

An Eskimo Nativity

by Sue Henry

During the shortest days of winter the Eskimos gathered for *Nakaciiarvik* — the Seal Bladder Festival. It was a time to honor the spirits of deceased clansmen and of the living sea mammal, to link together the continuity of human life with the gifts of nature provided to sustain it. Man and animals are one, in an unbroken chain of life.

Joseph and Mary were among the last to arrive at the site near the mouth of the river. They had traveled far in a sled pulled by a fine team of dogs. The sled was laden with the bounty of Joseph's skills as a hunter and a craftsman: meat, furs, ivory, tools, and impliments that he himself had crafted. During the festival, these precious items would be gifts to his kinsmen.

The couple urgently needed shelter, for Mary already had felt the first pangs of onsetting labor. As soon as they arrived at the camp they entered the *kasiaq* — ceremonial house. The Eskimos who had gathered, seeing Mary's condition, immediately began competing for the privilege of offering hospitality in their various tents. Eskimos could always make room for one more — no person ever was left without shelter.

But Eskimos never made a winter journey without shelter and blankets. Joseph had his own. So the men helped Joseph set his tent. The women brought hot tea and dried meat to the expectant parents. There were numerous offers to help in every possible way.

During the shortest days the Arctic night is blackest — dark and often overcast. How strange, then, that suddenly the sky cleared. The curtain of cloud parted before the Big Dipper, blazing brilliantly. Its handle pointed to Joseph's tent.

Aurora Borealis burst into streamers of golds and greens and blues and oranges, dancing and bowing clear to the ground around Joseph's tent. The atmosphere crackled and hummed in harmonic overtones that resembled a gigantic jubilant chorus: "Glory, glory in the highest."

Hunters, silently stalking seals at the nearby coast, saw and heard the awesome spectacle. Hastily they gathered their gear and rushed toward the campsite. Already the assembled *Nakaciiarvik* celebrants had congregated outside Joseph's tent. The birth of a child was a joyous event to the Eskimos, but this one was extraordinarily special. The sky told them so.

Hares, ptarmigans, foxes, beavers, muskrats, even seals, hopping across the snow; animals gathered around the heaven-illuminated tent.

Foxes and hares together; seals and hunters, man, beast, and fowl — this Child has brought all the spirits together. The peaceable kingdom is at hand.

Three *shamans* — medicine men and spiritual leaders — entered the tent of the newborn Child. He was wrapped in rabbit furs, lying on a new blanket of bearskin. The Mother knew the Child would arrive about this time, and she had traveled prepared for His birth.

The shamans presented gifts to the new family: spears of ivory, a woven baby-carrying basket, a poke of whale oil.

The newborn babe looked directly into the eyes of the shamans. They were electrified.

"This Child has been sent by *Ciuliaq* — the First One," they said. "He will be The Great Shaman of all the Eskimos. He will advise the Yup'iks, the Inupiat, the Inuit, and all the clans and tribes. He has come to bring peace and a promise to let our spirits live in harmony with nature forever."