

Arctic Survival—

Big Wind Blew Down Kukpuk River Upsetting Sled

Reprinted from Tundra Times
January 6, 1964

"You flew off the sled and I had to run after you. And, son, you didn't even cry," recalled my father, Weyahok.

He told me this in 1948 when I came home to visit them from the State of Washington. We had been visiting my mother Keshorna, father and I, in the comfort of seeing one another once again. Suddenly, Keshorna began to laugh.

"What's so funny now?" asked father.

"I just thought of the time when you were chasing your son on the ice on the Kukpuk River," mother chortled.

Weyahok broke into laughter and said, "That's one incident I will never forget."

When Keshorna suddenly brought it up, I, at once, recalled the event even though I was very young at the time it happened.

"You were four and a half years old at that time, son," mother said.

About three weeks before the trip, Weyahok had said one evening that he would like to go on a wolverine hunt for ruffs for the family's parkas. The Eskimos considered wolverine and wolf ruffs a great necessity because they were of great importance in the protection of the face in cold weather.

Wolverine and wolf furs had played a great role in the survival of men in the Arctic. A parka without ruff offered little protection against frostbite. Their worth to the Eskimos have been great.

The worth of the wolf and wolverine furs was not confined to their usefulness alone. They were sought after for adornment purposes — the enhancement they provided to the beauty of the parka. For decorative purposes they sought prime furs.

Outside of their usefulness, such furs were considered luxury items. A woman with a fine wolverine and wolf ruff was looked upon somewhat like a white woman who owned a fine mink coat.

They were also sought after

by young unmarried women. They begged and cajoled their parents for them so they may present themselves attractively to the young unmarried men.

So wolf and wolverine furs had definite romantic beginnings with the ancient Eskimos. They were, and are, worn on special occasions such as whaling celebrations and Christmas.

The Trip Begins

The writer does not remember what provisions were made to care for my brothers and sisters, but Kaipuk, my oldest sister had something to do with taking care of my older brother, Eebrulik and older sister, Akniachak. It seemed that Aunt Mumangeena was to care for my three-year-old brother, Kakairnok. Mother nursed and carried my youngest brother, Rupert, who was about a year old, on her back. My parents had taken me along because I tended to be a sickly child.

We had gotten up very early that morning of the trip. My father loaded the sled with our provisions and hitched the dogs with the help of my oldest brother.

The early morning was fine and about five below zero. It was a nice day for travel. We were on the way to a trapping camp 37 miles southeast of Point Hope. Since the ocean shore ice had not yet firmly set and was rough, father decided to travel up the Kukpuk River and then portage through the valley of two hills. The wind from the west was calm.

We traveled east to the mouth of the Kukpuk. The trail was good.

"We made good time all the way to the grayling fishing grounds on the Kukpuk," recalled father, "We reached it about 2 o'clock in the afternoon."

The traditional fishing camp was 25 miles away from Point Hope.

We were driving a 9-dog team. The sled was heavily loaded with our provisions and dog food. I rode on top of the load just front of my father at the handle bars. Mother walked and rode by

turns.

Nikka, our fine leader, was doing a wonderful job of leading the team as usual. He was the pet of the family. He was a huge black malamute. The only white spot on him was on his left paw. He was a powerful dog and he was my special friend.

When we reached the fishing grounds we stopped to eat. Mother took out our primus stove and took it into one of the small sod igloos and made some hot tea. She had made bread the day before. She took one loaf for part of our meal but it had frozen solid. Father had to break it to pieces with an axe.

We ate quickly and got under way. Father was anxious to reach the camp because the hardest part of the trip would be when we had to portage on a long gradual climb.

About an hour after we left the fishing grounds the wind shifted from west to east.

"This does not look good," father said to mother.

"Nahka," ("No") she answered "We better try to hurry."

Father began to encourage the dogs and they responded with a half gallop. Occasionally, Nikka would look back to us and yip.

"Tuvra, Nikka owlaqiin!" ("Alright, Nikka, get going!") I heard myself saying to my pal, the leader.

I could hear my father chuckle as soon as I said it.

"That is very good, son," said mother briefly putting her arm around me.

When Nikka heard my voice he responded with a powerful lunge and yips. The rest of the dogs followed and the team broke into a gallop. The leader's response gave me a wonderful feeling. I wished that I could put my arms around his neck and hug him, which I had done so many times at home.

The wind velocity increased rapidly as we went along. The snow on the river was good and hard and it made good footing for the team. There were numerous bare ice spots. The winds had

blown off the snow cover.

Before the trip, mother had made me a thick-haired winter reindeer skin parka with a second hand wolverine ruff. The thick parka made me look like a ball of fur but it was very warm even in that growing wind storm.

The dogs began to have difficulty pulling the sled in the gale. We were fortunate that previous winds had blown off the fresh snow, otherwise we would have been in a terrible blizzard.

We reached the part of the river where it ran between two steep hills. It was a veritable wind tunnel. The gale swepted and roared.

Nikka, as intelligent as any dog that was, carefully followed the snow patches for firm footing. We slowly progressed with father and mother pushing the sled to help the dogs. My position on the sled was getting precarious. I was almost blown off several times.

"Hold on to the rope binding, son," said father.

As my parents and the team struggled, I wished that I could help them. I wanted to be a grown man like my father, but the only way I could help was to encourage my friend, Nikka.

The great windstorm worsened. The gusts began to blow the sled and the team sideways. My father braced himself each time to keep the sled from tipping over. I held onto the rope as hard as I could.

Nikka was carefully skirting a large patch of bare ice when it happened. A great gust of wind hit the team and the sled was blown to the ice along with the two wheel dogs. The first of the dogs dug their nails into the hard snow but the force of the gale was so great it dragged them backwards onto the ice.

By the time Nikka was pulled on the ice, the sled had swung like a pendulum. At that moment, the gale swung the team completely around.

Then the great wind blew the team on the ice. The dogs were sprawled in every position. I couldn't see father and mother but I could hear them hollering, "Hold on tight, son!"

The team and the sled careened crazily on the ice at great speed. Suddenly the sled side swiped a patch of snow. There was a terrific jolt as the runners dug into it. The impact caused me to lose my grip on the rope. I felt myself flying through the air. I landed hard on my back but my thick parka cushioned the impact and I was unhurt.

I had landed with my feet to the wind and a gust caught the hem of my parka and billowed it. I started sailing across the ice and snow at great speed. Reindeer hair on the ice offered little friction. Moments later I began to spin round and round. That was when I saw my father running and slipping after me.

When he finally caught up and grabbed me, he slipped and sprawled. The wind blew us several more yards until we hit snow. He picked me up and started struggling toward the team. The sled had tipped over. Mother was struggling toward the team also. She had lost her grip on one of the handlebars and was blown clear of the sled.

As we huddled briefly on the lee of the overturned sled, mother said to father, "We should turn back and stay overnight at the Kukpuk fish camp."

"Perhaps we should. The drive would be much easier. This type of wind usually don't last. I think it's going down now and we're not too far away from our destination," father answered.

"We better go on then," mother said wearily.

Father picked me up and looked at me and said, "Son, the way you were going down the ice, you would have been at Point Hope in no time at all."

My father broke into a guffaw. Mother joined him and they laughed for several moments.

I became uncomfortable as they laughed and I pleaded, "Don't do that."

Still looking at me, father questioned, "You usually cry at a slightest provocation. Why didn't you this time?"

"Amah, apahng." ("I don't know, father," I answered.

Father straightened up the team and we got under way once again. As we traveled, the wind gradually died down.

When we finally reached our destination, it was in the dark of night. We were all very tired including the dogs. It had been a hard day's travel.

My father hunted for about a month. He got one wolverine, several red and white foxes. He also hunted on the sea ice and got several seals.

We returned to Point Hope in time for Christmas. It was an uneventful trip on a beautiful day.

A few travelers from Kotzebue and Kivalina had visited us during our camping period. When we reached home the news of our encounter with the heavy gale had preceded us. Father and I had become the source of chuckles. They couldn't get over my fall off the sled and taking off at great speed downward with my father frantically chasing after me.



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