

# Gambell Festival—

## Whale Festival Exciting

By PAUL H. JENSEN

Rarely has an Arctic festival come to such an exciting finish as the getting of a whale at the end of the Gambell Whale Festival.

Chartered flights from the mainland and families on snow machines from Savoonga came to join in the festival which was initiated only a year ago by Bob McHenry, the Principal at the BIA School.

Anders Appassingok was Master of Ceremonies which included a detailed reenactment of an old whale ceremony, Old Raven, Walrus, and Polar bear dances were demonstrated to an awed crowd.

There were parka parades, tug-of-war contests, dog sled races, and snow machine races. The usual Eskimo dances were expertly and enthusiastically performed.

A surprise addition to the festival was an Eskimo dance by 26 children from Dallas, Oregon, who currently are living in Gambell. The Gambell people gave their approval with a thunderous applause.

A number of walrus hunters arrived. However, no one wants to hunt walrus while they hunt whale, because that might scare the whale or be offensive to the whale.

Monday morning, May 1, was a calm sunny day. There was early activity. By 8 a.m. most of the boats could be counted in the Bering Sea by their sails.

No outboard motors are used in whale hunting until a flag is raised to signify a catch.

At that moment all the boats lowered their sails, inserted the motor in the well, and sped to the aid of the lucky hunter.

When he reaches the whale he prepares to add a harpoon with an explosive head. There is no confusion. Everyone seems to know his place. The movements of the whale determines the number of harpoons.

When the whale ceased to move, 17 umiaks manned by 106 men moved close to the whale to receive fresh muktuk. It was a victory feast for empty stomachs. For three years this village has gone without a whale, so essential to the food supply and the economy of Gambell.

This village was really thankful to Stanley Oosevaseuk and to all the hunters who helped in getting the whale.

When news reached Gambell by walkie-talkie the people almost went wild with joy. The few boats left in the village rushed to the scene 12 miles out to help bring the 55 ton whale to the village.

and Ralph Apathiki had two  $\frac{3}{4}$  inch walrus skin ropes strung from the lead boat to the whale. Quickly, 17 boats lined up to attach their boats to the main line.

Beautiful team work was seen by all. The motors started and soon 17 boats like teams of horses began to pull the heavy load.

It was a memorable sight to see their boats and 106 men pull as one experienced team. There was joy and laughter. Five miles from the village a flare went up to celebrate the occasion.

But some young men used part of the five hour trip to get a nap knowing that they would spend many hours distributing great amounts of meat and muktuk to the more than 400 villagers.

As in a slaughter house in Oregon, experienced men immediately began to cut huge slabs of muktuk and meat, some pieces weighing as much as a thousand pounds. Some were loaded on sleds and hauled to the village less than half a mile away.

Muktuk is a delicacy among coastal Eskimos. It consists of an inch of black skin and half an inch of fat. This is usually considered a dessert. It is chewed much like chewing gum.

The fat with muktuk, however, is only a small amount of the 12 inches of fat all around the whale. All mammals in Northern climates have a layer of fat to protect themselves against subzero weather.

Even though school and all social activities ceased to function for the rest of the day, there was real learning taking place as the whale was being brought to shore.

The most interesting was the baleen, a fiber like material which serves as teeth and as sieve in the whales mouth. The whale lives mainly on plankton. The more than 600 baleen teeth are approximately 12 ft. long.

The Eskimos use them for making baleen baskets, small baleen boats, sleds and for decorations. Such items are sold to tourists for handsome amounts.

For Eskimos who are too proud to ask for welfare, such a whale is their economic salvation. Without the taking of whales, walrus, and seals the 33,000 Eskimos of Alaska would be on welfare.

For thousands of years the Eskimos have formed a balance of nature in this part of the world. They have made wise use of the few natural resources available to them.