

UA Museum to Collect Native Objects in Use Today



UA MUSEUM TO COLLECT—Curator of Ethnology, Mrs. Dinah Thomas, will be collecting objects currently used by Alaska natives but which will be of historic value in the future. Dinah will be assisted by Pat Fitzgerald on the collection tour this summer in the northern Alaska area. Dinah is inspecting a baleen basket.

In 50 years material objects used by Alaskan natives today will be history and largely unobtainable.

Therefore, the University of Alaska is beginning now to collect objects currently used by the natives and to gather information on how the culture has evolved to its present state.

Five teams will be going to various parts of the state this summer and visiting some of the villages there.

Curator of ethnology at the museum, Mrs. Dinah Thomas will be going to the Northern Eskimo villages assisted by Pat Fitzgerald. Other areas to be visited are: Southwestern and southeastern Alaska, the Interior, and the Aleutian Islands.

The Alaskan Native peoples have always shown great skill and ingenuity in adapting Western goods to their own uses and surroundings and often have combined the new with the old to form an even better object, Mrs. Thomas said.

For example, she continued, the Eskimos on the Bering Sea still hunt whales with harpoons but instead of a point made out of bone, many now use steel points.

Other examples are skin scrapers made out of gun barrels, woven bags made out of plastic rope rather than grass, fish lures made out of parts of tooth brushes, and sewing done with dental floss instead of sinew.

The museum hopes to collect many of these objects and record their use this summer. It also wants to find out what traditions and old-time objects are still used today in the villages.

"We will be interested in objects the natives have taken from western culture and adapted to their own use," Mrs. Thomas said.

"We are interested in modern clothing, what they are wearing, and why."

"Why do older people wear mukluks and younger ones boots?"

"We want to find out what the people think about technology, which parts of it they consider good, and why," she added.

A lot of the information will be incorporated into exhibits which will probably not be completed for a couple of years, Mrs. Thomas said.

Funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities, the summer collection project will ultimately attempt to document the changes in material culture and to illustrate the use of new materials in traditional forms, the use of new objects in traditional methods, and the use of traditional materials in developing new approaches to traditional tasks.

In an effort to increase the urban man's understanding of the rural culture and to give the native new insight into his own way of life, the museum will attempt to reach people not only through museum exhibits at the university but also through traveling exhibits, special programs, brochures and films.