

Arctic Survival—

Dramatic, Dangerous Whale Hunting Days Recalled

(Editor's Note: Eskimo whaling in the Arctic is exciting, dramatic—an experience that can never be forgotten by those who have taken part in it. It can also be dangerous. The bowhead whale, like its cousin whales, is an intelligent animal that fights back with great destructiveness, sometimes with lethal effects. The following, and concluding installment of the story, **DRAMATIC, DANGEROUS WHALING DAYS RECALLED**, points out some of the near tragedies and one that was fatal.)

Part Three

By HOWARD ROCK
Times Editor

Background of Tragedy

My paternal grandfather, Kakaimaq, was a whaler of good repute and he had died, a victim of a whale he sought to take.

At the time of his death, the Tikiqah whalers were using their own traditional weapons—the whale harpoons of bone or ivory—a far cry from even the obsolete timed projectiles used today at the village and other whaling communities.

Kakaimaq and his crew of three adults and three boys, one of which was his son, Weyahok, my father, had gone in pursuit of a good sized whale. My father had been 14 years old. The oldest one, Akniachak, was 16 and the youngest, Koonook, was 13.

Kakaimaq had struck at the usually accepted target area—the kidney area of the animal. Since the oldtime Eskimo whalers could never hope to kill whales on the spot, they went for this target that created internal bleeding and weakened the bowhead in comparatively short time.

Freak Reaction

"We were in a good position and away from the usual danger points," my father recalled sadly. "I don't know what caused it. Perhaps father had hit a certain nerve.

Whatever it was, the whale reacted in a freak manner.

"In an instant, a great force from below flattened me to the bottom of the umiak and the next moment a sickening sensation of sailing—through the air.

"The whale had caught us squarely under the umiak with its great flukes, smashing the framing to bits.

"I remember hitting the water with great force after having been thrown clear of the wrecked umiak. I then went underwater for what seemed a long time. I finally felt air around my head.

"I looked around and I saw our boat had settled in the water, a shapeless thing.

"Then I heard my father's voice, 'Son, are you alright?' I answered that I was. He said, 'I'm very badly hurt and I won't make it. How about the other boys?'

"It was miraculous that the other boys and myself had not been hurt except for some bruises. All the adults had apparently been very badly hurt. They, along with my father, did not survive.

"My father kept encouraging us to try to swim to the shore ice which was about 125 feet away. We didn't know how to swim. My father kept saying, 'Use your hands like paddles.' We did.

"As I was about 25 feet away from the ice, I could no longer hear my father's voice. He had apparently succumbed

to his wounds.

"I was the first to reach the ice. I pulled myself up on to it. The next boy, Akniachak, reached the ice very soon after. I pulled him up. The third boy, Koonook, almost gave up and said he couldn't make it. We encouraged him and pleaded with him. We were crying. He finally made it and we pulled him up.

"We, the three boys, were saved and we couldn't have made it without our thick haired caribou clothing our mothers had made for us. Our clothing kept us afloat.

"When I reached the ice, I looked out where the terrible accident had happened. There was no sign of life, only the paddles drifting out to sea."

Sam Rock had never liked to relate the tragedy. It was too close—too immediate. It was a wonder that he was able to hunt whales at all with such a frightening and tragic background.

Was he ever afraid? We don't know. He never showed any manifestation of it.

The Near Tragedy

Allen Rock himself came very close to tragedy when he caught his huge whale on May 24, 1961.

"I struck the whale and the bomb exploded," he recalled. "It began to turn over and I thought I got it on the spot. But all of a sudden, the great flukes whipped out of the water and headed straight for us. They missed the bow of the umiak and my head by about an inch or two.

"The great whipping action threw water into my face with such force that it blinded me for several seconds. If those flukes had hit the umiak even

a little bit, I don't know what would have happened to my crew and myself."

Dangerous Situation

In his pursuit of the great bowhead, my father had many near accidents.

One unnerving moment was when a whipping harpoon line accidentally caught on the bowsprit of the umiak as a huge whale he had struck sounded with great speed.

"I tried to disengage it by pulling on it but it was so tightly wedged I couldn't pull it off," Weyahok recalled.

And this with his reputation as the strongest man in the village.

"The water was spraying and fanning out on each side of the bow and I could feel the umiak yawing behind me. The water began to cascade into our boat. The whale was taking us under!"

Even at the heat of the desperate moment, Sam Rock saw the comical side of the deadly incident.

"I whipped my hand to my right hip to get my knife to cut the rope and as I did, glanced back at the umiak. There he was, your Uncle

Nayukuk, way up in the air at the stern desperately trying to reach the water beneath with his paddle which he couldn't reach at that moment. That man—he was a helmsman all the way."

Sam, when telling about that incident, never failed to break into a convulsive laughter. The vivid memory of it never left him.

The Deafening Pop

"As I was about to cut the rope, the bowsprit suddenly gave way and in the next instant, there was a deafening report. I thought at first that one of our bombs had exploded.

"The big noise came from one of the inflated seal skin floats. The sudden release of the rope from the bowsprit somehow whipped it with a slam on the surface of the water and it exploded with a great POP!" related Sam with a smile.

My father and his crew later captured the whale in question. The timing mechanism on the projectile had again failed to function while Sam's aim had been true to the target.

Dangerous, But...

The traditional whaling time at Point Hope and other localities, is a period of suspense, excitement—and danger. It is still being carried on with the same, time proven 24 or 25-foot umiak—an oogruk skin covered boat.

The annual hunt is necessary from the food standpoint. The muktuk and meat of the bowhead are much prized by the Eskimos all over the northern part of Alaska and into Canada.

To those who have taken part, the whale hunt is an unforgettable period in one's life with strong overtones of romance of the participation in a great tradition.

The hunt can become extremely dangerous and brave men have died in the pursuit. It is a challenge that tries men's skill and brawn but the ultimate achievement of taking one of the world's great animals is a reward so enriching to the spirit of the hunter that he meets the challenge head on.

Getting the whale means great amounts of food for the village. By tradition, a laudatory tribute is made to the conqueror of the whale. It is climaxed at the annual whaling celebration held in early June where Point Hope is concerned.

No wonder my brother, Allen Rock, said, "The sense of achievement of getting a whale is one of the greatest feelings a man can ever get."

Nostalgic, But...

Here is the man who reached the epitome of achievement in his people's eyes. In the meantime, his editor brother at times shifts uncomfortably in front of the typewriter.

To come from a traditional whaling family and step into a drastically different profession gives one a vague sense of loss. Editing a newspaper that has become important to the native people is also a contribution.

The editor cannot, however, forget the thrill of the whale hunt, especially when his brother's words return at times to haunt him:

"I tell you what, Howard. Why don't you take over my crew next spring?"

AR Passenger Train to Seward

The Alaska Railroad passenger service between Anchorage and Seward began last week for the first time in many years.

The new passenger train operates via Whittier on Friday, Saturday and Sunday of each week. The continuation of the run will depend on whether it attracts sufficient patronage.

Part Four and Conclusion of: Senator Gruening, Assistant Enjoy Savoonga Walrus Carnival

BLIND FOR 17 YEARS—Daniel Alowa, 42, asked "Who is that?" when we went visiting in one of the houses. He has been blind for 17 years with heavy cataracts on both eyes. Sight failed first in the right eye; then a similar cataract formed on the left eye.

Senator Gruening, who is a doctor, examined the cataracts briefly and said he thought they were operable, so that possibly Daniel's sight could be restored, though there would be a question about that after so many years. The blind man said no doctor had ever looked at him. The senator is going to arrange that it will be done.

FACE TATTOOING—Some of the older women at Savoonga and many more at Gambell have tattoo lines on their faces. The custom of tattooing women's faces to make them even more beautiful was common previously, but has not been practiced for the past 30 years. A mixture of soot and seal oil was inserted under the skin with needles.

FOUNTAIN OF YOUTH—Many residents of St. Lawrence Island look remarkably young for their years. The example is cited of Nelson Alowa, whose younger brother, Thomas, moved from the island some years ago to

live at Noorvik on the mainland. Islanders say anyone would mistake Nelson for the younger of the brothers.

In another family, a much younger brother left Savoonga to live in Siberia. He returned on a visit, looking like a very old man compared with his youthful appearing elder brother who had remained on the island.

CARRYING CHILDREN—In most Eskimo villages on the mainland young children are carried by their mothers in piggy-back fashion, usually tucked inside the mother's parka. In both Gambell and Savoonga children are lifted all the way up on top of the shoulders of the mother, father or older brother or sister, where they ride quite easily.

BIBLE TRANSLATORS—Mr. and Mrs. David Shinen, who work for the Wycliffe Bible Translators of Santa Ana, Calif., make up one of eight teams in Alaska which are working to develop a written form of the various Eskimo dialects so that the New Testament can be translated into those dialects. The Shinens have been on St. Lawrence Island since 1959.

Although the people of Gambell and Savoonga try to listen to the programs broadcast by radio station KICY of Nome in the two main dialects, the Inupiat of the

people north of Unalakleet and the Upiik of those southward from that mainland village their own language is quite different.

COLD STORAGE—Mrs. Gladys Musgrove is a cheerful widow who works out of Nome for the Cooperative Extension Service of the University of Alaska. She flew to Savoonga on the same plane with us and returned when we did. She instructs residents in canning and food preparation.

Although meat on the island is fairly hard to come by, it is estimated that half of that which is taken is wasted through spoilage before it can be consumed. Mrs. Musgrove held a meeting with the village council to describe a new type of cold storage which has been developed at the university. Salt water brine about four feet deep is used at the bottom of an underground silo to draw the cold into the chamber and maintain a temperature of 20 degrees. This does not compare with the zero temperature which is considered ideal for meat preservation but a cold storage of the new type can be run economically without fuel or machinery.

POLITICS?—Found in the little house, known as the nurse's quarters, where Senator Gruening and I stayed

for two days at Savoonga was a "Workers for Wally" button. On the wall of the home of the village president is a House of Representatives calendar on which there is a rubber stamped legend: "With compliments of Howard W. Pollock, the Congressman from Alaska."

MANNERS—In the hallway of the little schoolhouse at Savoonga is a sign lettered by the students as follows: "Good Manners at a Movie: 1) Sit in your seat; 2) Don't clap your hands; 3) Don't go in and out; 4) Don't fight; 5) Don't make too much noise; 6) Don't throw papers; 7) Courtesy; 8) Don't slam the door; 9) Don't chew your gum too loud."

There was much of interest to see at Gambell also, but our stay there was shorter. We were met by ten of the older residents in colorful oldtime costumes, made mostly of thin white intestine, decorated with red cloth and hanging animal tails. Head-dresses were of polar bear hair.

The flat Eskimo drums are struck differently at Gambell than at Savoonga at the dances. At Savoonga they are struck on the skin side with little curved wooden whips. At Gambell only the wood frame of the under side is struck, and by a heavy staff.

(continued on page 5)