

Shy Eskimo Who Heroically Killed the Giant Polar Bear

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My Uncle Nayukuk, that February morning many years ago, went hunting, not that he wanted to but he was under duress to do so. His wife, my Aunt Mumangeena, had given him a barrage of invectives on his lack of initiative the night before.

As had been said in earlier articles, Uncle Nayukuk was somewhat adverse to work and he was the same way when it came to hunting. He tried to do as little as possible but took care not to create any serious crises in the little household.

It was true that his wife allowed him to stay home quite a number of times when he made excuses however impractical. Aunt Mumangeena was not tyrannical as she may have seemed but she was rather tolerable under the circumstances — but only up to a certain point.

When her husband began to make too many excuses, she became progressively vehement. I found myself tending to side with Mumangeena at such times but it was not my place to voice opinions; I wasn't allowed to do so. Respect for one's elders was thoroughly taught. But I did think Uncle Nayukuk should have hunted more than he did.

Good Looking Man

To take first look of Uncle Nayukuk would impress one of a man of some dignity, a man with good features, intelligent eyes, rather large for an Eskimo man, straight nose. At this particular time he was around 41 years old. The most distinguished feature of Uncle Nayukuk was his black mustache, one that fell somewhat short of being a walrus mustache.

He had good stature and stood five feet seven inches. He was a man who smiled rarely. In all, he was a good appearing man but this quality was lessened to a degree by his reticent nature. He didn't mix too well with people.

Cold Morning

I arose early as did Nayukuk and Mumangeena as usual. Mumangeena said, "Go out and see how the weather is." I had been under training to observe wind directions, cloud formations, and the velocity of the wind. These things, along with other rigorous training, were required of boys in our village to prepare them for hunters of the future.

The skies were cloudless and the stars shone brightly in the predawn darkness. There was a slight breeze from the north. The temperature was around 25 below zero. It was an ideal day for hunting.

Weather Report

I went back into the little sod igloo and made my weather report. Mumangeena was preparing breakfast. From somewhere in the house she had brought out a piece of slab bacon she has somehow procured and saved for a special occasion. She was cooking the slices of bacon; probably to lessen the sting of her tirade directed at Uncle Nayukuk the night before. She cooked sourdough hotcakes and strong coffee to go with them. It was a fine breakfast.

Mumangeena was very kind that morning, almost overly so. She asked her husband whether he wanted additional helpings. She did the same for me because I had done my duty to her satisfaction. The main reason

for her attentiveness was, of course, her husband was going hunting.

Donned Parkas

After eating, Uncle Nayukuk silently began to get ready to go with Mumangeena helping all she could. He donned his three-layer parka, light under parka of reindeer fawn skin, main parka of grown reindeer skin, and a white calico over-parka.

He put his 30-30 carbine in its sealskin scabbard. He stuffed his heaving line, meat for lunch, and a carton of cartridges into hunting gear up and went out through the low tiny door, stooping as he did so.

Once outside, he scanned the skies carefully and checked the wind direction. Satisfied, he slung his rifle and pack sack around his shoulders by straps.

Away For The Hunt

In February, daylight was still short. Hunters left early in the morning in order to utilize fully the abbreviated daylight. By the time they were in likely hunting areas it was usually bright enough to hunt.

Uncle Nayukuk set out towards the north beach, then on to the hummocked ice next to the shore. He headed in the general direction of northwest. He made his path skirting ice ridges. The wind died down and there was great stillness all around.

As he walked on, the only sound was the crunch and squeak of his mukluks with each step on the packed snow. The sounds seemed thunderous in the great silence around him. He felt alone on the gray-green expanse of Arctic ice in the predawn darkness.

The atmosphere became uncanny — electric. Uncle Nayukuk had felt this same atmosphere in previous times but he felt it more keenly that morning. It was the kind that raised the hair on the back of one's neck.

Rose Purple Dawn

As he walked due north, the peep of dawn began to steal up from the southern horizon behind him. For a lengthy period it did not make appreciable difference in the cover of darkness. Gradually, it created a half light of rose purple on the wide expanse of hummocked ice ahead. The types of jagged ice ridges began to loom out of the ice base in an eerie purple cast against the sky on the northern horizon.

Uncle Nayukuk walked, his mukluks crunch-crunching on the snow. The sound of his walk was disturbing. He wished that he could still the noise so that he could blend with the silence around him.

It was now light enough so he could see quite well. Some 75 yards ahead of him was a lofty ice ridge that ran roughly toward the southeast. He changed his direction to the east to go around it, to head northwest once more.

Awesome Silence

The wind had died down to nothingness, enhancing the awesome silence. He felt as if the Chukchi Sea was holding its breath to see what was going to happen. Uncle Nayukuk approached the end of the ridge. He noticed that it was recently formed. The edges of the four-foot thick ice were jagged and piled helter-skelter by great pressure created by the current of the Chukchi.

The hunter turned to skirt the ridge and then — the great silence was suddenly shattered by a deafening roar! Twenty feet directly in front of him was a giant polar bear! It reared up on

its massive hind legs with amazing agility and towered over him snarling furiously. It then humped its great back, kicked powerfully with its hind legs and charged!

What happened from the instant the giant bear roared took only a second or two.

No Time

During one of his rare utterances, Uncle Nayukuk related:

"There was no time to pull my rifle out of the scabbard. I knew I had no chance if I tried to dodge either to the right or left of the charging bear. A polar bear is extremely fast in striking with either of its fore legs. There was not a chance to run back from him."

Pausing briefly, he continued, "It amazes me how clearly I was thinking during the short instant. There was only one thing to do that might save my life and I took it."

Dived Through Legs

Instantly bracing his legs, Uncle Nayukuk dived headlong aiming for the space between the legs of the on-coming bear. He landed on his face in the snow. As he did so he felt a sharp pressure on his right rib cage.

He looked back quickly at the bear over the crook of his left elbow. He was wary of the bear that can double back almost instantly if it turned to its left and would charge again. He was relieved when he saw the bear lumbering ahead turning gradually to the right snarling wickedly as it went. (According to Eskimos, polar bear can turn instantly to the left, but for some reason the right turn it makes is rather gradual.)

"I think the bear was startled with what I did, and fortunately, it chose to keep running," said Uncle Nayukuk quietly.

Quick Pursuit

The hunter got off the snow quickly pulling his 30-30 out of its scabbard. The bear entered the field of hummock ice — and no wonder. It can traverse the rough surface with ease where man or other animals have difficulty.

Nayukuk could see the lumbering bear through indented spaces of the hummocked ice. He raised his rifle and aimed for the massive right shoulder. The bullet hit the mark paralyzing the right leg. On the impact the great animal summersaulted in its tracks. When it stopped, it attempted to get up but fell back repeatedly roaring terribly as it did.

The Kill

Nayukuk edged closer to the agitated bear and shot aiming for the head. The roaring stopped abruptly. The huge beast stiffened and fell slowly on the covered ice. It convulsed and then was still. The hunter shot another bullet into the head to be sure.

He quickly looked around for his icepick rod that was quickly discarded during the sudden action. He picked it up and grabbed it near the hooked end with his left hand. He retained his rifle with his right hand for instant use if necessary.

He walked cautiously to the prostrate animal and started to prod it on its tender spots. There was no response. Uncle Nayukuk had captured the polar bear.

Marvelled At Kill

He sat down rather wearily on a ledge of an ice hummock nearby, filled his pipe and smoked. From where he sat he surveyed the animal. He marvelled at the size of it. He doubted that anyone living in that village had ever seen one

that large.

Uncle Nayukuk commenced to skin the huge beast. Due to the size of the bear, it took him quite a while to complete the job.

The day was a Saturday and I was not at school. At my Aunt Mumangeena's bidding I had been chopping wood. As I wielded the heavy axe, I saw Uncle Nayukuk emerge over the north bank pulling hard on something he was dragging. When he pulled it over the bank I knew it was the skin of a polar bear from its yellowish white color.

I scrambled up to the roof skylight and hollered down to Aunt Mumangeena: "Uncle Nayukuk has got a polar bear!"

I could hear my aunt excitedly saying things I couldn't understand as I tumbled down the slope of our sod igloo to run to meet Uncle Nayukuk. When I got to him, he smiled but didn't say a word. I excitedly asked him questions why the three layers of parkas were torn to shreds on his right side. He simply said, "I'll tell you later." I could plainly see the nail marks which, I was sure, were made by the bear.

Happy Return

I helped him to pull the huge bear skin to our sod igloo. Aunt Mumangeena was out of the house walking slowly toward us smiling and making unintelligible happy sounds. As we came closer I noticed that there were tears in her eyes. They were happy tears, to be sure, I thought that she, perhaps, was feeling a bit remorseful about things she had said to Uncle Nayukuk the night before, during the heat of frustration on his lack of initiative.

Here he was, bringing home one of the most prized takes expected of a hunter. It would have helped matters a bit perhaps, if Uncle Nayukuk had taken advantage of the situation and capitalized on it by retorting, "Woman, what do you say to what I've done today?" Instead, he acted as he always had — quiet and unobtrusive.

Soon, quite a number of the villagers gathered at our igloo. Nayukuk, obviously ill at ease with sudden attention he was getting, hardly said anything.

The huge skin was brought into the igloo and a number of people followed, including Mumangeena, Nayukuk and myself. Once inside the group waited for the hunter to tell the story. It was clear that Uncle Nayukuk was having difficulty beginning. He was visibly shy and embarrassed.

Quiet Story

After a lengthy period, he began to tell of his ordeal shyly and quietly. It was apparent that he felt obligated to the people around him. He told it in detail. It was amazing to listen to the man of few words telling of the events in a quietly dramatic manner. It was also amazing to listen to so many words coming out of the mouth of this reticent man.

"When I dived and landed in the snow, I felt a sharp pressure on my lower right chest. I hoped it wasn't serious. The left hind leg of the bear came down on me just missing my ribs." Uncle Nayukuk explained the fear in his parkas.

He concluded, "Not knowing, of course, that there was a bear behind the ridge, I went around it. The bear had been hunting seal by a seal breathing hole — and I had disturbed it."

Some Skeptics

At the conclusion there was a noticeable atmosphere of awe in

the room. This soon spread through the whole village. Uncle Nayukuk became a hero, but not all at once. Some people were skeptical of the truthfulness of the encounter, including my father.

Next day, he and some other hunters went to investigate the scene of action. The proof was conclusive. The tracks, the seal breathing hole, the distance of the charge, the imprint of Uncle Nayukuk on the snow when he dived, and the track of the bear in the vicinity of the rib cage, were all there.

Yes, Uncle Nayukuk became the hero of Point Hope. Boys, like myself, who expected him to act like one were disappointed. He didn't strut or brag about his exploit. He was exactly the same man as before — mild mannered, reticent. I probably got more out of it than did Uncle Nayukuk. I told of the daring deed to my young friends time and again and basked in reflected glory.

Preparing Skin

Aunt Mumangeena, along with her sister Keshorna, my mother, and another woman, cleaned the excess tissues off the huge skin. When that was done, the skin was taken a short distance out on the ice where a hole had been made and dunked in sea water. When it was pulled out, I and some other boys stomped on it in cold powdery snow to clean the hair of oil and dirt.

When it was sufficiently dry, we dragged it up to the top of a high ice ridge where a long sloping snow drift had formed and slid down with it. This was encouraged because it helped to clean the hair more thoroughly. We did this time and again and had wonderful time.

It was taken back to the igloo to thaw out. The next day it was spread out on hard packed snow and pegged to freeze dry and then it was measured.

Mammoth Sale

When it was finally dry, Uncle Nayukuk and Aunt Mumangeena sold it to the native store. They were paid \$62.50, most money ever paid for a polar bear skin.

At five dollars a foot, current price at the time, Uncle Nayukuk's polar bear measured twelve feet six inches!