

Barrow Whaling Crews Get 13

By ROGER McPHERSON

BARROW — As early as March, radio monitors placed by the Naval Arctic Research Laboratory at Point Barrow recorded whales passing. When the lead opened around April 20th, whaling for Barrow had begun. Nate Neakok's crew, after three unsuccessful years, caught the first whale — twenty-five feet in length.

On the stormy night of April 24th, crews were coming in from the lead; strong winds were blowing up waves, making the ice unsafe. Sadie Neakok, former Magistrate of Barrow, was in the Community Hall playing Bingo when word came in: The Neakok's had a whale!

Forgetting her purse in the excitement, Sadie rushed home. People filled the house and the flag she had sewn for her husband's crew was already up on the house-top.

When the meat and muktuk came in early the next morning, Sadie placed it in a big pot of boiling water, and served it up to a long line of people.

Much of this first whale is given away, and what is left is stored for the Nalakatak celebration in June, as well as for the Thanksgiving and Christmas feasts.

Arnold Brower's crew got the second whale on the 27th of April, and then three more whales were brought in the next day. School children spent their time out at the butchering sites; whole families rode out on the big freight sleds.

From Barrow, four miles of trail over one pressure ridge led to the open lead. Whaling conditions were ideal. Each promontory of ice had a whaling crew with skin boat, harpoons, white tent, and windbreak.

Early in May, Allen Kaleak's crew got the 6th whale. As they cleaned out their ice cellar, the men smiled over the large slabs of muktuk and whale meat.

This was only the first of two whales Allen Kaleak's crew would get. Robert Aiken's house had similar piles of meat in the front yard. "Sleepless nights" was how old Eskimos of Barrow called this time of year.

When the successful crew got a whale, the captain's house (or another house large enough for all the guests) had a flag placed on its roof.

For a full day following the catch, the village could visit and taste boiled fresh muktuk, have tea, crackers, and stewed fruit. If a guest wanted, he could fill a plastic bag for other relatives.

The women would make many dishes for their families to eat: muktuk boiled, pickled, or fried; whale meat fermented or boiled many times in fresh water.

Because of the expenses and and time involved in whaling, some hunters prefer to skip whaling and prepare for geese hunting and summer fish camps.

John Nusunginya mentioned the high cost of maintaining a whaling crew out on the ice for a month and a half. For him, fall whaling in open boats offered quicker kills and less cost.

After losing many dart bombs, Ralph Aveonna's crew got the 9th whale May 7th. As the men cut up the thirty foot whale, several hundred villagers, came out to help.

A few yards east of Ralph's whale was the Neakok camp, and west was Robert Aiken's camp. Whale ribs and the red stains in the ice were all that remained of the first whales caught.

On the same day, Allen Kaleak got his second whale. A

north-east wind came, blowing up heavy seas and making ice break off. Harold Itta's crew killed a whale the night of May 8th, but only saved half when the ice pack started to come in.