

ARCTIC WHALING AT VILLAGE OF POINT HOPE

By LAEL MORGAN

POINT HOPE, Alaska—Esther Kingik Bosta wrote a note to her young brother's teacher: "Gussy is excused to go whaling." He would be away six weeks.

It was April and the start of the spring whaling season off the restless ice of the Chukchi Sea, when the Eskimos stake their lives for their groceries — the mammoth bowhead whale. Twelve crews, remnants of a thousand-year tradition, would set off with open boats for the thawing Arctic channels called "leads," camping in 10-by-12-foot tents on the treacherous ice. I became a cook for one of the crews.

The first water had opened up April 12 and the village of 400 had become tense with excitement. A week earlier the women had sewed new sealskin covers over the light boat frames made of driftwood and plywood. Now the preacher arrived by snow machine to bless our craft. The crew knelt for a prayer, in terse Eskimo, and we were away with "amen." The two dog teams went first, followed by snow machines pulling our boat and grub box.

THE ICE IS a harsh, ever-changing world, bounded by towering pressure ridges of frozen blocks the size of deepfreezers. Our first "lead" was a narrow span of black water that spun off dark mists shot with sun. The men quickly anchored the guy ropes of our tent to hefty ice blocks. Three plywood planks were laid as flooring, and a stove, fashioned from an oil drum, puffed smoke through a pipe bedded with a shield in the canvas roof.

Outside a sharp wind tore from the northwest, adding sting to the sub-zero temperature. Inside, secure with a large dishpan of seal blubber chunks to fire the stove, we drank tea and waited for the wind to drop. Our harpoon and darting guns, modest weapons patented in the 1860s, were ready in the bow of the boat.

Our captain, Bernard Nash, waited with apparent calm, but he was actually tense inside. This was his second year as a captain and he had yet to get his whale. He was an excellent hunter; he had been harpoon man on the crew that killed Point Hope's record whale, a 65-

footer. But last year, he left his crew partway through the season to take a construction job outside the village. This year's hunt was outfitted at a cost of nearly \$700 from his income-tax refund, unemployment check and food stamps. It was important that we scored.

Our ice expert was Gus Kowunna Sr. Good-natured and always joking, he is one of the toughest, wisest men the Arctic can produce. Also in the crew was Sam Nash, Bernard's son who bears the name of a famous whaler who was his grandfather. Sam was a bookworm, but he had been on the ice most of his 21 years and was a good man with a paddle. So were Earl Kingik, Isaac Killigvik, Norman Omnik and Morris Oviok — all young and strong, all trained to the ice from childhood.

Gussy Kowunna Jr., the 13-year-old excused from school, was our "boy" and had the hardest job of the lot. He fetched and carried, stayed up all night to tend the stove, did all the dirty work. But, as an apprentice whaler, he would get a man-sized share of the kill. He dreamed that next year or the year after he would take his place at the paddle. His sister, Esther Bosta, was our head cook and my boss in the absence of the captain's wife. She was well traveled and educated, and had become a city dweller. But she came home for whaling because she loves the ice and is sought after as a cook.

THE CRY WAS "AGVIK" — the Eskimo word for "whale." Often it was not given. Rather, the watch from a crew farther down the channel would alert us by making a broad swimming motion with his arm; silence was one of our weapons.

The men acted as one, quickly taking their seats in the boat. Kowunna pushed off, took his place in the stern with the steering oar, and they moved out, pushing their paddles soundlessly through the water. The bowhead was nearly three times the size of the boat, but it was wary. It surfaced and sounded, coming up out of range. Our crew returned, pulled the boat out and carefully knocked icy skim off the hull with their paddles. Spirits were still high. The season had started early and there would be many more



WHALERS SET FOR CHASE — Bernard Nash's whaling crew is vigorously setting its paddle pace after seeing a bowhead whale surface within approach distance. The umiak (skinboat) is 24 feet long designed for paddle propulsion and the

design enables the whalers to overtake whales that swim at normal speed. Whaling, although exciting, is a grueling way of subsistence hunting for the Arctic whalers.

—LAEL MORGAN Photograph

whales.

Among Point Hoppers, it's the mark of a man to go without sleep for days. Even at the beginning of the season, when the weather was savagely cold, our hunters shunned the comfort of our tent, keeping warm instead at the water's edge. When the whales came through en masse, the men would not eat and might spend five hours straight at their paddles. They would return crusted with frozen brine and send Gussy to the tent to exchange their frozen gloves for dry ones. Only occasionally would a man come to the tent to warm up or change clothes.

The whales would appear just about any time. Sometimes they surfaced in a "lead" so small you wouldn't expect a duck to land there. Sometimes they traveled after dark, and sometimes in a blanket of fog when floating ice was at its most unpredictable and dangerous.

A whale can travel about 50 miles an hour if he puts his mind to it, Kowunna told me. One of the Point Hope boats can

go 12 miles an hour or maybe faster if the crew is good. "When you see a whale you gotta work, work, work. Work like hell to catch 'im. . . Work until you sweat," Kowunna said. You must strike him from behind or directly in front, for his eyes are on the sides: if he sees you, he'll move out. Particularly with our outdated weapons, our crew needed the advantage of surprise.

The women's lot was less exciting than the men's, but we were an important support team. Cooking on the oil drum stove and a small Coleman burner, we turned out endless meals of caribou stew, boiled polar bear, muktuk (edible whale skin, which is delicious with mustard) and eider duck. The meals were served with pilot bread (thick, bland crackers) and yeast doughnuts, which we made by the gross in the dishpan, fashioning them with our fingers without the aid of a cutter. I was clumsy and a little leery of the native foods. But the crew was patient and I managed to hold my own.

It was also our job to cut blubber for the stove, babysit the dog teams for our crew and carry meals down to our men on watch. Often we walked 5 to 15 miles a day over rough ice. After a day like that you can sleep anywhere, and when the whales ran thick we slept on the ice.

THE DAY OF THE first catch, we watched our men go out until they disappeared over the horizon. For two hours we waited in the darkness until finally, from far off, we heard the echoing cheers of our crew and five others. We cheered and yelled back, laughing and crying and hugging one another. The first whale! Agvik! Meat!

The tension was gone at last. It was the first time in two weary weeks on the ice that the women really laughed. We knew we would eat. It was not our whale, but we had helped. We got a share. Then we went back to our watch.

The winds shifted and tried to push our camp to Siberia. We hurried our gear to the lee of the point and returned two days later. Again we camped, only to have the men shaken in the night by crashing bergs and move again. Later the open water froze and our men smashed away at the young ice with their paddles. Finally it

defeated them, freezing thick enough to support skilled walkers, who moved cautiously out to open water a mile beyond.

One day we took food to them only to evacuate in mid-meal and watch our picnic site become open water. Two of our crew fell in, hauled themselves out, changed clothes and went back to the hunt. And we scored. A 38-foot bowhead shouldered in close to the camp of a neighboring crew, who harpooned it. Our crew hurried to assist. We got our harpoon in, too. Rope was fetched to secure the animal. But it revived despite the fact it had taken six black powder bombs, spouted blood and sounded to die alone.

We searched for it. Three days later it surfaced, a "stinker." The meat was fit only for dogs, but the muktuk was good and we helped with the long, foul job of butchering. With nearly 70 men working, it took more than 12 hours. Ours was a good share.

THE WEATHER turned warmer. We took breakfast to the men one morning to find our boat out. Ruth, the captain's wife, and Esther and I waited by the lead, enjoying the sun and excitement as 20 bowheads and dozens of kittenish little beluga whales cruised by.

Our men came home happy despite the fact it was late afternoon and they had fasted for 14 hours. They had helped bring in three whales, one a 57-footer. But the south wind came in while we were butchering, and it pushed in a crushing front of ice that buried the big whale before we really got to it. The crews escaped with no time to spare. We regrouped, waited out the wind, and went back only to find old landmarks missing and our leads frozen.

"How much is a whale worth to you in groceries?" I asked the captain.

"Why, 30 to 60 tons," which would be shared with the other villagers, he replied. "And we will use every bit of it — everything but the liver and the lungs, which will go to the dogs."

But whaling meant more than food to them. "It is our tradition," Morris Oviok said. "The tradition of our forefathers."

(The writer is an Alicia Patterson Fund fellow on leave from the Tundra Times of Fairbanks.)



WHALERS COOK TENT — The whaler's tent is not always for shelter for the whalers who seldom enter it even to warm up. It is primarily for cooking the food for the crew. Oftentimes women cook along with a "flunky" for help.

The flunky is a youth 12 to 14 years old. He builds fires, makes coffee and tea and generally makes himself useful for the older whalers.

—LAEL MORGAN Photo