

Northern Natives Have Learned to Live with Elements

(Reprinted from Tundra Times
October 21, 1963)

By HOWARD ROCK
Times Editor

The great storm that staggered Barrow on October 3, happened so suddenly that even the weather bureau did not have an idea that it was coming. There was no warning, which meant, the people of Barrow had to do some quick thinking to save themselves during the onslaught. This they did amazingly well.

No lives were lost in the savage winter storm that lashed the town with huge waves driven by a 80-mile wind. Huge chunks of sea ice were hurled ashore and they swirled around among the houses as the storm flooded the town.

The wind hit a pile of sheet metal and they took off like kites. One of them slammed into Lawrence Ahmouak and knocked him unconscious. Luckily, the metal hit him apparently with its surface. He was the only casualty among some 1,350 people living in Barrow. A small percentage of this number represent white people.

Houses, Float Planes Took Off

Houses were freed of their foundations by heavy waves and they floated around in the streets. Two of them crashed into the guy wires of a 200 foot radio tower and it fell to the ground.

Four light planes that were parked near the village took off when the sudden gale hit them. Two of them are not accounted for and no one knew how far or where they had gone.

Fuel Lost

The most serious loss Barrow suffered was the loss of fuel oil. About 1,000 barrels were lost when the waves crashed into piles of drums and scattered them helter skelter. Some of them washed out to sea. The Native Store alone lost about 700 barrels.

Huge oil tanks were ruptured by the force of the waves and they spewed their contents into the streets and into a fresh water lake used by Barrow for water.

When the storm abated, about 200 Eskimos were left homeless. Except for three families that

were housed in a church, all of the storm victims were quickly taken in by relatives and friends.

It was amazing and miraculous that no lives were lost in a storm of that magnitude at Barrow. It brought to mind the fact the Eskimos have long faced many and terrible dangers during the span of time in their survival in the Arctic.

Second Nature

During the ages past, survival in the north was the first order of the day with the Eskimos. The constant pressure on survival had gone on for so long that it seemed to have become a second nature to the people of the Arctic. Time had sharpened their senses to cope with dangers with a rare gift of presence of mind under difficult pressures of stress.

This was the first requirement to meet the many dangers the Arctic presented. These dangers represented the Arctic's treachery, the unexpected, the lurking and the sudden. With highly developed sense of perception, they learned to recognize them with knowledge they had painfully gained through the ages.

Panic Dangerous

The main tool of combat against the Arctic dangers seemed to have been the difficult manner of meeting them without panic. They had found out long ago that to panic was a dangerous thing. Panic was a condition where the victim lost his reasoning and that was when he became a prime target for disaster to overtake him. In the Arctic, to allow panic to overcome one was asking for disaster. The north country gave no quarter once it saw an opening.

Unnecessary Chances

Another important aid to survival was the importance of not taking unnecessary chances. In the village of Point Hope, this was frowned upon by village elders who, as their ancestors did before them, saw it as a definite threat to life and limb. Hunters, especially younger ones, were constantly reminded not to over-extend their daring.

Strange Tragedy

The advice of the elders did not always succeed as will be shown in the following example - a strange and unexplained incident that happened at Point

Hope in northwestern Alaska, 130 miles within the Arctic Circle.

In the memory of this writer was a first cousin, Timothy Oomittuk and another man, James Nashookpuk, who shared in the bazaar tragedy. Both men had notorious reputations of taking unnecessary chances.

Timothy was not an easy man to figure out. Why he went to the extent of taking dangerous risks was not known. He apparently did not fear for his life. He seemed bent to test his daring against the varied pitfalls of the Arctic. He apparently took strange delight in cheating it, but in the long run he came out second best.

Fine Man

Timothy Oomittuk had a personality that was contagious. He was liked by everyone in the village. If he had any sadness in his life he didn't show it. To be around him was to have a great time and to laugh. His home life seemed happy with a fine looking wife and four children.

His elders, who had learned to take a great liking for him, gave him paternal advice not to take unnecessary risks. He took these with smiles and light-heartedness.

Carried Out to Sea

One day, he was carried out to sea. He crossed the wide lead by using a cake of ice as a raft using his icepick rod as a paddle. A few years later, he was again carried out but had to use every strength he had to get back.

A quite strong breeze had come up and he paddled his ice raft on an angle to the wind and finally made it in what seemed an eternity.

Insurable

The two near tragedies apparently did not cure him. When he was reminded of them he laughed them off. He continued to hunt in his usual manner. Such apparent unconcern led his leaders to say sadly, "There will come a day when Timothy will not return."

Out on the ice one day, in the presence of another hunter, Timothy Oomittuk noticed a likely spot to hunt and he said, "I want to get over there and see. There might be some seals

there."

"It's too dangerous. You shouldn't try it. The ice is too thin," said his companion.

Timothy smiled and stepped on the ice. The distance between firm and solid ice was around 75 yards. He crossed it and went beyond for some time but didn't get anything. To get back, he had to cross the same thin ice. Each step caused it to undulate under his weight. With apparent elation he said, "That was exciting!"

Brash Man

James Nashookpuk was a man of different personality than Timothy Oomittuk. He was heavily built man and was known as one of the strongest men in the village. He was brash to the point of being a braggart. He was one of the rare individuals who openly antagonized his elders. He thought those who gave advice were cowardly and meek. When he hunted he broke every safety rule of his people.

One cold day while hunting, he fell through thin ice and managed to get out on solid ice. He made a dash to the village, his clothes frozen and his limbs were on the point of freezing when he arrived. A man of lesser strength would not have made it. In telling about it later he guffawed as he did so.

Gainful Returns

Because of their daring, the two hunters were better than average. They took many seals, oogrucks, belugas, walrus, caribou and many polar bears. They were hunting all the time. Inclement weather did not stop them. When hunters stayed home because of adverse conditions, they were out roaming the ice.

The Fatal Day

One day in the latter part of November, the two men went hunting. Each went in a different direction. The day was anything but perfect. There was a stiff breeze blowing from southeast and a steady snow-fall was coming down. The sky was gray and forbidding.

According to Helen and Chester Seveck of Point Hope and Kotzebue, the great fields of ice were in the process of forming a solid shield around the land. Cleavage, or lead lines, were not yet permanently set. That meant no one knew just where a lead might open. It meant also that there were many patches of open water that froze or in the process of freezing in the lowering temperatures.

"They went hunting in two different directions and at different times. Some people wonder whether they met out there on the ice but that doesn't seem likely," said Helen and Chester.

No Trace

When evening came, Timothy Oomittuk and James Nashookpuk failed to return. Early the next day, the hunters of the village went out to look for them. They fanned out in all directions looking for tracks but the snow had covered them wherever they were. When each of the hunters came home that evening, they had not seen any sign of the missing men. They had disappeared without a trace.

It was presumed that each of the men may have attempted to cross over thin ice to make shortcuts and had fallen through. The Arctic had claimed two men of different personalities but who had one thing in common. They defied nature in the north.

Another irony in connection with the two men - each of them left four children with

their widows. Except for one of Timothy Oomittuk's daughters, they are still married and have many children today.

Dangerous Indifference

And so men lived in the Arctic. Most listened faithfully to their elders and usually lived a full span of life. Few other, unfortunately, thought they knew better than the older men and they paid high for their indifference - the loss of their lives.

A nervy man was much admired by the Eskimos but if he used it foolishly, he became something of a man marked with doom. It was just a matter of time if he persisted. The Arctic, its nature the way it was, and is, never relaxed its pressure. It forever looked for weaknesses and once seeing an opening it struck viciously and mercilessly.

Intensive Studies

Through passage of time, the Eskimos had learned to respect the grim surroundings under which they live. They had come to regard the Arctic with something akin to a being they had to understand. They learned and largely figured out the moods of the country. They studied its calm winds, gales and their effects on land and sea. They studied movements of the icefields; studied what winds and from what direction affected them. They studied formations of clouds before setting out to hunt and they could tell with amazing accuracy what kind of a day it would be.

They studied the animals, their habits and the areas they frequent. This was a great requirement. They had to know the behavioral pattern of every animal they hunt for livelihood. They had found that the only way to live with the Arctic was to know it from every angle - its behavior under certain conditions. In doing so, they learned to cheat the many perils it dealt out from its many-sided and dangerous nature.

Yields Secrets

And so down through centuries the inhospitable Arctic had grudgingly yielded its secrets to the Eskimos who used them against it to survive. Even with the best knowledge they had garnered from the Arctic, the people still had to deal with one of its dangerous facets - its unpredictability.

Such was the sudden upheaval of the recent vicious storm that did great damage at Barrow. It was a freak storm. It had to be dealt with quick thinking and without panic. There were no fatalities. It could have proven otherwise because the storm erupted without warning. It was a storm with a murderous intent and it came in a cold, freezing weather.

Heroic Behavior

The people of Barrow, both white and its predominantly Eskimo population, should be commended for their heroic behavior under the deadly onslaught of the vicious winter storm.

It was a classic example of survival of man in the Arctic.