

Spirit world of the Bering Sea Eskimo

INUA: Spirit World of the Bering Sea Eskimo

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Reviewed by Wally Olson

In 1877, a young meteorologist by the name of Edward Nelson arrived in St. Michael,

Alaska.

Although he was just in his early twenties, he was an accomplished ornithologist and naturalist. His official task was to take weather observations at this outpost in the new Territory of Alaska. His unofficial task was to gather information on the geography, environment and people of the region - and gather he did!

In the next few years he traveled thousands of miles and obtained about ten thousand artifacts which he carefully referenced. In later years, he compiled his observations in the classic study known as **The Eskimos About Bering Strait**.

It is by far the largest and finest collection of Eskimo artifacts in existence.

A hundred years later, the late Ann Stevens, wife of U.S. Senator Ted Stevens of Alaska, asked if the Smithsonian Institution might allow part of this collection to be exhibited in Alaska. Specialists were called in to help with the exhibit and prepare a text to accompany the display.

INUA: Spirit World of the Bering Sea Eskimo is the title of that text. It is 290 pages long, printed on excellent material and beautifully illustrated with hundreds of photographs. It is a superb piece of work.

It is divided into sections on the land, the village, the spiritual life, their neighbors and changes in the last hundred years.

As Americans, we are greatly indebted to Edward Nelson for collecting and preserving not only the artifacts, but the stories, philosophy, and observations of everyday life at a time when Euroamerican influence had not yet completely changed the Eskimo way of life.

The photographs of villages and people show clearly that

this was a harsh and difficult place in which to survive. Yet the items on display show the Eskimos possessing a sense of beauty and oneness with the world around them that many of us strive to recapture in our modern, technological, artificial world.

If Nelson had been just an art collector, we might have had the artifacts, but not the magnificent explanations that go with them. It is this added dimension that makes the collection, and this accompanying text, so educational and informative.

This is one of the few books that I feel should be on the shelves of every school library in Alaska. The modern writers who have contributed their insights add an even greater depth to Nelson's descriptions. The book could form the core of an entire college course on Yup'ik traditional culture.

Only a small part of the collection will be on display in Alaska. The first showing will be at the Alaska State Museum in Juneau beginning May 7.

Later in the summer and fall, the exhibit will move to Anchorage and Fairbanks. Schools may want to plan now to take their students to the exhibit when it is in their vicinity - it could be a most educational experience.

Teachers may want to obtain a copy of **INUA** so that they will be prepared to explain what they see on display.

Some of us have been waiting for this book to come out and for the exhibit to come back for a visit to the land where it originated. It has been worth waiting for. **INUA** is one of the finest books on Eskimos to be published in many a year.

Wally Olson

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