

Rigging APFSE Expedition Proves Difficult for Lael Morgan

(Lael Morgan recently won a fellowship from the Alicia Patterson Fund to report on the transition of Alaskan Natives from a subsistence to a money economy. She plans to spend a month each in seven remote villages. This is the newsletter she wrote before setting off for her first assignment.)

By LAEL MORGAN

Preparations for the Alicia Patterson Fund Sub-Polar Expedition (APFSE) have been long, laborious and a trifle unnerving. At destination Anaktuvuk Pass the chill factor ranges from -200 to -800 which could be the makings of a fast-frozen "fellow".

There's something delightfully ludicrous, though, about being an expedition of one, and female to boot.

It started in Seattle at Jim Whittaker's. His shop has the deceiving name of "Recreational Equipment" but he caters to Mt. Everest and McKinley expeditions and Alaskan VISTA volunteer types.

I arrived with a covey of Seattle matrons who'd come to outfit their young with beginner skis. The only thing that made me stand out in a crowd like that was my demand for an Arctic expert.

Someone sent me to John Sherpa in the boot department.

He'd spent several months at the North Pole, was a climber, a native of Nepal and just the man.

His English, though unorthodox, was good, but he couldn't quite grasp the idea I wasn't just in search of snow boots for junior.

"Where did you say you were going..."

"Anaktuvuk Pass for a month, then whale hunting with the Eskimos in Point Hope. Have you been there?"

He hadn't, but he checked the latitude and found it above the Arctic Circle and decided it was serious.

Would I be sleeping in an Army barracks or government headquarters, he wondered?

"No," I explained. "Sod houses if I was lucky and maybe camping on the ice for the whale hunt."

Without further question he produced an "Expedition McKinley" sleeping bag just like the one he'd used at the Pole. . . . three pounds of prime, northern silver gray goose down, trussed up in a screaming orange bag. A double bag, in fact, to prevent "cold spots."

He recommended blue, feather booties and red thermal socks. The latter would be especially useful, he suggested, if I fell head first in the snow. Easy to spot, providing I could wiggle my boots off.

He brought out red gloves, too; down filled with fur backs to warm your nose. Sherpa was pretty enthusiastic about this feature. Demonstrated it a couple of times, burrowing his hand—some nose in the soft fur.

Then he took a sceptical look at their Expedition down parka. It had served the International Himalayan Expedition, the American Antarctic Expedition and probably Bobby Kennedy in his climb up Mt. Kennedy, but would it serve APFSE?

"We have just made a better parka," he said. "It's not in production yet but we have a sample. It's really good and I think it would fit you."

It did, as much as any of the men's sizes fit me; billowing just above my knees, sleeves over finger tips, a welter of feathers bulging under bright blue nylon. If it didn't take off and fly south on its own, it should be a warm investment.

So would the down pants. The smallest size was built for a man just my height who weighed 380 pounds. Bright red.

Sherpa decided it was perfect and which did I want, Vogue and frostbite or multicolored bulges and survival?

Frostbite is forever.

"Is she an expedition?" the cashier asked.

"You might say that," Sherpa answered.

In Anchorage, Keith Arnold presented me with the "Cold Weather Operations Survival" book he did for the Alaska Oil and Gas Assn.

It's waterproof, won't rip and won't burn, he assured me proudly. Great, I'll read it at -600 while I'm freezing for want of kindling.

Not a cheerful book, this. The chill factor page warns that at -250 with a 15 mile-an-hour wind, flesh may freeze within one minute. At -750 with a 10 mile wind it takes only 30 seconds.

For treatment of superficial frostbite in the field, "Cover cheeks with warm hands until pain returns."

Layers of clothing are recommended to trap warm air and personal hygiene is stressed.

"Bathe as frequently as conditions will permit," which will be just before I go to Anaktuvuk Pass and just after I return a month later. The old trappers and natives regard a bath in the Arctic winter as a weird form of suicide.

But the book deals with this philosophy, too.

"While extreme cold does not kill lice, it paralyzes them; therefore garments should be hung in the cold, then beaten and brushed."

There's a fine chapter on first aid. So explicit in dealing with frostbite, trenchfoot and snowblindness, it pained me to read it. I tucked it in my parka pocket to read on those happy occasions.

Then on to Fairbanks for final preparation. A snowmobile driver had just been rescued from an overnight at -850. Came through with just a touch of frostbite on wrists and ankles. So I bought snowmobile boots.

A less successful purchase was a spiffy snowmobile jumpsuit. It cracked and rattled so in the cold it sounded like the sleeves would fall out. And how, asked a friend, would you answer a call of nature with only a zipper down the front? Take off the while top?

Howard Rock, Eskimo editor of the Tundra Times, does not approve of any of my man-made gear. I should wear fur. I agree but fur takes time to tailor and costs several hundred dollars more.

"Well, the Eskimos will worry about you," he assured me. He loaned me his beautiful fur seal mittens. He worries.

A friend from California sent a wool face mask with a little pompom on top. It may look silly, but no one can tell who you are. And it's warmer than anything I've seen here.

Another friend insists I buy glasses against snowblindness.

Word comes from Anaktuvuk that the store is out of groceries. A month's shopping is in order.

A friend of a friend in Anaktuvuk writes triumphantly he has rented me a house for \$30 a month. Of course, fuel is \$75 a barrel and I'll probably have to roll my own barrel from the airport, but at least they've got some. Last winter they ran out.

And finally arrangements are complete. I leave in the morning.

My special camera from Bell and Howell just arrived.

"It and the lenses have been tested at temperatures as low as -650," writes Mike Laurance of their consumer products group. "Everything works just fine."

Now to test the photographer and APFSE at -650. That report will follow next month (I hope).



BLUE BULGES—Lael Morgan, Tundra Times reporter and winner of an Alicia Patterson Fund fellowship, struggles with her cold weather gear. After a month in Anaktuvuk Pass she added caribou fur mukluks and a big wolf ruff. The outfit scares ptarmigan but is quite comfortable at a windy 500 below. Photo by Ruth Edmondson

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