

Christmastime in the bush

"I know there is a Santa Claus," said E.L. Keithahn, "and he's an Eskimo!" Keithahn, long time curator of the Alaska Historical Museum, never forgot the Christmas he spent at Kelketuk, an igloo village

north of Nome. It was a long time ago when he taught there, but it was a Christmas to remember.

In the Arctic even a Christmas tree is a baffling problem, since no trees grow within

hundreds of miles of the village. However, Keithahn found Eskimo ingenuity was equal to the situation. First, a 10-foot pole was found, mounted on a stand and rings of holes drilled at intervals over the entire length. Next, into the holes dwarf willow branches were inserted until there was the skeleton of a well-shaped tree. Some discarded green window shades were torn into strips, fringed with scissors until they looked like fir needles, then carefully tied to the willow branches —

by
Phyllis Carlson

and there was the Christmas tree!

After the school children had given their program, the real Arctic Christmas began.

"Es-keck-te sulie Neule-Aga," said the head man (Keithahn never found out what the words meant.) and games, acrobatics and gifts followed. Their method of gift giving was somewhat different from that to which Keithahn was accustomed. The head man called a name, its possessor rose, walked to the front and turned, facing the

sitting group. Anyone wishing to bestow a gift would come forward (there was always someone), and hang his present around the recipient's neck.

The gifts were sometimes mirth-provoking and gales of laughter would go up when a hunter who had missed a shot at a polar bear was presented with a polar bear paw, or a childless young couple given a baby doll. Beautiful new parkas and mukluks for the men, household pots and pans and yards of cloth were favorite gifts for women. Homemade toys and mittens brought joy to the children, while the older boys were often given guns, ammunition and knives in anticipation of their needs as hunters.

The Christmas celebration went on all week, with dog-team races, reindeer races and foot races in the scant daylight hours. Then, driven indoors, the participants would join in finger-pulling, hand-walking, slack rope acrobatics and Eskimo wrestling. Each evening saw another feast of pokes of willow leaves fermented in seal oil, frozen heather berries — which looked like buckshot — in oil, dried oogruk meat, roast reindeer, seal soup and, to top it off, Eskimo ice cream — "au-koo-tuk" and "kim-mamook," seal oil, whipped to a froth with snow and

(Continued on Page Eight)

● Christmas time in the bush

(Continued from Page Four)

dried berries. Every night there would be more gifts, too — altogether, a Christmas that Keith-ahn never forgot.

Never forgotten, either, are the Christmas boats that used to bring Santa to the children living in coastal Alaska. All the way up the coast the news of their progress thrilled young Alaskans.

"It's in Juneau — now it's gotten to Cordova — Valdez — Seward!" they would note.

Perhaps only in Alaska did Santa Claus arrive by boat, not reindeer sleigh, but those of us who remember those days didn't question his mode of

travel. Almost all of our supplies came from Seattle by boat — why not Santa?

The Alaska Steamship Company boats were Santa's transportation along Alaska's seacoast towns and when the Christmas boat arrived the youngsters all down to the cove to meet it. Dressed in their best bibs and tuckers they would get in line to march up the gangplank and into the social hall to meet Santa and receive their Christmas stockings. When the last Christmas ship, the "Denali," made its final trip in the 1950s some of Alaska's Christmas magic was no more and a tradition was broken.

Although the white man's Christmas is not a traditionally rooted holiday in the Athabascan Yukon villages, the Natives welcomed it warmly, for it served to break up the cold monotony of their frozen winters and any excuse for a festivity was eagerly seized upon.

The village schoolhouse was usually the scene of the Christmas school program, with carols being sung and pieces spoken. The appearance of Santa was looked forward to with anticipation, as was the potlatch or community feast. Different ways of serving the feast were customary from village to village. One tradition had the women seated

at long cloths spread out on the meeting-house floor, with the children opposite and the men seated apart. And one could not refuse anything or decline a second helping — that would have been a terrible faux pas!

Sled-dog and showshoe races added to the festivities. Just before the old year ended, in many villages the people gathered to scrub the floors of the trading post, the community hall and other public buildings, so the New Year could start out all fresh and clean.

Christmas in the Aleutian Island villages, the Pribilof Islands and Southeastern Alaska has traditionally been a little different, for most of these villagers belonged — and still belong to the Russian Orthodox Church, brought to Alaska in the 18th century. They have a different calendar, their Christmas falling on January 7. One of their interesting customs was "starring": A large paper star on a wheel, often equipped with colored lights, was carried from house to house while the celebrants sang Russian songs.

Christmas wasn't forgotten by lonely prospectors out in the hills searching for gold, either. Their emotions were described by George Carmack, discoverer of Klondike gold, in a poem he wrote Christmas Eve, 1885: