the game.

When we went to the game, Nikka had followed along after me as he always did. He had stuck around for quite some time. He could not follow me around too well as I was darting here and there playing with my younger friends. Sometime during the games, he had gone home without my knowledge.

It was around 9:30 in the evening when the players decided to quit. The sun was still up. The evening was calm and beautiful. The spectators began to go home. While I was playing with my friends I had forgotten about my friend, Nikka.

Pal from Babyhood

Nikka — he was there ever since I could remember. About two years and a half before I was born my parents had raised him when he was born. He had grown into a huge black malamute. The only white spot on him was on his left front paw. He was intelligent and he was

powerful. No dog in the village dared to mix with him because no other dog could match his great strength.

"For some reason he took to you even while you was a baby. He seemed to want to watch over you," mother and father would tell me.

Although powerful, Nikka had a most friendly disposition. When I became aware of life around me there was Nikka. I romped with him to my heart's content. He used to take a great delight in knocking me down and he would mildly and playfully rough me up. When I protested he would take his huge tongue and swipe me across my face as if to say, "I'm sorry."

Playmate

My father had made a tiny flat ivory sled with walrus ivory runners for my brothers and sisters to play with. When I was about four years old I learned to harness Nikka to the little sled and he would take a great delight in pulling me around in the vicinity of our house. He would yip, trot and gallop. How I enjoyed his great speed when he ran almost spilling me off the little sled when we hit little drifts of snow.

Once in a while, Nikka would get a little lazy and when he became that way, I would harness him anyway. When I give him command to go, he would go a few steps and stop. I would start hollering at him, "Kee, Nikka, waliaqin!" ("Alright, Nikka, go!")

He would look back at me and wag his tail but he would just sit. I would get off the little sled and take him by the collar and pull. He would take a few steps and sit down. I pushed him but he wouldn't budge. When I became frustrated I would beat his head with my young hands. He just closed his eyes and took it. He knew I couldn't hurt him.

After much effort, I would manage to get about 200 yards away from the house and all of a sudden, Nikka would make a dash for home leaving me behind or he would drag me as I held on to the little sled, his big paws throwing snow in my face.

After driving and playing with Nikka, I would take his harness off, take him by the collar and

bring him into the house. He stayed in the house much of the time, a special privilege seldom given a dog in the Arctic. This was the proof that he was loved by the whole family.

Intelligent Dog

Since puppyhood, my parents had noticed Nikka's fine intelligence. He was promptly trained to be a leader as he grew up and he proved to be a great one. He was so versatile that Weyahok and Keshorna trained him to meet father when he came home from hunting out on the ice.

Late in the afternoon, Nikka would start to scan the north and south beaches watching for father to appear over the banks. On seeing him, he would dash up to the roof of our sod igloo and ran around the skylight yipping and whining letting us in the house know that father was coming.

My older sister, Akniachak and I were given the job of putting the harness of Nikka. He would never go without it. Akniachak and I used to tease our dog once in a while and delayed putting on the harness. He used to get agitated and would start knocking us down so anxious was he to get the harness on.

As soon as it was on, Nikka would dash toward my father at a full gallop. When Weyahok caught a seal or a polar bear all he did was fasten the animal to Nikka's harness and the dog would drag it home for father.

My parents had also trained Nikka to be a watch dog and a wonderful one he was too. When father came home with a load of reindeer meat on his sled late at night, he left Nikka untied to watch the meat. He would watch all night. We never had to worry and the dog would never touch the meat no matter how hungry he was.

Many a night, Nikka slept by me. When I woke up during the night I could feel the warmth of his great body through my reindeer skin sleeping bag. He had uncanny timing when it was time to get up. He woke me up by licking my face. I would push him away not wanting to get up. For further persuasion, he would lay his huge head on my chest.

The Great Dog Ages

When I was ten years old,

Nikka, according to my parents, was about 15 years old — a great age for a dog. His face had turned gray and his eyes became dull. He no longer galloped around. He walked slowly, his tail wagging as he followed me or some other member of the family around. His once powerful teeth became dull and round.

The aging of Nikka did not make him less loved by the family. We considered him as one of us. His love for us and the faithful service he had given us through the years bound him to our hearts.

During his old age we kept the leader in the house in winter. The only time he was out in the weather was when he wanted to comfort himself. He would get up and walk to the door and look questioningly at me or another member of the family.

Even at his old age I continued to play with Nikka. He would playfully bite at my legs, arms, and fingers, never biting too hard. He was forever wanting to lick my face. It was at these play sessions that I could feel Nikka's great love for me. We had this mutual feeling between us and it was a great comfort.

When the leader was away on a trip, I missed him. It was apparent that he missed me too, because, as soon as he came back, he couldn't wait to get to me. He would jump on me whining and knocking me down to lick my face.

Through the years, Nikka and I had been almost inseparable. Having my parents, my brothers and sisters, and Nikka, made my life complete.

Other Dogs Hated Nikka

The great leader was never liked by the rest of the dogs in the team. There was a deadly jealousy of him. We never worried about him when he was younger. He was more than a match for any dog and what terrible punishment he could give.

But now that he was old, the younger dogs became more bold and would attack the old leader every opportunity they got. Even at his great age, Nikka never backed down when attacked but it was pathetic to see him fight back because he could no longer do much harm to his attackers. Age had dulled his teeth.

Even then we could see flashes of his old skill as a fighter. When the fights were stopped, old Nikka would circle around, proud and defiant, his tail high in the air.

Terrible Scene

The Eskimo football game was drawing to a close and the older people began to walk home, including my parents, I, with my young friends, played around a bit longer reluctant to quit the games.

I finally walked home, running part of the way. When I was about 300 yards from home I noticed some activity that scared me although I didn't know why. My parents were working over something in front of them I could not make out. I ran to them and what met my eyes brought a sob out of me.

There in front of my parents lay Nikka, matted with blood. He had been horribly wounded. My old friend followed me with his eyes and weakly wagged his tail. The great dog's gesture brought me to sob uncontrollably.

My mother had been weeping. She couldn't say anything to me but my father said quietly and sadly, "Your dog has been very badly wounded."

"Which one did this to Nikka, father," I sobbed.

"That one over there and that one there," father said pointing at two three-year old malamutes. "They had gotten loose while we were gone."

Fierce Inflictions

I couldn't hold back the sobs that welled in me. I began to look for rocks. Finding them, I hurled them with all my might at the two dogs while I cried with anguish. I did this for several moments until father said, "Stop it now, son. Those dogs will not eat or drink for three days!"

I went to Nikka and knelt down and put my head to his. His breath was labored. He looked at me with great sadness in his eyes.

The two malamutes had inflicted fierce wounds on Nikka. His right ear was almost completely torn off. His throat was bloody and his flanks were horribly torn up. Nikka would never recover from his wounds.

Sadly, my parents and I tried to make Nikka comfortable. We put a reindeer skin under him and put him in a nook by the outside door.

"We can't do much more for him now. It's getting late. We better go in and go to bed," father said.

I wanted to stay with Nikka but father told me that there was nothing I could do for my dog. I went in reluctantly. I couldn't go to sleep for a long time. I knew that Nikka was not going to be with us much longer. I didn't want to think of it but it kept coming up in my mind.

Nikka Disappeared

Sometime, very early in the morning, I finally fell asleep. I was first to awake. I dressed quickly and went out to see Nikka. He was gone! I ran around the house looking for him but he was nowhere to be found. I ran into the house and shouted, "Nikka is gone and I can't find him!"

The family got up at once and we started to look for the missing leader. We searched all around the vicinity of the house. We scoured the beaches without success. Finally about 3 p.m. my sister Akniachak came running from about a quarter of a mile east of our house and shouted, "I found Nikka!"

(Continued on Page 11)

Arctic Survival . .

(Continued from Page 10)

Nikka had dragged himself away during the night and made his painful journey quarter of a mile away. He had crawled into a rather deep hole and died there. My great friend, playmate, and companion was gone, forever.

The Burial

My father had us children get a small sled and we dragged it to the hollow where Nikka had died. Father lifted the dead leader into it and we took him back to the house.

Father conferred with mother and they told my sister, myself and my younger brother, Kakairnok, to take our dog to a spot north of the house half way up the north beach. The distance was about 150 yards. Father took a shovel and walked ahead of us. He stopped and dug a hole four feet deep. He then lowered Nikka carefully into it.

We stood around, the whole family, and father gave a prayer. He then filled the grave.

Thus we buried our beloved Nikka — a great dog. He had given us his most faithful service through the years of his life. He had won the hearts of everyone of us in the family.

A dog? Yes — but we felt he was truly one of us.