

# Rexford has been whaling for 50 years

by Barbara Crane

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BARROW — Burton Rexford has been whaling for 50 years.

He first went out with a crew when he was 10 years old. Ever since then whaling has been an important part of his life.

Rexford, now a whaling captain, says it's taken many years to learn all he needs to know about leading a crew.

"It takes good training from the elders who are experienced to know what to do and to be able to read the ice conditions and the wind and the weather," he said.

"The safety of the crew is a big

responsibility."

There is a lot of expense involved, too, for a lengthy hunt which may or may not be successful. He has to feed his crew and pay for snow machines, fuel and other supplies.

"It's not easy," Rexford said. "Some years I don't even have a penny in my pocket, but once you're hooked on whaling, you can't give it up. You keep on going."

As one of the six whaling crews from Barrow to take whales this spring, Rexford and his crew co-hosted a community feast June 19 on the beach at Barrow.

He said he particularly enjoyed seeing so many of his family together at the festival.

"I'm related to this whole com-

munity in some way," he said. "My wife came from 14 in her family, and I come from 13, so we're automatically related to just about everyone."

With 14 children and 17 grandchildren, Rexford has plenty of men and boys to train and choose from for his crew.

"I have been training my sons over the years," Rexford said. "I'm really proud of how well they do."

His son, Mike, threw the harpoon for this year's whale; and another son, Julius, shot it.

Another son, Delbert, now 35, has been whaling since he was 9. He remembered how his father decided when he could begin whaling.

"When he thought we were old

enough to listen to our elders, we could go out," he said. "Then if we didn't listen, we were left behind until we *did* learn to listen."

While Rexford has never had any women in his whaling crews, it's becoming less unusual to find them in other crews.

"I think that's partly because there is a shortage of men crew members," he said. "More and more people have jobs, and it's difficult for them to get the time off, so it can be hard to get a crew together."

Rexford plans to continue whaling as long as possible.

"It's been a part of my life all my life," he said. "I will go out as long as I can."