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Barrow Christmas, 1971

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Notes: Originals on 7 inch reels. Master copies on CD.

Series:

Sadie Neakok and Mary Leavitt are speaking in Inupiaq. Noises of children laughing in the background can be heard.

Conversation switches to English. Sadie Neakok is translating for the grandmother, Mary Leavitt. There are two interviewers, a man and a woman. Mary Leavitt is now 81 and she remembers in the olden days when people from outlying areas used to gather. People from outlying villages used to come in to a bigger settlement like Barrow, or Point Barrow when there was no Barrow. The grandmother was born on the point, a location people used to gather to compete.

People didn't have much they were able to do during the shortest days of the year, so they would gather to compete and would bring enough food with them to last them through the shorter days. Each village would have a representative. Villages would also send a runner with a song as a message to the people that they are coming in at a certain time and naming a person in the village who they wish to compete with. Messages were passed back and forth this way through runners by singing and chanting. This is the way the villages would plan events for the annual gathering.

The interviewer asks if there used to be men's and women's games. Sadie Neakok speaks in Inupiaq and translates the question for Mary Leavitt. The grandmother answers in Inupiaq. Sadie Neakok says that the grandmother says that she has never heard of women taking part in the competition in these areas; they did most of the cooking and preparing of food.

The interviewer asks if the feasting was at the same time as the games.

Women would prepare the food and have it in the biggest building available, in the middle of the floor. Everyone would eat.

The interview asks what other things would go on during this time.

Mostly the competition was among men. There were no dog races. There was no competition among women. During the shortest days of the year, no one took time out to have dances; it was just competition to see who the best athlete was.

Dog team races are relatively modern. Only in about '40 did they come out with the dog team races. And after about 1958 or 1959, you didn't hear any more about dog team races at Christmas time.

Eskimo dances were not held during the period of competition. Dances were reserved more for celebrations where everyone had a good time with no competition.

At the times when messengers came in, they would have dances when the message was presented at a gathering. A dance might also be held at the end of a big gathering, but dances were not held right in the middle of a competition event.

The interviewer asks if the grandmother remembers when Christmas was brought by the missionaries.

The grandmother remembers when the first missionaries came in. At this time they started the school. She can remember only 6 or 7 students were in the school. The others lived as nomads and didn't stay in one place so the children could go to school. The grandmother didn't go to school. Her family moved around. When the grandmother got married, her children didn't go to school either. They had to live where game was available. The grandmother mentions names of some of the first teachers and missionaries. The grandmother remembers coming into the village for the Christmas program. Each year, the event got a little bigger. The Thanksgiving feast was also an important event.

The interviewer asks what the first missionaries' Christmas was like.

The grandmother remembers being invited in from Point Barrow and her parents bringing her down. The children at that time were given little packages. Some of the packages held a little cake of soap. Soap was highly prized then. There were little packages of sweets for each of the children and maybe little mission bundles. "This was the only time that they knew that people gave each other anything. And then it got to where people started giving." The grandmother remembers that as she grew older, the presents from the missionary boxes never varied very much. The main present was soap. This was welcome because at that time cloth was being distributed among the Eskimos and being bought from stores and the missionaries and the teachers showed how to wash it clean with soap.

The interviewer asks if there was much singing in the church at that time.

The grandmother can remember that Native translations of Christmas songs would be sung. Those that were in school were taught to sing the English version. The grandmother can remember Christmas caroling and Christmas programs where songs were sung and Santa Claus would get on the stage of the missionary church program and everyone was given a present. Caroling was introduced by missionaries.

The interviewer asks about the old times. He asks about who came from where during these gatherings and whether they brought gifts. The Sadie Neakok and the grandmother discuss in Inupiaq for several minutes.

The grandmother can barely remember this far back but she has heard parents and other older people talking. She was born in 1890 when the first missionaries came. The first missionaries were also teachers. They built the back half of a building which is still standing. The grandmothers can remember people gathering but she can't say for sure if people from villages came and stayed for the full length or not. But during the shortest days of the year, she can remember people coming in and gathering to have games.

The interviewer asks where the people came from.

The grandmother says they never knew about settlements like Wainwright (?) and Calville(?). There would just be one family here, one there. These people would come in from their camps but they could hardly be called a community. She remembers them coming in but she couldn't determine where they were from. The grandmother remembers seeing runners come in from the Point Hope area to compete. But a whole lot of people wouldn't come in, just the ones who were going to compete; not a whole village at a time.

The interviewer asks for a description of some of the games played in those days.

The grandmother says that most of the games that you see today are handed down: hand pulling, high jumps, somersaults, string pulling, throwing. Although, in the old days, people were more strict about the times of the year certain games were played. The blanket toss only came with the whale catch in the spring. Summer games that have to do with spears and seal poles were never played during the Christmas season.

The interviewer asks if there were any celebrations when the sun came back.

The grandmother said no. People just started moving out to hunt as the days grew longer. The only time that people gathered was the shortest days of the year.

The interviewer asks what the Inupiaq name for the time of the shortest days of the year is.

The grandmother says she doesn't know what this is called. There may have been a name for it a long time ago. The only way the grandmother has heard it referred to is by "the time of games" or "the time of the round up/gathering (of people)"

At the end, the interviewers ask for the women's names. They give their names as well as an Eskimo name.