

Diseases Swept Arctic Wiping Out Populations

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"Something happened between then and now. Our ancestors had a tradition of cleanliness but this has broken down as time went on," wondered Tony Joule, retired Eskimo teacher.

He was supplemented by Frank Degnan, of Irish and Eskimo decent, who said, "The Eskimos of the old days had a tradition that any animal they killed did not like to be taken to a dirty home. As a result the sod igloos were kept immaculately clean."

Yes, something happened — something so demoralizing that it shattered a tradition that was held rigidly as part of everyday life of long ago. This writer, as a child, has seen traces of this tradition but, to a great extent it has not been followed. What made the tradition break down?

Was it caused by the visitation of the terrible epidemics that killed off thousands of Eskimos and Indians back in the early 1800s? Would repeated loss of dear ones, children, brothers, sisters, mothers, fathers, relatives, and great hunters have been so profound that demoralization set in?

Epidemics killed off everyone including the great hunters. Hunters were a great loss to the people who depended on hunting economy. Those who managed to survive the diseases, no doubt starved to death because of the loss of hunters. This tragedy of death plagued the people for generations.

Many People

Legends are being told today that in places like Point Hope, great many people lived in the old days.

"Apu, innuit makoah inu-geaktuoy taimani," ("There were a great many people who lived here,") is the statement heard quite often among the Eskimos today.

It has been written about perhaps with some accuracy, that back in 1828 the population of Point Barrow was approximately 1,000 Eskimos and by 1890, there were only 100. At the same period, there were 2,000 Eskimos in Tikikq (Point Hope) and by 1890, the population

was reduced to 350.

Port Franklin, some 65 miles west of Point Barrow, had a "large" population, but by 1890 the people had been wiped out. Shishmaref Inlet in the Seward Peninsula, purportedly had 1,000 to 2,000 Eskimos in 1823 but by 1890, there were three houses left.

New Diseases

Some writers claim that the great reduction of Native population in Alaska was largely due to the reduction of game by excessive hunting or over-hunting. Although this might be true to a small extent, this writer believes that the drastic reduction was due to new diseases to which the Eskimos and Indians had no natural immunization.

They had no immunization to such diseases as smallpox, measles, and these were often lethal to them. Other diseases like influenza and tuberculosis took heavy toll. The sicknesses mentioned, and others not mentioned, were unknown to the Arctic areas until early voyagers and explorers brought them.

The following story although fictionalized in many parts of it, is based on an incident that is said to be true:

"The weather is going to be fine tomorrow and it will be a good time to start up the Kukpuk River to squirrel and to fish for grayling," said Attungana to his wife, Siqvoana. "There should be many caribou up there now, too."

"Yes, Attungana, this is a good time to travel and the children will enjoy it. Most of the things are ready and I'll finish getting the children's clothes ready and ours too," replied Siqvoana with some excitement.

Attungana and his wife had five children. The youngest one, Olaqroaq, a girl was seven years old. She along with her sister and three brothers, was excited with the coming trip and adventure.

Pleasant Journey

The time of the year was around the middle of August. The air had a tang in it — the harbinger of the coming fall. The weather had turned beautiful only the day before. It had been blustery as Tikikq weather

usually was.

Early the next morning the Attungana family left their sod igloo and went to the north beach where their umiak was beached. They carried their provisions and gear on their backs and arms. They righted the umiak that had been put upside down to keep wind-blown sand from getting into it. They dragged it to the water's edge, launched it part way into the water and loaded their gear.

A fresh breeze was blowing from the west but the sea was rather calm. The sun came up into a beautiful blue sky and the happy family got underway with Attungana and the two older boys towing the umiak with a long oogruk hide line along the beach while Siqvoana steered it.

Portage

They traveled in this manner for about a mile and a quarter when the wind shifted to the north. Since the waves would get rougher in a short while the family portaged the umiak across a narrow strip of land and gravel onto a large lagoon.

They all boarded the craft and paddled eastward. They traveled for eleven miles until they reached the mouth of Kukpuk River. By the time the sun was sinking close to the horizon and they made camp for the night.

They resumed the journey the next morning. They were on the river now and the going became harder because of the current. Attungana and the boys and the oldest girl towed the umiak along the bank.

Their destination was the traditional grayling fishing grounds some thirty five river miles from Tikikq. There were many ground squirrels in this area also which they wanted for parkas and for meat.

Other Campers

When the family reached the fishing grounds there were already around 25 people that had gone up before them. Quite a few more arrived after the next three days until the number of people was around 45.

The people were a carefree lot and they joked and bantered with light-heartedness. They feasted when some of the men caught caribou. The older men told legends during the evenings.

Children ran and played everywhere. Life was good and the Attungana family enjoyed it along with the rest.

Man in a Kayak

One afternoon, a man in a Kayak paddled up the Kukpuk. He paddled with energy as if some urgency drove him on. When he landed on a gravel bar in the middle of the camps, some of the Tikikqmiut (Point Hope people) were not familiar with him but a few of them recognized him as a man from Kivaliniq (Kivalana), a village 70 miles south of Tikikq.

"Tukruk, it is good to see you again. You look as if you have been traveling hard the last few days," said one of the men who knew the traveler.

"Yes I have traveled for the last eight days, from Kivaliniq and I have much news to tell," said Tukruk with a ring of excitement in his voice.

Tikikqmiut, most of whom had gathered around the traveler, were always eager for news and one of them asked promptly, "What news have you brought us from the south?"

Strange Craft

"There has been a great excitement in our village of Kivaliniq ever since the Kasuk family came from Qikiqtaqruk (Kotzebue) about 12 days ago," said the man.

There was a strange expression on Tukruk's face. He was haggard but excitement was there and he seemed fearful. It was unmistakable that whatever news he brought had great gravity. The Tikikqmiut gathered closer around the traveler.

"What I am about to tell you I told to your friends and kin in Tikikq," said Tukruk in a voice that was louder than ordinary conversation. The group around him became very quiet.

"Some of you know Kasuk in Kivaliniq. He and his family and three other people had gone to Qikiqtaqruk little less than a moon ago. They came back 12 days ago. What Kasuk and the other people with him told us, was the strangest news we have ever heard.

"Three days before they started back to Kivaliniq, a strange craft hooked to the bottom of the sea some distance south of

Qikiqtaqruk. It was an umiakpuk (great boat). The people were greatly surprised and fearful when strange men came ashore in a small boat. Kasuk told us that they had very light skins on their faces and hands. Many of them had hair like the color of the red fox — not black like yours and mine," the man related.

The crowd around the traveler was spellbound. Some of them showed fear on their faces as they listened to the astounding news.

Tukruk told his listeners that at first, the Qikiqtaqrukmiut were sorely afraid of the strange people but the visitors showed some kindness. Soon the people crowded around them in great curiosity.

Strange Sickness

"When Kasuk reached Kivaliniq, one of his children, a boy twelve years old had a strange sickness and he died a day after the family arrived. The boy looked horrible when I carried him ashore and he was barely conscious. Another one of Kasuk's children was getting sick the day I left to tell the news to Tikikq and you here.

"The sickness was something I had never seen before. The boy was covered with round red welts all over his face and body. No one could do anything about it, not even our ahngatquqs (medicine men.)

"Kasuk told us that quite a few people in Qikiqtaqruk were starting to have another kind of sickness. He said they coughed and some of them could hardly breathe. People were talking that these sicknesses might have come from the strange people of the umiakpuk."

"I, myself, have not felt good since before midday," the traveler continued. "I have been feeling cold and I feel some weakness in my limbs. I am weary now and I would like to take some rest."

Tikikqmiut was astounded beyond words. They began to go about their business silently. When they did talk, it was done in muffled tones. Their very actions seemed to spell that some impending visitation was about to overtake them.

Illness of the Traveler

When the traveler complained of weakness, a family or eight invited him to their tiny temporary sod igloo and made him comfortable in a bedding of caribou skins.

The next day, Tukruk was weaker and his face was flushed. Not long after that, red spots began to appear on his back and spread all over his body.

"I'm beginning to look like Kasuk's son," said Tukruk with alarm, looking at his arms. "I am distressed with what this strange sickness is. I am hoping it will not go beyond me. I do not wish it on you. What is happening to me? I can feel myself becoming weaker with each movement of the sun."

The Death

By the time of the evening of the second day of his arrival, the traveler was delirious. The next day during mid-morning, he was dead!

Tikikqmiut, of course, had crowded around the traveler. They were curious to hear more news and they were curious to see the strange sickness that had stricken him. The mystery of the sickness had a foreboding fascination to many of them. The horrible newness of it filled them with questioning dread. What was this strange disease?

Although the people of the Kukpuk River camp were stunned

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ned and shaken by the death of the traveler and the strange malady that took his life, the women and older children hunted squirrels and picked berries while the men took their bows and arrows and hunted caribou.

New Illnesses

Then about ten days after the arrival of the traveler from Kivaliniq and Tikiqaq, several people in the camp became ill. As their illness progressed, it was recognized as the very same kind Tukruk had. The dreadful realization of it struck the people with great alarm!

(To Be Continued)