

Whaling Required Preparations, Great Precision

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The great tradition of whaling on the Arctic coast of Alaska remained, from the past to the present, as a time of expectancy and keen excitement. It has been looked upon with a sense of reverence because it has afforded to whaling communities a key to survival. A bountiful season means food for a year. It also affords a great challenge and a dangerous one.

The very size of the animal demanded respect and the great whale had to be hunted with precision. Little room was left for mistakes. Mistakes meant real danger for life and limb.

The type of whale the coastal Eskimos hunt is the bowhead. This monstrous marine animal has been taken up to 65 to 70 tons, perhaps even larger. The baleen on the large ones caught has measured up to 15 feet and jawbones up to 21 feet. It is little wonder that extreme care has to be taken in hunting these titans of the sea. To err means disaster.

Preparation

March is the month of the year when whaling preparations usually began. Equipment is looked over and repaired. New gear is made and made carefully so it can be used to the fullest possible effectiveness. Women skin seals taking the entire flesh and bone out of it using only the neck opening to operate through and leaving only the last knuckle bones in the flippers.

These are made into seal skin floats, a great necessity, because a whale when killed sinks to the bottom. It has to be kept afloat with the use of the inflated seal skins.

Old Whalers Consulted

During the preparations old whalers, usually retired whaling captains who were too old to hunt any longer, were consulted for advice. More often than not they volunteered their services to younger whalers. Their knowledge of whaling procedures was invaluable. They have had vital practical experiences.

Proper procedure in whaling has always been the first law of the hunt. The position of the umiak has a great bearing on the safety of the crew and is the product of time of experience of the ancient whalers. What was gained through experience and proven to be valuable was carefully handed down for the benefit of the younger generations.

The manner of paddling the umiak without making bubbling sounds with the paddle is one of the important things the men have to do. The whale has keen hearing ability while submerged. The paddle must never touch the gunwhale of the umiak.

The vital spots on which to strike the whale also were of great importance. Precision, coolness, and presence of mind were emphasized before, during, and after the whale had been struck. The nature and pattern of the thrashing flukes were discussed so that the hunters would best be able to avoid the deadly sweeps.

Umiak, The Skin Boat

The most vital need of the whalers was the umiak. This craft was made especially for whaling but it was also used extensively for other purposes, such as a means of marine transportation or for traveling up rivers.

Its vital importance was for whaling purposes, of course. Its design was made for easy paddling, the only means of propulsion the ancient whalers had. (Present day whalers still use

paddles. It is the best way to approach whales silently, without alerting them by noises.)

The lines of the umiak were made so that six or seven men could paddle the craft to easily overtake the whale.

Every few years whaling umiaks had to be recovered with oogruk skins because, in time, the sinew threading began to wear out and the stitches began to open up. Also, after being used for going up rivers the skin on the bottom of the boat got deep scratches from striking against sharp rocks.

The umiak may have looked fragile but it was not. It was a remarkably sturdy craft. One reason for this was that it had the give which made it absorb shocks surprisingly well.

Six Oogruk Skins

It took six oogruk skins to cover a whaling umiak about 24-feet long.

The whaling captain's wife usually took charge of the sewing of the skins. She called in about six women, usually her close friends or those women who were exceptionally good at sewing.

The skins used were cured until the hair peeled off. They trimmed the edges and commenced to sew the skins together.

This operation was usually a light-hearted affair where the women stopped occasionally for snacks, bantered, gossiped and

laughed.

They used waterproof stitches on the outside, or water side of the skin, leaving an overlap of about an inch and a half on the inside. This overlap was sewn using the same stitch for insurance against leakage. After completing the sewing, the women made small slits all around the cover so it could be laced to the umiak frame with rawhide thong.

Men's Turn

When the women completed their work, it was the men's turn to finish covering the umiak.

The sewn skins were rolled from the stern end to the bow and taken out of the house to where the frame of the umiak had been suspended upside down on racks about two and a half feet off the ground.

Laced

The men placed the rolled skin on top of the bow, fitted the skin on it, and then unrolled it to fit the stern. After the skin had been draped in that manner on the boat frame, it was time to lace it on.

Two men got under the bow and fastened the ends of two long oogruk rawhide lines and commenced to lace on the skin by putting the line through the slits on and around a horizontal brace that went the full length of the umiak frame.

The two men coordinated the lacing on opposite sides and

pulled the line as taut as possible as they worked toward the stern. When this was completed the newly-draped skin was as tight as a drum.

Ancient Custom

During this operation there followed one of the ancient customs. When the sewn skins were brought out of the house by the men, it was a signal for the children of the village to flock to the skin covering operation.

This was the time for the whaling captain's wife to bring out tidbits that had been previously prepared to pass around to the children in honor of the occasion. In the old days these consisted of pieces of muktuk, frozen whale meat, akutuq (Eskimo ice cream), or pieces of cooked caribou.

In the present day this custom has changed a great deal. The children have been educated to goodies like candy bars, Kool-aid, and cookies, so that is what the captains' wives are now giving the children.

The reason for this custom probably sprang from the ancient Eskimo's attempt to allay the moods of their whaling god. Some villages apparently had different gods. The Point Hoppers had one whom they called Allingnuk, the whaling god who dwelled on the moon.

Goodness Meant Children

The philosophy of the Eskimos leaned strongly toward kindness and goodness to chil-

dren. While they didn't coddle them to an extensive degree (there are exceptions, of course), there was a strong family bond. A spoiled child is looked on with disfavor by the people.

In the eyes of the ancient Eskimos, children were good and in treating them in a kindly manner in the eyes of their whaling god, was to instill kind feelings so that he might reward them with a bountiful season.

When the newly-covered skin was done, it was put up on high racks to keep it out of reach of loose dogs and to be dried by the wind and sun. When thoroughly dried, the skin took on an almost cream-white shade.

Ice Trail

After the whale hunting equipment has been prepared, the men turn their thoughts to preparing a trail to the leads, or water that open with the currents and the north wind, between the main ice offshore and the cleavage line of the moving ice.

Between the cleavage line and the shore there are usually stretches of rough hummocked ice that are impossible to skit unless the men travel great distances to do so. The thing they must do is to chop a trail so the umiaks on low sleds, pulled by teams of dogs or the men, could be transported to hunting locations on the edge of the lead.

At the junction of the trail from the village and the open

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water each crew launches its umiak, loads it, and paddles southward or northward and picks out its camping location, a site the captain thinks as a likely place.

These whaling camps might be from quarter of a mile to half a mile apart and stretch for several miles along the lead.

Strangely Exciting

The preparation for whaling has been made and now it is time for the strangely exciting, exhilarating moments of nervous tension, hopes for safety, and above all, hopes for a bountiful season.

Thus the mood of the whole village changed. The hunt was on. The people who must stay home in the village, women, children, old women, old men, nursed tensions, no less than their men who were actually on the hunt.

They hoped for their men's safety. This would come from the men's skill, courage, and their presence of mind under dangerous situations. They expected of their men all these qualities and fortunately they possessed them.

Preparations for the great whale hunt is one of the great chapters of survival of man in the Arctic.
