

Peter J. Priess

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Charles E. Hanson, Jr. Editor

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The Eskimo Trade Ninety Years Ago

SOURCE MATERIAL

The following observations on acculturation of the inland Eskimos on the Kowak River in Northwestern Alaska have been gleaned from the "Report of the Cruise of the Revenue Marine Steamer Corwin in the Arctic Ocean, 1884" by Capt. M. A. Healy (Washington 1889). In spite of their late date, they give some specific data on the progress of trade with the Eskimos, and some views of a transition from stone age to "civilization" which resemble those made by colonists in New York and Virginia over 300 years ago.

pp. 16-17. I wish to again call the attention of the Department to the injustice that is being done the harmless people of northern Alaska by depriving them of breech-loading arms. No evil results can come of the repeal of the law in so far as it applies to them, and a manifest act of humanity would be accomplished by so doing. They are a peaceful race. They have no tribal affiliations and no chiefs, their "omalik" being the head of a family. They live apart in small villages; communication is difficult, and their languages different. With the exception of She-sho lik, a town on Kotzebue Sound, where they congregate during the summer to the number of twelve to fifteen hundred for the double purpose of catching salmon and white whale and trading, no considerable number of them are ever together, and it is not within

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the range of possibility that any combination can be effected for warlike purposes.

Again the whole sale slaughter of the walrus by whalers has so diminished the numbers of that aquatic mammal as to almost deprive these people of their main source of animal food. Those that are left have become so wild that they can seldom be brought within range of the spear or shotgun.

Any one at all familiar with the use of arms knows how difficult it is to charge a muzzle-loading gun in cold weather, yet these natives of a polar climate are obliged by law to depend upon this weapon for their principal means of obtaining food and clothing where game has been largely decreased by the very people who forbid them the use of modern arms. In the winter a muzzle-loading gun, after being subjected to a temperature of sixty to seventy degrees below zero, can not be carried into a house or brought near a fire if loaded, as the frost in the barrel will dampen the powder and render the charge worthless.

Occasionally breech-loading rifles of the latest patterns are seen in their boats, and the white men coming in contact with the natives raise no objection whatever to their retaining these improved arms. I have no doubt that they have quite a number of these rifles in their possession, and to seize them would be an act of injustice, as the Indians have bought them in good faith and can not be made to understand why they should not have them.

For like reasons there should be no restrictions on the sale of cartridges. At present those having rifles are obliged to pay a price for cartridges to fit their arms so high as to almost be equivalent to the purchase of a new rifle.

I believe that no good argument can be adduced for keeping these weapons out of their lawful reach, while the dictates of reason and the promptings of human instincts would seem to demand their unrestricted sale. In this opinion I am joined by all who are acquainted with the habits, customs, and needs of these people, and quite a number of the whaling captains indulge in much unfavorable criticism of the law.

* * * *

Owing to the continued and determined efforts of the *Corwin*, and notwithstanding the lax enforcement of the law regarding liquor permits to vessels clearing for this Territory, I am happy to state that the whisky traffic in northern Alaska has almost entirely ceased. The beneficial effects of our annual cruises are apparent in the changed condition of the Eskimos. Sickness has decreased; the people are better clothed; more attention is paid to their boats; food is plentiful, furs, bone, and ivory for trade and abundant, and the large number of healthy young children in every village dissipates former fears that the race might become extinct.

pp. 86-89, (*Ethnological Notes by Lt. Cantwell*).

In the course of my investigations I observed five forms of spears and three of arrows; the description and uses of which are as follows:

SPEARS:

- (1) *Reindeer; Thrusting*. — Shaft of spruce or larch about five feet long, slightly tapering, with head of chipped flint, ivory, or, rarely, jade.
- (2) *Projectile*. — Light wooden shaft three and one-half to four feet in length, with short chipped flint or iron head, shot from a bow.
- (3) *Throwing*. — Shaft four and one-half to five feet long, smaller than (1), with barbed ivory or bone head two and one-half inches long, darted at fish or small game.

- (4) *Bird Spear*. — Light wooden shaft like (3), with barbed ivory or bone head, rarely curved, and with three ivory or bone prongs fastened in the middle.
- (5) *Bear Spear*. — Shaft larger than deer spear, with iron or chipped flint head, rarely obsidian or jade.

ARROWS:

- (1) *Reindeer*. — Shaft two and one-half feet long, with long ivory bone, or chipped flint and, rarely, obsidian head.
- (2) *Bear or other dangerous game*. — Shaft larger than (1), with short, sharp-pointed iron or chipped flint head.
- (3) *Bird*. — Light shaft feathered at small end, with blunt bone or, rarely, stone head.

The bow used by the natives is about five feet long, made of larch and re-enforced with rawhide or sinew. In order to increase the propulsive power of the arm in throwing spears a flat board is used eighteen inches long and two and one-half inches wide, having a hole through one end for the finger and its upper surface grooved to steady the weapon.

* * * *

Traps. — The ordinary steel spring trap of commerce is used by all of these tribes, and forms one of the staple articles of trade between them and the traders on the coast. Besides these the natives employ a number of means of capturing animals and birds, some of which are common to all hunters and others which are peculiar to this region. Bear traps are made of very heavy logs, which are so aranged as to fall on the animal when an attempt is made to take the bait. They are clumsy affairs, and the natives confess that they are not very successful in capturing this animal by means of these traps. For smaller game, such as foxes, lynx, beaver, etc., steel traps or figure-of-four traps of native make are used.

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Implements or special crafts. — The most important article of native domestic economy is the knife. In the past a rude implement was made of stone, bone, or ivory, but now iron has replaced the use of the primitive implements to such an extent that only in rare instances could the latter be found. Iron and steel knives are imported into the country from the United States, and he is a very poor hunter who has not purchased one at least of these necessary articles. As a usual thing the larger they are the better. They are worn strapped to the thigh, and are carefully protected from injury from dampness by a sheath made of hair-seal or deer-skin. In their hands the knife is used either as a weapon or a tool; as a tool it is remarkable what a degree of perfection the natives have reached in its use. Spears, bows, arrows, etc., which require great nicety of finish, are made with the knife alone. The shafts of arrows specially attracted my notice on account of their symmetrical appearance, being as round and smooth as if lathe-turned.

Woman's Knife, made of chipped flint, jade, or sharpened slate, with a wooden or bone handle, is still common among the interior tribes. It is used principally in the work of splitting fish during the fishing season.

Drills made of iron or rarely of stone were seen. The point of the drill is inserted in the end of a handle made of soft wood. Drill-bows are made of ivory, bone or wood, with holes in the ends to which are attached a thong of rawhide or sinew. The upper end of the handle is rounded, and in use is rested against a small stone socket held between the teeth.

* * * *

Flint-flaker. — A short piece of iron, evidently the remains of a knife

with a bone handle. The use of iron and the introduction of fire-arms is doing much to render the use of stone obsolete, and the occupation of chipping flints, which was once pursued with profit by these inland river people and especially by the natives of the Kowak, will soon be entirely gone.

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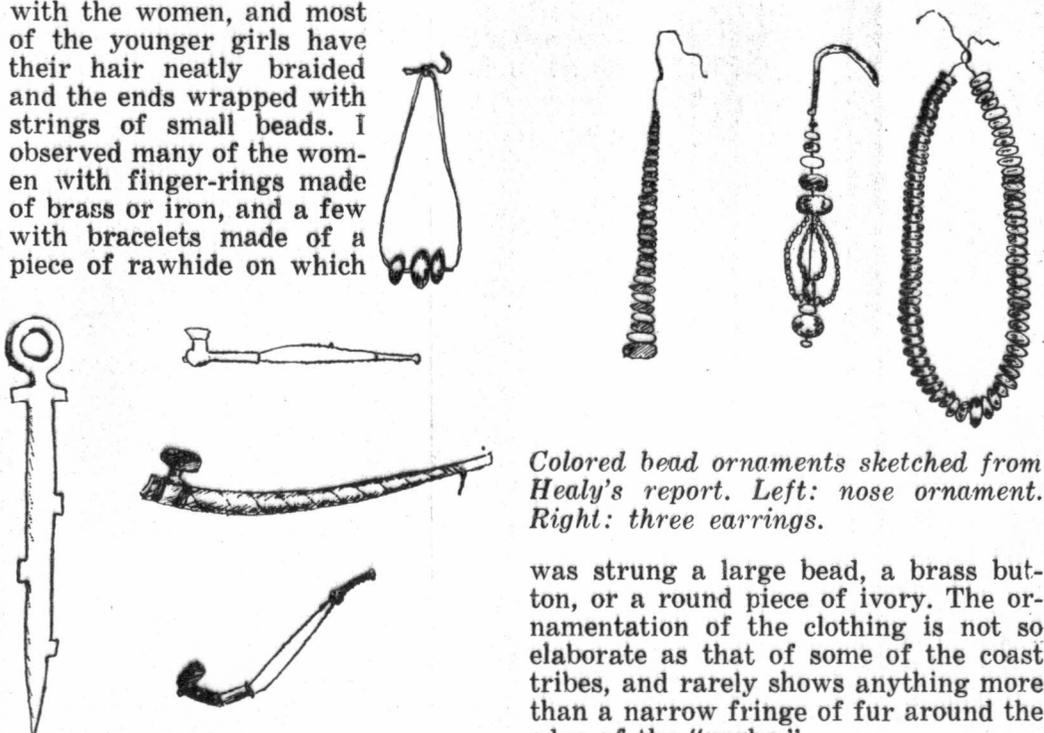
Needles. — Steel needles from the United States are used almost entirely. I saw only two specimens of bone needles of native manufacture, one of which was made for me by our guide A-ta-ta-rok.

* * * *

Fire. — Among these natives the flint and steel will probably never be supplanted by the more modern invention of matches, although the latter are used to some extent during the summer season by the coast natives and others who visit the whale-ships. They are not considered as desirable for their uses as the more compact flint and steel. Several plants indigenous to the region furnish an abundant and easily obtained supply of material to make tinder. Among the natives of the interior there are a few old people who have retained the art of making fire by the use of the fire-drill, but the younger generation apparently do not practice it.

* * * *

... Ear-rings made of bright-colored beads strung on sinew are common with the women, and most of the younger girls have their hair neatly braided and the ends wrapped with strings of small beads. I observed many of the women with finger-rings made of brass or iron, and a few with bracelets made of a piece of rawhide on which



Colored bead ornaments sketched from Healy's report. Left: nose ornament. Right: three earrings.

Pipes sketched from Healy's report. Left: Steel pipe pricker, natural size. Top: Modern pipe, brass bowl, one-fourth size. Center: Pipe, brass bowl, one-fourth size; Bottom: Modern pipe, stem of wood and brass cartridge case, rubber bit, one-fourth size.

was strung a large bead, a brass button, or a round piece of ivory. The ornamentation of the clothing is not so elaborate as that of some of the coast tribes, and rarely shows anything more than a narrow fringe of fur around the edge of the "parka."

All these tribes are universally addicted to the use of tobacco, and the pipe is always an article upon which considerable work in the way of ornament is spent. There were seen so many shapes and styles of this one article that it would be impossible to give a description of all. I will, then, take the ones

most commonly seen as examples:

The bowl is made of iron, brass, ivory, or stone, cylindrical, with its top flanged and two lugs on the lower end, over which the lashing passes which secures it to the stem. The bore of the bowl is from one-fourth to one-half inch in diameter and holds, when full, about a thimblefull of very finely pulverized tobacco. The stem is from twelve to eighteen inches in length, and is made by splitting a branch of alder or soft piece of wood in two and making a groove in each part. The two parts are then put together so that the grooves lie opposite each other and are securely lashed in this position with sinew.

The women's pipe is longer than that of the men. Each is furnished with a short steel or ivory pricker for clearing the bowl when it gets foul.

* * * *

During the short summer months those of the interior natives who have furs to barter, or who care to make the journey to the coast for pleasure only, descend the rivers and join in the festivities which annually take place at a rendezvous of all the natives of the coast and interior in this region. At such times wrestling, foot-races, and feats of strength and agility occupy the attention of the young men and boys most of the time; and frequently a kayak race and contests between the hunters in throwing the spear from a boat interest the older ones. Dancing, singing, and story-telling also are indulged in on special occasions.

I observed several groups of natives, mostly belonging on the coast, gambling in the camp at Hotham Inlet, and they were playing with ordinary cards.

p. 108, (notes by 2nd Asst. Engineer McLenegan).

In the Kowak River region the fur trade is of local importance only. The few hundred skins which are annually brought down to the coast are comparatively insignificant in value, and in the end are productive of more evil than good to the native inhabitants.

It is impossible to gather any statistics showing the value of the production. It is believed, however, that the annual product does not exceed ten thousand dollars in value.

The most valuable peltry to be obtained in this region is the silver-gray fox. The skin is worth about ten dollars in trade to the natives, but in the San Francisco market it is worth from two to three times that amount. The beaver is found sparingly here, and the fur, although in demand, has not a high value. The peltry can be obtained for about a dollar in trade.

The land otter is found more or less commonly throughout the interior. The fur is justly esteemed in the market, and by many it is considered equal to the fur-seal. The fur is thicker and heavier than the latter and certainly much more serviceable. It can be obtained for about two dollars in trade.

The marten is found abundantly in the mountain districts. In former times it was one of the most important and valuable skins in the market. At the present time, owing to the caprice of fashion, there is little demand for it. It is worth about one dollar in trade.

In addition to those mentioned, the red, white, and cross fox, bear, wolf, lynx, and reindeer are found abundantly in this region, and their skins are a staple article of trade. There are no trading stations in this region. The bulk of the production is brought down to the shores of Kotzebue Sound, and a market is found on board the numerous vessels that visit this region.

There is an excellent opportunity for the establishment of a trading station at this point, and the enterprise would undoubtedly prove remunerative.

nerative. Under the present lack of system the trade is injurious and demoralizing to the natives.

There are certain furs which can not be obtained except for rifles or whiskey. Large quantities of both were brought into Kotzebue Sound during the past summer by the Diomedea and Cape Prince of Wales natives, who obtained them on the Siberian coast

The sooner the limited demand for rifles can be legitimately supplied the sooner will the horrors of the whisky traffic cease.