

Sinrock - Inupiat poet looks at change

BY BILL HESS

Tundra Times

*Driving down Seventh Avenue
I saw a skinboat sitting
on a rack
Outside the museum.*

*Why was it there?
It should be at sea.*

*It's on display
To show the visitors
What a skinboat looks like.*

*How it is made.
What it is made of.
How times have changed.*

*Yesterday, the skinboat was
used*

For continuing a lifestyle.

*Today, it sits outside a
museum*

*To show how it was used
in a lifestyle.*

A museum skinboat.

Fred Bigjim wrote the above poem on June 8, 1981. Many years before that, the skinboats in his life did more than plant a vague image of past days in someone's mind.

"I think the most vivid memory I have is with a skinboat," explains Bigjim, a short, well-groomed Inupiat whose high modern education is reflected in his speech and manner. "One time we went to Wales," he recalls the days of his childhood, before he knew what the halls of upper learning looked like and when the English language which he now speaks so fluently was still a foreign tongue. "Wales was a very traditional village.

"Most of the homes were sod houses, built like igloos. I remember staying in those sod houses, using seal oil lamps for light. We went out one time walrus hunting, and we injured a walrus. We thought it was dead, but it wasn't. When we pulled up to get it, it slashed the skin boat!"

Out in the sea, the cold Bering Sea, where a young boy could easily drown. "We saved ourselves on an icepack. (we) includes Bigjim, his stepfather, a cousin and others since forgotten) "We pulled the boat up and patched it. We always carried a spare skin with us. Then we chased the wounded walrus, caught it, and brought it back. It was freezing out there! It seemed like days, but it was only about a two to three day time period."

Bigjim recently completed a book, which weaves his own poetry with photographs collected from various sources, in which he creates vignettes of such past days, and contrasts them with the sometimes incomprehensible changes which have fallen on his people. All he needs to do now is find a publisher willing to print and market the book.

Bigjim's own life has changed centuries in the three decades since the walrus-hunting incident. He is now the director of cross-cultural education at Sheldon Jackson College in Sitka. His own higher formal education has come from Sheldon Jackson, the University of



PHOTO BY BILL HESS

When Fred Bigjim spotted this skinboat, now displayed at the Anchorage International Airport, he was inspired to write a poem.

Alaska, Suffolk law school and Harvard.

Bigjim has three young sons of his own, of whom he speaks with great pleasure. His wife is of Irish-Catholic ancestry. He has co-authored a book, "Letters to Howard," for which he has received acclaim, but no money. Alaska Methodist University Press picked up all the expenses involved with publishing that book, and Bigjim turned the copyright over to them. The book has been a consistent seller, but AMU press does not have an aggressive marketing policy, so the numbers sold have been small.

Bigjim hopes "Sinrock" - named for the place of his birth and early childhood will be picked up by a publisher who can give it good exposure in both Alaska and Outside markets. "One of the problems is that publishers do not publish poems with any enthusiasm unless you are a known poet," Bigjim muses.

Perhaps, but Bigjim certainly has written with enthusiasm. In the poem, "Sinrock, My Love," he likens the splendor of the place where he was born in a tent on the beach with that of "Greece and the islands of the Aegean Sea. New England in the fall. Fifth Avenue in New York. The Boston Common. State Street in Chicago. Laguna Beach."

But how quickly life changed for the people of little Sinrock! That is what Bigjim attempts to portray. "I'm not saying the change is all bad, but at the same time, it can't be all that good," the author explains.

"I want to show different things. The tragedy of alcohol,

and how it is destroying the human being." In one of Bigjim's poems, he visits "down-and-outs" living on Fourth Avenue. They wear the biblical names such as Matthew, Moses, Luke and Abraham brought to them by the Christian missionaries, and their once independent lifestyle on the land and sea has been replaced by one never envisioned by the evangelists who entered Native lands determined to improve the lot of what they thought to be a backward people.

"I also want to show the change that I see, from where I was as a boy, to where I am today. In just that brief period of time!" Bigjim lived full-time in Sinrock until he was seven years old. "My whole rearing was off the country," he remembers. "The traditional Eskimo lifestyle; the basic food source; the animals, the sea, the fish in the river, birds in the spring, berries and wild greens. I participated in the gathering of all these food sources. I traveled by dog team to Teller, Wales, and Shishmaref."

But the outside world encroached, and Bigjim moved with his family to Nome, so that he could attend school. Each summer, they returned to Sinrock, and followed the old lifestyle. Until he was 10. Then his stepfather drowned, and his mother was hospitalized with tuberculosis. Bigjim was sent to a children's boarding home in Unalakleet and attended four years of school at White Mountain. Finally, his mother was released from the hospital, and Bigjim returned to Nome, where he completed high school.

The adaptation to new

worlds did not come easy. Bigjim recalls the subsistence activities, such as the walrus hunt. "I enjoyed it so much that when I was in the children's home, I just couldn't adjust for weeks! That free spirit that I had became structured! There was scheduled time. Time to get up, time to eat, to go to bed, to pray, to go to school!"

"I spoke only Inupiat until I went to school. Then there was no special help to learn English. No tutors, no aids, no bilingual program."

"I try to reflect through my poems the way I envision the change that happened to me. Each poem has a message in it." Writing the poems has clarified what has happened in Bigjim's own mind.

"I became more and more aware of change as I sat and wrote different poems. It helped me see more clearly what has happened to Alaska Native culture."

Bigjim wrote "Letters to Howard" along with James Ito-Adler while he was working on his master's degree in Arts and Sciences at Harvard. In it, he took the role of an elderly Eskimo, Naugga Ciunerput, and his classmate, Ito-Adler, the role of Wally Norton, a VISTA worker who is the only person living in the fictitious Land's End Village.

In the letters, written from March 30, 1973, to Nov. 26, Bigjim takes a hard look at what some of the ultimate implications of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act could be. The letters were published in the Tundra Times by editor and founder, Howard Rock. Many of Bigjim's speculations with problems in-

volved in the Act - such as difficulties and limitations on Native land selections - have proved to be on target.

That book was written by a young Eskimo pretending to be an old man looking at the future with skeptic wonderment. "Sinrock" was written by an older, but hardly old, Eskimo looking at the past, present, and future, and trying to decide how he and his people fit in. Now, if only the right publisher can pick it up, maybe we all can get a chance to read it.

*Your shores hide the Eskimo's
past,
Covering it with sands of time.*

*Every once in a while,
You uncover jewels of relics,
As if to remind the world
That once, in times past,
Eskimos shared the shore with
you.*

*When I was nine
I walked your shores
Nearly every day.*

*Once, I found a baby seal.
When I approached,
It looked at me
With tears in its eyes.*

*The Eskimo in me said,
"Take it for its fur and liver."
The child in me said,
"I need to care for it."*

*Eskimo,
Seal,
Together a culture.
So interwoven like braided
hair,
Shedding the same kind of
tears.*

*The child in me carried the
seal
And it disappeared off the
Bering Coast.
The Eskimo in me went with it.
(Bering Coast, by Fred Bigjim)*