

Ernest Kignuk  
Barrow

Interview by N. Jacobs  
September, 1974  
At Kignuk's house, Browerville  
2 hours

Ernest Kignuk is a Nunamiute Eskimo, born somewhere in the Brooks Range at the beginning of the Twentieth Century.

His parents were nomadic hunters who came to Barrow to visit occasionally when he was a boy.

Kignuk describes visiting in a sod house at Barrow when he was a boy, describes entering through the sunken tunnel entrance, and the way people inhabited the igloo.

In the 1920's Kignuk moved to Barrow and drove the mail by dog team to Point Hope. He describes the route but says he had no unusual experiences--if the weather was bad, he just waited it out, and avoided any problems.

He describes how his parents hunted caribou, made snow block shelters, made shelters of caribou skin over willow frames.

Kignuk points out that until the Navy built the base at Point Barrow (several miles up the spit from Barrow Village) there was no moneyed economy; Brower's store and a few trading posts were the only structures representing white man's world. The Eskimos hunted and traded furs for supplies--tea, flour, sugar, etc.--but other than that, they lived much as they always had. But in 1941 all this changed. Kignuk went to work as a carpenter, and has worked at the base for many years after.

Some years ago he became concerned about the change of Eskimo culture, and began to make interviews with other Eskimos. He has several dozen tapes on wall shelves--he said someday he might let the University copy them! He may place them in the North Slope library; if they go into public domain they should be valuable.