

Editorial—

The Fine Coverage of Whaling Celebration

Jane Pender, special correspondent for the Anchorage Daily News, covered the ancient whaling celebration on June 7-9 at Point Hope. In our estimation, Pender's observations touched the soul level of the ages-old rite and in doing so, brought out some of the stirring intents, values and reasons of the annual event.

The culture of the old, old village of Point Hope revolves around the yearly whale hunting event that occurs from around the middle of April to about the last week in May. That is the time of year the great bowhead whales migrate toward their breeding grounds in the remote northern seas of Arctic Canada.

The tradition of whale hunting at Point Hope and other whaling communities, such as Barrow, St. Lawrence Island, and to lesser degrees in other areas, must have a fearsome beginning in centuries past when the whalers of those times used nothing but hand harpoons. No explosives were involved. Nothing but raw courage and stamina prevailed in the trial and error process of learning to hunt the great mammal.

There are families living today at Point Hope whose direct bloodline ancestors six generations ago died in the pursuit of the whale. Grandfathers and grandmothers of some of the old people today at the village witnessed some of these tragedies. They will tell you that fatal accidents were caused by freak reactions of the whales when harpooned because the whalers then already knew the proper procedures of whale hunting.

The whale hunt is also exciting—challenging. It requires precise timing—requires precise angles of approach to avoid known areas of danger at the moment the whale is struck. There are deep-throated cries of triumph when the whale turns turtle. There are thrills in the chase that culminates in the strike that succeeds. There are narrow escapes and deep disappointments. In the village at home, there are anxieties that border on fear and concern of the wives, children and the very old for the safety of the whalers. There are also shrill cries of elation and happiness by the women—even tears—at the overpowering news a whale has been taken.

The whaling celebration at Point Hope is the culmination of human experiences. It is at once a tribute to the nerve and guts of the ancient whalers; the death of those who died in the pursuit. Its meaning is life-giving food. It contains the moments of high elation and the triumph over one of the great animals of the world.

The Qaqrulik (Whaling Celebration) has the ingredients of esthetic values woven into it from deeply felt adventures of man. With proper approach, the true sense of its values can be felt not unlike those experienced at viewing a great work of art or hearing a great symphony.

Jane Pender touched, and experienced, some of the true values of the whaling celebration at Point Hope.