

# Whaling festivals

*Editor's Note: Already, the bowheads are heading north, following the receding ice pack. The St. Lawrence Island villages of Savoonga and Gambell have each landed one whale so far this season, the first under management of the International Whaling Commission. This year's hunt is also being carefully monitored by the Alaskan Eskimo Whaling Commission. The Federal Gov-*

**BY IRVING UNGUDRUK**

Nalukatak. A day of joy and celebration. A day in June to commemorate a successful whaling season. At the traditional place in the village, the

men lay out a walrus skin. Actually, it is several skins sewn together. A stout rope is looped around the skin. Four anchors are dug to hold ropes to the four corners of the skin, crossed poles on the ropes lift it to about four feet. The ropes are tightened, stretching the skin. Three umiat are placed end to end, are tipped on their sides as windbreaks for the people. The flags of the successful whaling captains are raised on poles next to the boats.

While the villagers are assembling, the children climb on the skin, jump on it, playing. In front of the center umiak, several men sit on reindeer skins, singing and beating their drums slowly. They will provide the singing for the first part of the festivities. When everything is ready, the young people take places around the skin, one hand grasps the rope handles, the free arm is around the next person. Everybody is wearing new cloth parkas and new summer boots. It is a big day.

The young people move the skin up and down, testing it. It is just right. The tension on the

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# ● Annual Inupiat whaling festivals

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ropes makes it fine and bouncy. One at a time, a few of the young people get on and are tossed into the air. Some manage to stay on their feet a few times, they soon lose their balance and fall. A pretty and popular young woman is helped onto the skin. Everyone knows she is one of the best in this game. After two small tosses, the young people pull hard on the skin, sending the girl high in the air. Her new parka is so colorful in the sunlight as she goes up. She moves her legs like she is running through the air. She looks straight ahead. She easily lands on her feet, is immediately thrown up again. The people are pleased with her performance, those around the skin are cheering as they begin to put real effort into sending her higher with each toss; she keeps landing on her feet. The skin is making a rhythmic sound. The people say to each other, this is the way

skin tossing should be done. She is so good, when she lands on the skin, it is almost at the same spot each time. Finally, the girl says that is enough, she is let off.

(Following this day, the younger girls of the village will practice earnestly on the teeter totter boards they will put up.)

More of the people try their skill on the skin. Anyone who wants to try is given a chance, as this is the only day a skin like this is set up.

The young people make way for an older man. He was very good at the skin in his youth. Today, he will put on a show for the people. He is up there pretending to be very scared. His knees shake, his eyes roll, and he seems to be having a lot of trouble staying on his feet. He is tossed in the air, hollering and frantically waving his arms. He comes down flat on his back, but is immediately thrown again. Some of the young people are giving advice

to him. It is all good natured banter, of course. Sometimes it looks like he is going to fall on his head, however he knows how to fall without getting hurt. A couple of times, he shows some of his old ability and stays on his feet. At the top of one high toss, he pretends to see something way out over the ice, shades his eyes. Some of the people look that way too, without thinking. They are laughing so hard, the tears are flowing from their eyes. His fake clumsiness is so cleverly done. He is let off to much laughter and cheering.

As expected, a young man is on the skin. He is an all around athlete, a good runner, good high kicker, good everything. All can see him up there, his new parka brightly trimmed. His pants are tucked into new black and white summer boots. His mother has spent many hours creating those intricate designs on the bottom of his parka, and on the top of his boots. A hush falls over the people, expectation is in the air. The singers sit up straighter, rub their drums with water to make them more resonant. The young people toss him into the air, he lands solidly and confidently on the skin, which gives a loud thump. The singers are into a new song and the drum beat is steady. The next high toss, the young man slowly and expertly turns a somersault and lands on his feet. Thump. He calls for an inflated seal skin float, one that had been used during the whaling season. He takes hold of the ends, his hands are about three feet apart. He is tossed in the air, while holding the float. At the top, he pulls his knees close to his chest, the float is behind him when he lands. He is still holding on to it with both hands. A few more times he uses the float like a jumping rope, passing it completely around his body before coming down on the skin. The cheering is loud and unrestrained. When he is finished, the skin is taken down and spread in

front of the singers.

It is time to eat. The women have brought their best specialties. The whale flukes that were saved for this occasion have been sliced, cut to the proper size, placed in tubs and large pots. These are brought to the skin along with all the other food. One of the elders of the church stands before the food, asks the blessing. He thanks God for the bountiful supply of food. The families are sitting together, and as the youngest whalers come around carrying the pots of flukes, one of them asks the mother how many in her family. She tells them the number, she also counts the baby asleep inside her parka. The young men reach in the pot, put the right numbers of pieces in the pan in front of the mother. After the people have eaten, there is a break. This is to allow the families to take the left over food to their homes. If the family is large, and there was more than one whale caught, there is quite a lot to take home.

When the villagers assemble again, it is time for the dance. The best singers now sit in front of the center umiak. Women with good voices seat themselves behind the men. They sit on low sleds. The walrus skin has been cleared and swept. Some of the people have composed songs for this day. Many of these will be memorized, sung today and at other celebrations. At first, the singing and the drums are low, as the singers learn the new songs. Then, there is a change in the singing. It is the song of the whaling captain, the one who caught the first whale that spring. He goes to the skin, followed by his wife and his whaling crew. Each song is sung twice, the first time slowly with soft drums, there is a slight pause. BOOM, the singers straighten their drums, the beat is steady, insistent. The women's high voices join in the song. The captain and his crew are whooping as they dance. The woman dances

in one spot, eyes toward the ground, as is proper. The men dance vigorously and joyously, they dance around the woman, they stamp one foot in perfect time with the drums. When this first group is finished, they are replaced by the second whaling captain, his wife and crew. A different song is sung for each group. After the successful whalers have danced, general dancing follows. As it was in the skin toss, there are good dancers, and there are those who need more practice. There are special dances, like two or three women dance together, each one making the same motions as her partners. There are children's dances. There are dances where the song leader will call out two or three words of the song, to be repeated in song by the singers, all through the dance.

A man walks to the skin, announces he will attempt to dance like someone else, one who has executed a perfect dance earlier. He asked for the same song to be used. At the first slow part of the song, he slowly and dramatically puts on his gloves, while lightly stamping first one foot, then the other. He does not look at the man he will imitate, instead he is looking at the sky, as if he is trying to remember how the dance was made. Boom. He is doing the same dance, but in a comical way. It is hilarious. The people begin to laugh, it is so unexpected, some of them glance at the man being imitated, they can see he is laughing harder than anyone else.

Late in the evening, the dance is over, the people start for their homes. For several days, even weeks, they will discuss the celebration, as they recall how a certain person danced, or how another was tossed on the skin.

This is the Nalukatak, as it has been celebrated for many, many years.

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BLANKET TOSS