

'The Siberian' a short story about Alaskan and Russian Eskimos

"The Siberian" is one of several short stories written by Arthur Nagozruk Jr. in the early 1960's.

Nagozruk was born in Wales, Alaska on May 10, 1920 to Lucy and Arthur Nagozruk Sr. Following his graduation from Eklutna Vocational School in 1937, Nagozruk joined the army and served in the Aleutians during WW II. He attended the University of Alaska in Fairbanks and graduated with a Bachelors of Education degree in 1949.

He was the first full-blooded Eskimo to earn a degree from the University of Alaska.

Nagozruk followed in the footsteps of his father, who himself, earned the distinction of being the first full-blooded Eskimo school teacher in Alaska.

Nagozruk Jr. died in November, 1976. This story was contributed to the Tundra Times by Nagozruk's daughter. © 1990 Sharon McClintock.

by Arthur Nagozruk Jr.

The eternal spring fog blanketed its rocky slopes. The winds mercilessly bared its steep slopes of life-sustaining vegetation.

There it stood with the winter making its last stand against the returning sun. Around it stood other mountains in other places welcoming the sun's rays to bring forth wild saxifrage, Bering Sea beauty flowers, and the dry dwarf willows. But the Cape Mountain, Kingegan, the last guarding mountain of the Bering Strait on Alaska's side, still clung to its last wild hold on winter.

"Be High" is the Eskimos' name: Kingegan, "Be High, for to guard us against the ancient Siberian invaders! Be High, for to show us the village when the fog rolled on the icy seas! Be High, to protect us from the rigors of the North Wind!"

Atop the invulnerable Kingegan, stood a lone figure, looking over the narrow strait to Siberia. The weather was unusually clear, and he could see the distant cliffs of his old homeland.

Misha Fredov shaded his eyes with his mittened hands to strain his eyes for better visibility. Across the cold Arctic waters was his old home. He could not see, nor could he go there anymore, for a man named Stalin had forbidden his fellow Eskimos to cross beyond the International Date Line separating the two mighty countries.

But Misha Fredov had elected to stay in Cape Prince of Wales when his family and relatives returned to their homeland, never to see Alaska again.

"How I longed to eat fresh Arctic potatoes boiled in fresh walrus oil!" he thought. His memory sought to reacquaint him with many happy hours of his childhood in the Soviet Arctic. He longed to hear the baby walrus migrating with many thousands of mothers, grunting and hooting in the nightless spring.

He looked down the mountain slope and saw the smoke from the stove pipes spiraled upward into the cloudless skies. He could see the small dark figures emerging from the houses as they gathered driftwood by the armlands for the breakfast fires.

Misha had climbed Cape Mountain early in the morning, as he did many times before, to ponder and wonder about his old home and family. He had not been homesick, but he did often wonder about his relatives and how they lived under the Iron Curtain.

Forty years ago, he and his family had crossed the strait with a skin boat load of sable furs, Siberian wolf pelts, walrus tusks and other Arctic commodities for trading in the Seward Peninsula.



Lucy (Alvanna) Nagozruk shown holding Arthur Nagozruk Jr., circa 1920.

During the last trip, another skin boat from Siberia brought news that Stalin's government had called all the traders on the Alaskan shores to return to Siberia.

When his family had made preparations to return to Siberia, he had defected — against the advice of his parents — and hid in the rocks of the mighty Kingegan. There, he remained until the village of Kingegan had accepted him to live there. He became a naturalized citizen and led a quiet, but useful life.

Misha had returned to Kingegan after an absence of 20 years. When the World War II started, he volunteered his services in the Alaska Territorial Guard and was then inducted into the Army, serving his entire 42 months in the Aleutians. He had not seen action during the long duration, and he had not minded the severe, inclement weather suffered by the less fortunate buddies from the Lower 48.

In fact, Misha rather enjoyed the service in the Aleutian Islands where the sea lions, seals and countless thousands of auklets, murrens and

gullmots are congregated each season.

After the war, he worked for several seasons in the Fairbanks area in placer gold mines.

Looking down at the waking village, Misha saw that it had not changed since the war. There were fewer people, to be sure, but nevertheless, the same houses stood weathering the Bering Sea storms. The younger generation had moved to Nome or other larger towns in the Seward Peninsula, seeking year-round employment.

Misha was heavily built with a large frame in his small, stocky body. His face was smooth with high cheekbones and a heavy jaw. His complexion was lighter than Alaskan Eskimos, with fuller eye pouches, lighter brown eyes and blacker hair.

He had a very large trunk, and when he sat down on a chair, he appeared to be about 6 feet tall, but when he stood up, his height hardly increased in size.

With a sigh, he gathered his shotgun and his packsack and proceeded to climb down the slope to the village

below. The ground squirrels scolded him before they scrambled into the permafrost ground. He made great strides down the slope in spite of himself, the gravity of the earth propelling him downward, to the sleeping village, now waking up to a new spring day.

The people of Kingegan had raced against time in the spring hunting period to cache away tons of walrus and other marine mammals for the long winter ahead. Misha Fredov had returned to Kingegan to hunt in Bering Strait from his comfortable waning in Fairbanks.

The weather looked good, so he hurried down to make preparations for the walrus hunt. There were large ice floes flowing southward with the current. The Japanese current, making a long, sweeping invasion of North Pacific waters, warmed the ice congested seas of the Bering Strait, melting ice that is battling for survival.

Walrus, bearded seals, beautiful ribbon seals and thousands of hair seals, fat with thick insulating blubber, migrated in their seasonal ways to the

Arctic Ocean where the ice is perpetually prevalent. Through the narrow funnel of Bering Strait, the sea mammals worked their way under the protection of the persistent fog.

When Misha entered his hosts' house, he found them already at breakfast of oatmeal mush, bread and hot, steaming coffee.

"Just in time!" his host John Lincoln said. He pulled up a wooden box and sat down.

"John," Misha said, between mouthfuls, "The weather looked good all the way to the Siberian coast. I think we should take enough gasoline and oil for a three-day hunt. If we were to hunt only for cows and calves, our best bet is to hunt around Fairway Rock or close to Little Diomed Island. The open lead appears to be parallel to both Siberian and Peninsula coasts."

"Nora," John said, "I think you should prepare enough grub for three

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or four days for eight men, full crew, and be sure to pack enough change of duds, especially socks."

His wife nodded in reply and eyed Misha for more information.

"We have plenty of balls now," Misha continued. "We are due for some prime walrus hides for our boats, and Nora here needs tender baby walrus for half dried meat. Now, Nora, be sure that you don't let the maggots overrun your meat!"

"Don't count your calves before you put them in caches!" Nora replied. "John, don't you think our little Fred should stay home from this trip? He is just a little boy, and I don't believe he should follow on this extended hunt."

"Aw, Mom," Fred complained,

"We aren't going far! We will be in a shouting distance all the time!"

"Maybe your mother is right," John said, "we want to take as many hides and calves as the boat can hold, and you will just take the room for one more calf."

"Your father and mother are right," Misha cut in, "This will be a special trip no little boy should participate in."

Nora and her husband exchanged glances. How can a trip be so special when it is only a routine hunting party? But neither said anything.

A very few minutes of planning settled all the details of this and other hunting preparation as the family followed all carefully adapted hunting procedures from the time immemorial — except where their forefathers used primitive hunting equipment, they used modern firearms, outboard motors and cordages.

The men excused themselves from the table and took pains to prepare for the hunt. Into John's bag went ammunition, extra socks, mitts, harpoon heads, rawhide bridles for hauling dead walrus, tobacco and matches and butchering knives. Misha packed his bag with similar equipment and his wallet.

"Why, you don't need money on this trip!" John teased. "Won't Nora take good care of the house while we are gone?"

"Oh, . . . that is . . ." Misha stammered in embarrassment, "I have some important papers in my wallet I don't want to lose; besides, we might stop in Little Diomed Island. I want to buy some ivory carving and new sealskin pants."

John opened his mouth to say something, but thought better of it. They were in good humor, and John did not want to strike a sour note to injure the man's sensitive ego. He had long known the Siberian to exhibit fragility of temper when cornered into frustration.

"Fred!" John called to his son. "Go tell my crew to be ready to go in an hour. Tell them to take enough kits for four days' hunt."

"And don't forget to run all the way!" Misha added. When the child went outside on the run, Misha called after him, "And don't talk to little girls on the way!"

"You big teasing walrus!" the boy answered and disappeared down the village path. Misha laughed and winked at Nora, who blushed and turned her head.

When John and Misha reached the beach where the skin boat was racked, the crew had already gathered around it. They were smoking pipes and jok-

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Arthur Nagozruk Sr., circa 1976.

ing at each other. The crew was light-hearted this morning and eager to start. John was pleased. He made a cursory inventory of the hunting equipment and inspected the ancient Johnson outboard motor.

"Hey, Andrew!" John called in a loud, commanding voice, "Go up to my house and ask Nora for my binoculars and bring down a funnel from the shed."

Young Andrew, a lad of about 16, sprinted up the beach to the house to fetch the articles.

"Misha, take two men and mix 20 gallons of gasoline and put them in five-gallon cans. One of you men help me inflate the seal pokes, and the rest of you go ahead and inspect the gear."

John gave his orders in a firm, but kindly voice.

"Hurry, men!" John urged his men. "One of the boats is already started! Come on, you old women, step lively!"

The young men made some obscene references to old women and hurried to make their boat seaworthy and put their equipment in readiness. Andrew reached the boat panting as the crew shoved the boat down the gentle waves. He jumped in agilely just when the last of the crew jumped aboard.

Each man grabbed a paddle and skimmed the skin boat down the waves into the sea, avoiding the drifting ice floes while the steersman wrapped a sash cord around the flywheel of the ancient outboard motor and cranked repeatedly.

The motor just coughed loudly with each cranking and finally took hold and putt-putted noisily in the crisp morning air. The propeller kicked a long "rooster tail" behind the skin boat until the crew scrambled toward the aft to sink the stern for the propeller to take hold.

The skin boat made six knots with the crew-laden weight. The old 10-horse Johnson with a gas tank wrapped around the flywheel started hunting power until the steersman adjusted the ivory knobs which served as controls for the carburetor needles.

All eyes were glued to the steersman as he turned the motor; like the passengers in a plane on a take-off, they sighed gratefully when the motor whined steadily.

The crew settled down comfortably and armed their rifles and unsheathed their harpoons and hooks. John started to trim the boat by shifting the fuel, grub boxes and hunting equipment until the boat balanced evenly, and the motor no longer cavitated with each onrushing swell.

After he had trimmed the boat, he took his honored post of the "captain" at the bow to command his boat. He was the chief harpooner and first man to shoot sea mammals from his dignified post. Next behind him sat

two elder men who serve as his assistants and advisors.

Misha sat amidship with another lesser crewman. The crew had settled down with nothing to do until game was sighted. Only the steersman and the captain, as a lookout, pointed right and left through ice channels to guide the steersman toward the barren Fairway Rock Island.

A young man named Nimrod Mayak sat across Misha.

"Have you ever been to Little Diomed Island?" Misha asked the young man.

"Yes," Nimrod replied, "Last year we were storm-bound there for several days. It is a small village. People lived on walrus as much as we do."

"Just walrus?"

"No, they have seals, many kinds. They have lots of auklets, gullmots, cormorants and, of course, polar bear in winter. They also have lots of Eskimo potatoes."

"M-m-m-m, I sure like them boiled in walrus oil!"

"Little Diomeders are also the world's best ivory carvers," Nimrod said. "Boy! Their work is beautiful. I know. I've seen some of their work in drug stores and jewelry shops in Fairbanks. Tell me, have you ever been in Siberia?"

"Siberia!" Nimrod exclaimed. "That's Russian territory! The Iron Curtain is drawn there as tight as a drum as anywhere else! My father had been there long, long ago, when I was a baby. Why, you can't even go to Big Diomed, and it is only a couple of miles from Little Diomed."

Misha was silent for a moment.

"I was born in Uelen, near Mys Dezneva. Mys means 'Cape,' of course. Life there is just like here in Kingegan. My folks were talking about moving to Nunyagmo when we

"Nunavuk!" John yelled from his post. The crew craned their necks ahead and saw a small herd of walrus basking on a large ice floe. The steersman reduced the throttle of his motor and steered toward the noisy nunav (walrus on ice).

John trained his binoculars on the sleeping walrus. The 2-year-olds were awake, fighting, grunting and quarreling with each other. The near-sighted beasts did not see the boat approaching. When they were a few hundred yards of the herd, John made a sweeping signal with his arm, and the steersman receiving his message, swung the boat around.

"Only bulls!" John yelled. John cupped his hands to his mouth and shouted above the roar of the motor.

"We'll have to go beyond the Fairway Rock to find cows and calves. They migrate mostly through the Siberian side of the Strait."



Shown above are Lucy and Arthur Nagozruk Sr., circa 1976.