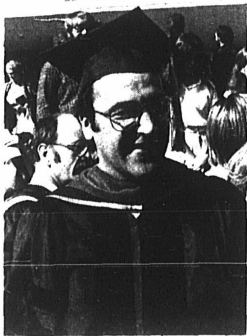


Retired whaling captain Vincent Nageak, 76, of Barrow reminisces on whaling days gone by. See related story, page 5.

Andy Klamser photo.





Old ways still valuable

BARROW—Captain Vincent Nageak may be 76 years old and retired—but he's not out of the mainstream of the whaling community.

The Barrow Eskimo's knowledge on whaling techniques is still sought after and reflections of his life-long occupation are in evidence in all his recollections. His house in the center of Barrow is a reminiscent clutter of whaling and hunting artifacts.

His old equipment is now being used by the Robert Aiken crew. Several of his men are still whaling the treacherous waters off Point Barrow.

Times have changed, of course. He recalls when they used to pull their boats and sleds out onto the ice by hand—minus the ever-reliable snow machine.

And, when he whaled, they didn't use tents, either. "I always knew the snow would come and cover me up and keep me warm." Many times he and his crew would be on the ice up to three months at a time. "We never slept much when the whales came."

He was only 12 or 13 when he was allowed to take his first shot with the big brass whale gun. The first whale he shot sank and got away.

That's all in the past now, though.

He relishes his retirement, but says his eyesight is going. He has only one good eye; his right eye was blinded "a long time ago" when he was a government surveyor; a rock kicked up on the trail and blinded him.

His whaling and hunting days also left another mark on him. When he was quite young, Nageak killed a polar bear. While skinning and cleaning it, the blade of his knife scratched the bear's highly toxic liver. Unknowingly, he licked the blade, and according to Nageak, his hair and skin turned a pale white.

But Nageak doesn't live just with the memories of a long and fruitful livelihood. His advice and knowledge are still invaluable to the younger generations following his path.

Photos by Andy Klamser

