

Arctic Survival—

Whale Caused Eskimo Helmsman to Steer Umiak in Air

(Reprinted from Tundra Times April 1, 1963)
By HOWARD ROCK
Times Editor

"If it hadn't been for the fact that we were being taken under by the whale, I would have laughed out loud," said my father laughing and recalling the incident that happened many years ago that involved my Uncle Nayukuk.

Somewhat Lazy

As I have told in an earlier article, my uncle Nayukuk was a reticent man. He attempted to make life as easy as possible for himself. Being somewhat lazy helped him along, dubious as that may seem, although his wife, my Aunt Maumangeena, gave him little peace. She wanted him to be like other hunters who went out every day, weather and hunting conditions permitting.

Uncle Nayukuk seemed to have built a shell around himself. He took nagging and malicious kidding in a casual manner and never allowed such things to anger him; that is, if he was at all capable of getting angry.

When his wife became vehement on his lack of initiative, Uncle Nayukuk would hunt. When he brought results, there would be peace in the little household. It is not entirely impossible to assume that if he brought home game it would make it tolerable for him to languish a few days and enjoy the luxury of inactivity.

Unsuspected Ability

Uncle Nayukuk was like a different man when whaling season approached. It was hard to tell, of course, the reason for this, but I like to think he relished the hunt with some measure of danger in it. As he proved conclusively, Uncle Nayukuk was a fearless man under dangerous situations.

Perhaps wrongly, I always thought Uncle Nayukuk was not too bright. I was puzzled why my father picked him to be the helmsman of his whaling crew, since being one was a decided position of responsibility as to the safety of the entire crew. My estimation of uncle's intelligence was totally discredited by my father who had explicit trust in Nayukuk's ability by insisting that he was to be the helmsman.

Precision

The approach of the whale for the strike had to be an operation of precision, and the man, responsible for the proper execution of it was the helmsman. The angle of the umiak in relation to the position of the whale was of prime importance. To err meant dire danger to the whaling crew.

At the same time the helmsman had to place the bow of the umiak at a most advantageous position for the harpooner to strike the whale. The helmsman had to have thorough knowledge of the whale's behavior under attack and conduct the maneuver accordingly.

Sighted Whale

One morning around 4:30

the watchman of my father's crew quickly awakened the men who were sleeping in their winter clothes so they could go into action at once. I had been sleeping in the cook tent and was blissfully unaware of what was going on.

The watchman had sighted a whale, a huge one, that had surfaced about a quarter of a mile away. The crew ran to the umiak. My father took his accustomed position as the harpooner at the bow. The rest of the six men took their assigned positions in the boat with Uncle Nayukuk at the stern as the helmsman.

Fine Judgment

The chase was on and the men paddled powerfully with Uncle Nayukuk heading the prow of the umiak where he estimated they would finally take a position directly on the wake and behind the submerged whale.

As usual, Nayukuk's estimate was almost accurate. The whale surfaced within easy overtaking distance. (Whales surface 3 or 4 times in a series to breathe and then sound and swim submerged for a mile or more before surfacing again.)

Fine Maneuver

This was the moment the crew commenced to bear down on their paddles in unison paced by the harpooner in a powerful effort to overtake the whale. Extreme care was taken by the men not to touch the gunwhale, or any part of the umiak with their paddles, because that would make a drumming noise easily heard by the keen-eared mammal and frighten him away.

Nayukuk expertly maneuvered the umiak to the right side of the whale. My father preferred that side which he considered advantageous when he struck at his favorite target, the spot just behind the eye, or the temple, where the bone was thin.

A moment before the strike Uncle Nayukuk placed the craft to that precise area. The position of the umiak was at around a 45 degree angle in relation to the nose and flukes position of the whale.

Monstrous Whale

As was mentioned earlier, this particular whale was of monstrous size. My father struck and hit the mark, as they discovered later, but the fuse bomb turned out to be a dud. The point penetrated the bone but that was all.

(The fuse bomb is fired into the target with a powder charge. The Eskimos acquired the weapons, darting gun and shoulder gun, from professional whalers back in the 1880's. Before that time, they used whale harpoons and the targets were usually the kidneys or wherever internal bleeding resulted. They shied away from the heart because that target made the animal react with great violence.)

The Strike

At the moment of the strike the great whale bumped its monstrous back and the mountain

of black protruded from the water as the whale sounded in a swirling mass of foam. It then whipped out its massive flukes in a great kick to dive into the sea.

At the impact of the strike the crew backed off a distance as the heavy hemp harpoon line at the bow began to uncoil and whip around with dizzying speed as the whale sounded.

Unexpected Snag

Then it happened! the whipping line caught at the bowsprit and the umiak suddenly darted forward under the unplanned tow of the submerging whale. The tension and the speed increased as the whale sounded deeper and deeper.

All of this happened in seconds, but to the men in the umiak it seemed an eternity. At once my father started to tug to free it but the snag wedged so tightly it was impossible. As he frantically worked the rushing water started to stream into the umiak. The fury and power of the diving whale was taking the boat under with it!

Unforgettable Picture

My father whipped his hand around to his right hip to pull out his knife so he could cut the rope and as he did so he took a momentary glance back at the stern. What he saw was an unforgettable picture. Father took particular relish of telling of the incident years afterwards and it never failed to make him and his listeners laugh.

He related: "When I glanced back, the stern of the umiak was clear off the water, quite high, and as we were speeding forward by our bow and yawing, there was Nayukuk frantically trying to reach the water with his paddle!"

"In spite of the gravity of the situation the spectacle I saw was one of the most comical I have ever known. I would have laughed out loud then, but at that moment we were being taken under by the whale."

Freed Unceremoniously

Just as father was about to cut the rope with his knife a loud snap sounded followed by a deafening explosion an instant later.

The bowsprit had broken, freeing the snagged rope and the second report was caused by an exploding-inflated sealskin float that was whipped against the water with such force that it burst.

At the moment the bowsprit broke, the stern of the umiak fell back down on the water with a resounding slap of the flat bottom of the umiak and the man that was shaken up badly was Uncle Nayukuk who took the shock on his rear section being the farthest man back.

A minute or so later, after my father and his men collected their wits about them, they set out in pursuit of the wounded whale. By that time other whaling crews had seen the action of my father's crew and came on to help.

Whale Taken

The great animal was subdued finally. As it turned turtle, a great shout arose from the combined voices of five whaling crews that assembled at the capture.

Many sealskin floats were attached to the dead whale to keep it afloat and the slow job of towing began. The men sang and shouted as they paddled hard toward the anchored shore ice. Ahead of them lay two or more days and nights of hard work required to cut up a giant whale.

Ancient Custom

According to custom handed down through the ages, the whale was awarded to the captain of the crew that first struck it whether that crew was present at the kill or not. In this case my father struck the animal and he and his crew were actively participating at the end.

During the cutting, my father's fuse bomb was found and he had planted it right on the target, on the thin bone on the temple. Had the bomb exploded it would have stopped the huge whale instantly.

One of Largest

When the baleen, or whale-

BLM

Land Issues

Q: What is the first thing I must do to acquire a homestead in Alaska?

A: We suggest you first visit one of the BLM Land Offices to determine the status of public lands in general. Then obtain a topographic map of the area in which you are interested from the U.S. Geological Survey and bring it to the Land Office to match with our maps and determine what claims already exist on the lands.

Then, you must personally go to the site you wish to obtain and carefully examine the area on the ground. Establishing occupancy is next with the staking of the four corners of the site (up to 160 acres) and making improvements upon the land.

Within 90 days of entering on the land, you must 1) file a notice of settlement in the Land Office and 2) post a copy of the notice on the land. This notice should include the date of settlement and the act under which you are claiming the land.

The notice must also contain a metes and bounds description of the tract claimed which consists of a definite starting point and continues with directions and distances around the tract back to the point of beginning.

This point of beginning must be described in relation to natural features such as rivers and mountains. If the land has been surveyed, you should give the location of the survey markers.

A \$10 fee is required for filing a homestead settlement claim.

(Questions may be submitted to BLM Land Issues (912) 555 Cordova Street, Anchorage, Alaska 99501.)

LEGAL NOTICE

INVITATION FOR BIDS
STATE OF ALASKA
DEPARTMENT OF HIGHWAYS
Sealed bids in single copy for furnishing all labor, materials and equipment, and performing all work on Project S-0680(23) and G-20062, Minto Road and Local Service Road described herein, will be received until 2:00 p.m. prevailing time, April 25, 1974 in the Commissioner's Office, Department of Highways, Island Center Building, Douglas, Alaska.

This project will consist of grading and drainage on 11.8 miles of roadway near Minto, Alaska. Minto is located approximately 110 miles northwesterly of Fairbanks, Alaska.

Principal items of work consist of the following: 497,400 cubic yards of unclassified excavation; 83,000 cubic yards of borrow; 3,500 cubic yards of structure excavation; 3,300 linear feet of 24" pipe conduit; 3,300 linear feet of beam type guard rail; 3,300 cubic yards of rip-rap, class 1A; 109 square feet of standard signs; 840,000 square feet of seeding; and miscellaneous items of work.

All work shall be completed in 184 calendar days.
Plans and specifications may be obtained by all who have a bona fide need for them for bidding purposes from the Chief Road Design Engineer, P.O. Box 1467, Juneau, Alaska 99801 at a charge of \$10.00 for each assembly. Plans may be examined at Department of Highway Offices in Anchorage, Fairbanks, Valdez.

B.A. Campbell
Commissioner of Highways
Pub.: April 3 & 10, 1974

bone, was measured the longest of them was found to be 12 and one-half feet in length, one of the largest whales ever taken in the history of the village.

Other whales were taken that season and the population rejoiced upon their good fortune and impatiently waited for the "kahruq," the whaling celebration, an ancient custom performed when the season is over.

Feat Told, Retold

From the time the whaling season was over that year, the harrowing experience of my father and his crew became one of the most talked about events of the ancient village. It went on like that for years afterwards.

It was told and retold by the members of the crew, and, of course, my father although he and his men had no intention of belittling Uncle Nayukuk. They and many other men in the village had respect of his ability as a helmsman.

Butt of Joke

It was the ordinary, the general run of people of the village, unjustly I thought, that made him the butt of the joke as the "man who steered the umiak in the air."

If Uncle Nayukuk thought that he had been wronged he never made any attempt to right it. He kept right on living his own way of life seemingly unaware of the slighting remarks.

Perhaps, somehow, he knew that he would someday vindicate himself by doing a most prodigious performance that was ever done by any man in his village.

HELP WANTED

HELP WANTED

VILLAGE ADMINISTRATOR. Required by Atkasook Inc. Must be able to obtain sources of information pertaining to administer profit Arm of Regional Corporation. Responsible to newly-created Atkasook Inc. Starting salary \$15,000 per year or depends on experience. Send complete resume to Atkasook Corp. Box 591, Barrow, Alaska 99723.

HELP WANTED

Northern Commercial Company Department Store, 603 D Street, Anchorage, Alaska. Interviewing for part-time positions. Please call or stop by for an interview. Mention this advertisement when calling. We are an equal opportunity employer.

HELP WANTED

JOB OPENING
Applications are now being received for the FY-75 principal's position at the Noorvik State-Operated School. Requirements are: 1) A valid Alaskan teaching certificate, 2) Four years "bus" teaching experience, 3) Administrative credential required, 4) Administrative experience preferred. An interview will be required. Applications should be sent to either: Regional Superintendent Alaska State-Operated Schools P.O. Box 1088 Nome, Alaska 99762 Or Director Personnel Alaska State-Operated Schools 650 International Airport Rd. Anchorage, Alaska 99502 Deadline for submitting application is April 19, 1974.

HELP WANTED

The Tanana Chiefs Conference, Inc. announces the opening for the position of

Executive Director
Degree in administration or related field and/or equivalent work experience. Knowledge of rural health and educational delivery systems helpful. Knowledge of federal and state contractual procedures. Knowledge of Alaskan Native issues. Ability to coordinate and direct staff members in five separate locations.

The above criteria will be utilized in consideration of applicants. The job offers a demanding and exciting future. Please submit applications (State form) and resume to: Melvin Charlie, President Tanana Chiefs Conference, Inc. 102 Lacey Street Fairbanks, Alaska 99701 Ph: 52-1746

Application deadline 5 p.m., April 15, 1974. Salary depends on experience.

Record Whitefish

The apparent North American record Broad whitefish, weighing in at a whopping 16 pounds 13 oz., was collected from Minto Flats in Interior Alaska during the summer of 1973 by a Department of Fish and Game field crew during the normal course of their fishery investigations.

Since this fish was not caught on sport fish gear, it is not eligible for trophy fish designation, however, it is apparently the largest whitefish ever reported

in North America.

The Broad whitefish, Coregonus nasus, is found in Eurasia and North America north of approximately 60°N latitude and is utilized mainly for local consumption. It is renowned for its delicate flavor.

The record fish is presently being preserved and will be on display later this year at the Department of Fish and Game building, 1300 College Road in Fairbanks.