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Howard Rock

Lael Morgan, interviewer

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Lael Morgan asked Howard Rock to talk about Pt. Hope, Alaska. Howard Rock said one of the first things he experienced was the cold. Some people would say an Eskimo born in a village wouldn't be affected by the cold, but that is not true. He was born on August 10, 1911. He described the usual conditions in August. By the middle of the month the smell of fall is in the atmosphere. Lots of times snow begins to fall. Each day it gets a little colder until the winter sets in. Lael Morgan asked him when the ice starts to form on the fresh water. Rock said it starts to form in October and November. Around November it is thick enough to travel on it. They would go up to Kukpuk River for grayling fishing. The people would fish there every fall at the first part of November. Morgan asked about the bounty of Pt. Hope. Rock said it was an ideal for people to settle because of the animal migrations. One kind of animal would migrate one month and then another species would migrate the next month. Around April white whales would start coming up and they would precede the big bowhead whales who would arrive in the middle of April. A few oogruks [ugruk] would start showing up. After the whaling season there would be more oogruks [ugruk]. While the ice is breaking up in springtime there are quite a few ugruk. Seals are there all year long much of the time. Before whaling season in March great schools of tomcod would come by. They fished with lines made out of baleen. Each line would have four sets of hooks with a sinker in the middle. You would make a hole in the ice and put the fish hooks in. Tomcods are eight to eleven inches. As the ice begins to break up in spring the eider ducks begin to migrate in great flocks. They hunted them with bow type slings in the old days. They would hide behind the ice hummocks and as they flew over they threw the sling at them. When you hit the duck it would tangle the duck. The strings were made out of sinew or a fine thin seal. They used bones and ivory for the weight. Morgan asked about hunting after the ice goes out. Rock said walrus starts coming. The bearded seal numbers increase. They talked about their size. Rock said they used harpoons with a float. When he was growing up he used to go with his father. When walrus are migrating they would get up on large cakes of ice and sun themselves. They would sneak up to them on the sun side. When they got close to them in a skin boat his father would begin shooting. One time his father got three of them. The smaller ones they would put in the skin boat. Other ones they had to cut up. They used all of the walrus including the flippers. They would cure the flippers in oil. They were also fixed fresh. They used the intestines and liver of the seal. The choice part of the seal are the side parts of the seal and the brisket. They would eat all of it. It was also used for dog food. His mother would take sealskins and cut up the seal blubber. They were cut into slices about four inches by two inches. They would be put in a seal poke. It was then put in the hallway of the igloo and it would render. He said it takes about three weeks to render the fat. When it gets the right taste to it then it would be put in a cool place. All the air would be taken out of the poke and keep it from going rancid.

Morgan asked about fishing in the summer. Rock said they would get whitefish, salmon, arctic char, herring, and smelt. They would get caribou throughout the winter and summer. Some winters it

wouldn't stay around. Sometimes there would be a scarcity of caribou meat. This summer they didn't have any caribou meat in Pt. Hope.

Morgan asked how large the population was when he lived in Pt. Hope. Rock said there were 300-325 people. Morgan asked about some times of bad hunting. Rock said there were times in the winter when hunting was very bad. Hunters would go out every day and wouldn't bring anything back. They had caches. They had underground caches which were dug into the permafrost. They could keep meat there frozen even in the summer. It cures at the same time. The caches were made to store a lot of meat. There were different levels for different types of meat. At the lowest part of the cache in a special chamber was the whale meat and muktuk. The bottom section was pretty much frozen. On the top level on platforms were the ukruk meats. His mother used to prepare them for storage by lacing them into a ball with the blubber side outside. The ball was put on the platform and they would cure. They were tied up with thongs.

Morgan asked him if he ever remembered the cellar being bare. Rock said it got pretty empty sometimes especially when they didn't get too many whales. It happened during one or two springs. By the time the next whaling season came around the caches would be quite empty. The men would continue to hunt. He remembers some shortages of food in the village. It never got real serious. His mother had to ration the meat every once in a while. By that time a hunter would get seals. He remembers his father bringing back two seals when hunting conditions were bad. Supplies had gotten low. His mother cut up the seals and then asked him and his brother and sister to take pieces of the seal to certain families. There was very little left for them. He voiced his concern several times and his mother told him to be quiet. The next day someone would come to their door with other food. In the summer people would bring salmon. This is what they have done all through the ages. When hunting conditions are bad the whole village suffers and they had to share. In good times they would store as much as they wanted for themselves.

Morgan asked if Pt. Hope was better off than many other areas. Rock said they were better off than other places because of the succession of animals that migrated throughout the year. After the ice breaks up and floats away there's no ice on the shore. Until the ice comes back in November there wouldn't be seals. They had lake fish and there might be a few walrus stragglers. Morgan asked about berries. Rock said they had blackberries and salmonberries. They were picked in August or somewhere around there. They ate sour dock. His mother would put sugar and flour with them. They had certain types of roots, too. They would gather a certain root that was gathered by the mice. They would go out on the tundra and try to find the mouse cache. His mother would dig up the cache with her ulu. His mother told him to leave about half of the roots in the cache for the mouse.

Morgan asked about the polar bear. Rock said the polar bear had always been hunted around Pt. Hope. They used spears. It was a tricky way to hunt. The polar bear could use its front paws to attack along with the teeth. He said they are very adept with their left paw. The old timers used the spears to hunt the polar bear. They would make the bear attack them and then they aimed the spear at the chest of the bear. Rock said there must have been cases about hunters being killed by the polar bear. They are very fierce when they are wounded. By the time he was growing up they were using guns. The hunters used to get quite a few polar bears during the year, at least 75 bears for the whole village. When hunting by planes started the hunters kept the polar bears from getting close to the village and the polar bear take was getting less and less. It got to the point where they were only getting two or three bears.

This year since the polar bear hunting by planes was banned the hunters are beginning to get polar bears again. There were quite a few hunters who got bears at Pt. Hope. Morgan asked if there was a particular season when polar bear hunting was the best. Rock said around February and March the hunting would be better. He said the summer was a time for fishing and camping. It was a time in the village to relax from the rigors of hunting. The men would be able to relax and repair their boats. Or they would make new frames for the skin boats for whaling. They would prepare for the year to come. In the summer the sun would shine continuously for fifty days. As a little boy he would try to stay up all night. They were told not to get in trouble. They played games and ran around the beach. About two or three in the morning they would lay down on the beach and sleep a while. There were always birds flying in the summer such as murre which they called coal bills. They tried to hit them with slings. Morgan asked if they had shellfish. Rock said they had a tiny crab. They would collect them in nets and used seal meat as a base. He said you would eat them raw frozen.

Morgan asked about their houses. Rock said most of the people were living in sod houses. About the time he started attending school some of the villagers were building frame houses. He said they were made to believe that they were better houses to live in. They were colder. The igloo was much warmer. Rock talked about the construction of sod houses. He said you needed a supply of spruce driftwood. The year before you build the house you cut up blocks of sod four or five inches thick and about a foot square. You pile them up like bricks so the weather would dry them. In the spring after whaling the men would begin to shape the frame of the igloo out of driftwood. They hew out the flooring of the igloo. They used planks for the walls and then they would make a domed roof. They couldn't be too large because they would be difficult to heat. The old time people would use seal oil or whale oil lamps. One or two lamps would keep the igloo warm.

Morgan asked what they used for cooking. Rock said in the olden days they cooked outside the main room in a hallway. They built a fire there with wood. They also used strips of seal blubber. They were beginning to make stoves out of gasoline drums when he was growing up. They still used the lamps to heat the igloo. They could read by the light. They could make a large flame in some of the lamps. They used dried moss for the wick. They would dry it and powder it. They used porcelain dishes. They mostly used spoons. His favorite food was whale meat and muktuk as with the rest of the community. He liked caribou, too. They changed their diet by eating different meats. Morgan asked what kind of white man's food he liked. Rock said homemade bread. His mother learned how to make bread. Butter was also one of his favorites. They had condensed milk, canned peaches, and canned tomatoes. There was a store in the village that sold flour, rice, beans, rolled oats and other things. Peter Kuniak was the person who operated the store. He did have hard candy in the store. Later on they began to sell candy bars.

Morgan asked about clothing. Rock said clothing was the main thing to survive the winters. They made them from materials such as caribou skins or reindeer skins. They did have a reindeer herd at Pt. Hope at one time. The skins were ideal for winter clothing. They lasted for about a year. The women made new parkas for each year. They were tanned by the women to a very supple soft material. They were light and warm. They used fawn skins or squirrel skins for the insides of the parka. They had two layers. Later on when he was growing up they covered the parka with white calico. They were able to walk around on the ice to hunt. This idea was borrowed by the American and Russian armies during the Second World War. The parka is now used by the army, too. The mukluk had airspace. Footwear should never be tight so there would be space for air. They had caribou socks. His parents let him gather grass roots or plant roots by the seashore which were used for the insoles. The roots would be shaped like a tube. They

wouldn't slip around when you stepped on them. Morgan asked about the use of long johns. Rock said they had reached into Pt. Hope when he was growing up. The hunters would strip down from the waist up when they went into the igloo after they went hunting.

Morgan asked about being cold when he was little. Rock said his mother would repair their mukluks. When he was a child there were seven children. His mother's main chore was to clothe his father properly for hunting. Once in a while their mukluks would tear or get holes in them and you would get cold after a while. You had to be careful not to freeze your feet. Morgan asked how cold it would get. Rock said in winter it would get down to forty-five below and along with a twenty mile an hour wind. If you are properly dressed you could be comfortable. He said it is very important to dress properly. He has had frostbite on his cheeks, ears and nose, but not very often. He walked about a mile to go to school. If a blizzard came up they couldn't see very far. They would bunch up and walk on the beach. He doesn't ever remember being scared. They didn't have time to get scared. One of the boys fell into the ocean once and they threw him a line. This was in the summer when they stayed up all night and they got into trouble. Boys were indoctrinated fairly early with information about survival and dress. Food was important. If your stomach was empty then you got cold. They advised you to eat before hunting and carrying some food with you. It helped them to keep warm.