

Oil painting memorializes whale rescue

by Jeanne Freeman
for the Tundra Times

FAIRBANKS — A year ago the world spotlight was on Barrow and the plight of three gray whales trapped in the Arctic ice pack.

BARROW

Now one year later, rescuing the whales from an icy end is memorialized in an oil painting by well known whale artist Don McMichael.

"I want to thank the people of Barrow and the Soviet Union for their compassion and caring for these precious creatures, and to do that, the Spirit of Barrow is my gift to you," McMichael said in presenting the painting to the people of Barrow.

McMichael, who is from Coos Bay, Ore., has a deep respect and admiration for the ocean and the mammals in it. He retired from the U.S. Coast Guard in 1977. From extensive research and observation of whales and other ocean mammals, McMichael's subjects swim to life on canvas.

McMichael has a unique style which portrays the whales both above and below the surface. The Spirit of Barrow shows the three gray whales trapped off the shore near Barrow in October 1988, partially out of the ice.

Three rescuers stand near the broken ice. The three figures, dressed in heavy parkas, represent the cooperative efforts of Native Inupiat and the Russians in freeing the trapped whales, said McMichael.

Only two whales survived the icy ordeal. The smallest of the three disappeared under the ice part way through the rescue attempt.

From the cake decorated with both the American and Soviet flags to the



The plight of three whales trapped in the ice off Barrow led to worldwide attention about a year ago.

many children shouting, laughing and playing, a recent dedication ceremony in Barrow was a tribute to the people of the Soviet Union and Barrow.

North Slope Borough Mayor George N. Ahmaogak Sr. welcomed the people of Barrow and guests to the dedication in Inupiat, followed by an English translation. Ahmaogak introduced McMichael and accepted the artist's gift to Barrow followed by a welcome to Soviet neighbors, represented by Eugene Lugennov of Magadan.

Lugennov spoke of the Soviet people's desire to continue cooperative efforts such as the whale rescue and expressed hope for continuing peace and friendship. An interpreter translated Lugennov's words to the crowd.

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Ahmaogak thanked people who worked hard in freeing the whales and presented each with a certificate of commendation. Earlier that day, McMichael presented Barrow school children with 250 posters of the Spirit of Barrow and another 250 to be sent to children in the Soviet Union.

As part of the celebration, Barrow

residents performed Inupiat dancing.

The morning after the ceremony, the Spirit of Barrow hung in the borough office lobby. McMichael smiled and said he liked it there.

McMichael stopped in Fairbanks and Anchorage for special guest appearances and print signing before returning to Oregon.