

An Eskimo Whaling Outfit

From Sledge Island, Alaska

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In 1912 William B. Van Valin, an elementary school teacher stationed in Sinuk, Alaska, ushered his students aboard the schooner *New Jersey*. The class sailed to Sledge Island, or Ayak, a small uninhabited island off the south coast of Seward Peninsula (see map on p. 5), to have a picnic celebrating the end of the term. A number of the picnickers clambered to the top of the island to scan the icy waters for signs of walrus. During the descent Johnnie Tumichuk, one of Van Valin's students, spotted a long wooden stick wedged among some boulders. The youngster tugged at the stick, a rare find in a barren Arctic landscape, but could not dislodge it from the surrounding boulders. He proceeded to roll a number of them aside, only to discover that the stick was actually the long shaft of an ancient ivory boat hook, used to push ice away from skin boats and to retrieve harpoon lines. The boy was even more astonished when he realized that he had also exposed the entrance to a cave. Inside the cave, Tumichuk found a cache which included lances, whale-shaped boxes, ivory harpoon rests, whetstones, bentwood buckets, scrapers, slate blades, whale-shaped weights, and a wooden box containing amulets and charms. Tumichuk removed these items, leaving behind a pair of skin gauntlets and a number of stuffed birds. These were never recovered.

Van Valin acquired this collection from his student and discussed the find with a number of former Sledge Islanders. According to Van Valin (1944:48):



1 Northwest Alaskan Eskimos believed that the spirit of a bowhead whale was a woman. She appears on the underside of this magic float which is part of the Sledge Island whaling outfit. (NA 4791, 35 cm. tall. Photograph by William Clough.)

The whaling outfit was an heirloom passed down to a very aged man, a shaman, many years before. The oldest living Eskimo related that this shaman suddenly disappeared while on a trading or hunting trip, and was never seen again. The Eskimos knew that he could not have taken the whaling outfit with him. Each succeeding generation had scoured the country, but had never found a trace of it.

In July 1912, Van Valin evidently took the Sledge Island collection to Seattle, where he showed it to dealers and museum specialists. By happenstance, an aspiring young anthropology student, E. W. Hawkes, was in Seattle at the time and examined the collection. In a letter to George Byron Gordon, then Director of The University Museum, Hawkes wrote:

I took the time to visit Mr. Van Valin today, and to examine his collection in detail. It is a remarkable find, and unlike anything I have seen in any museum. . . . Mr. Van Valin is convinced that he has a rare find, and the collectors and curio dealers of this city have confirmed him on his opinion. (The University Museum Archives)

E. W. Hawkes was a school teacher on Diomed Island who had gone to Alaska in 1908. In 1910 he began corresponding with Gordon about the possibility of enrolling in the Anthropology graduate program at the University of Pennsylvania. Hawkes suggested that if he were allowed to study at the University and

were given a fellowship, he would donate his private Diomed Island artifact collection to The University Museum. Thus, when Hawkes saw Van Valin's Sledge Island material, The University Museum must have been on his mind. Hawkes offered to buy the collection from Van Valin for \$100. Van Valin refused this offer; he was more interested in the scientific importance of the collection than in its cash value. Undeterred, Hawkes continued to visit Van Valin throughout the summer, and during one of these visits suggested that The University Museum would be an excellent repository for the Sledge Island whaling outfit. In a letter dated August 22, 1912, Hawkes wrote Gordon:

The Van Valin collection is mine, after an exciting campaign in competition with other collectors and museum representatives. Personal friendship and the fact that his brother is a Penn graduate inclined Mr. Van Valin in my favor. (The University Museum Archives)

Hawkes transported part of the Sledge Island collection to the east coast so that Gordon might inspect it. Eventually, the collection in its entirety came to The University Museum. By a curious twist, however, Hawkes enrolled at Columbia University where he studied anthropology under Franz Boas and later became a noted Eskimo ethnographer.

Negotiations for the Sledge Island collection also initiated a lengthy correspondence between Gordon and Van Valin (The University Museum Archives, Directors' Letters). In 1916 they reached an agreement whereby The University Museum paid Van Valin \$100 a month for a year. In return for this money, Van Valin was to make ethnographic collections and take motion pictures in order to document

2 The mandible of a large walrus was fashioned into this whetstone container. The container's resemblance to a bowhead whale pleased bowhead whale spirits. (NA 4809A-F, container 20 cm. long. Photograph by Susan Kaplan and Richard Jordan.)



3 Whalers stored fragile slate blades in the bellies of whale-shaped wooden boxes. According to Eskimo lore, thus stored, stone blades became well acquainted with the anatomy of their prospective quarry. (NA 4780, 29 cm. long. Photograph by William Clough.)





4 Eskimos called on the spirits of other hunters for help. This lance blade box, carved in the form of a polar bear head, endowed the weapons stored in it with the speed and deadliness exhibited by a bear. (NA 4784, 20 cm. long. Photograph by William Clough.)

the lifeways of Alaskan Eskimo people. The association between The University Museum and Van Valin continued intermittently for a number of years. As a result, the Museum has a wealth of artifacts, photographs, and notes documenting early 20th century Alaskan Eskimo life.

The Rediscovery of the Sledge Island Whaling Outfit

Early in 1983 we spent a number of weeks examining The University Museum's vast Eskimo collections in order to formulate plans for a temporary Eskimo exhibition and to provide the Director with an assessment of the nature and condition of the collections. In the course of this research, we noted that a number of artifacts dispersed among thousands of others had a distinctive paper label that read: "Sledge Island Whaling Outfit." Many of these specimens were unlike anything any of us had seen in other museum collections or publications.

Since American Section specimens are stored by artifact type rather than by collection unit, we had to reassemble the materials from Sledge Island in order to evaluate their significance. An examination of the Accession Book, which records each specimen by Museum number, revealed that the weapons, utensils, and charms were in fact part of a single coherent collection.

Thus, the Sledge Island specimens were once again reunited, presumably for the first time

since they were accessioned as a unit in 1916. With the exception of a few artifacts that have been published as individual pieces (Ray 1977:90,121), only a passing mention of this collection is found in Van Valin's popular book, *Eskimoland Speaks*. After a close reading of this book, as well as a study of the correspondence between Van Valin, Hawkes, and Gordon housed in the Museum Archives, we were able to piece together the story outlined above.

The Sledge Island Whaling Outfit

Van Valin's account suggests that the Sledge Island artifacts were in fact possessions of the shaman who mysteriously disappeared. Before this collection was inherited by the shaman, it undoubtedly belonged to at least one whaling captain, or *umialik*, a key figure in northwest Alaskan Eskimo economic, political, and social life. While a few other hunter's tool kits and weapons caches have been recovered by archaeologists working on Banks Island and along the Labrador coast in northern Canada, the Sledge Island collection represents the only complete whaling outfit known to us.

While there are no written or verbal accounts of the Sledge Island whaling tradition, much is known about the whaling communities farther to the north on the Alaskan mainland. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries there were four major whaling settlements at Point Hope, Point Barrow, Wales, and Icy Cape (map on p. 5). They were strategically located near major ice leads through which thousands of bowhead whales passed on their northern migrations each spring. The annual hunt for these enormous animals was so successful that it supported as many as three thousand Eskimos in these four settlements (Sheehan, in press).

A whaling settlement usually consisted of a number of semisubterranean sod houses, which were occupied by one or two nuclear families, as well as a few men's houses, which the Eskimos called *karigis*. Each *karigi* was associated with one or more whaling captains, who used the structure as a base of operations. Men and adolescent boys spent most of their time in the *karigis*, while women and children lived in the smaller houses. A *karigi* functioned as a workshop where utensils, weapons, and ceremonial paraphernalia were manufactured and repaired, as a community center where people gathered to hear the day's adventures and to dance informally, as well as a religious center where important ceremonies took place.

The *umialik* or whaling captain was a man of considerable wealth who could afford to own and maintain an *umiak*, a large skin boat. As owner of the *umiak*, the *umialik* supervised all whale hunting efforts and received the choice cuts from the catch. He directed acts of



5 During the whaling season, crews camped at the ice's edge and constantly scanned the surrounding waters for signs of whales. When a whale was sighted, crews quickly and quietly slid their skin boats into the water and paddled toward the animal. (Negative 11117. Photograph by William B. Van Valin.)

warfare and claimed large parts of the spoils, held intercommunity feasts where he forged and renewed his regional networks and alliances, and annually traveled to trade fairs where he gained access to exotic materials from distant regions of Alaska, as well as Siberia and Canada. The *umialik* also presided over the many rituals and ceremonies which the Eskimos felt were so critical for a successful whale hunt.

An *umialik* achieved his status because of his excellent skills as a hunter, his positive relationship with the spirit world, his entrepreneurial capabilities, and his charisma. His following usually included members of his extended family, as well as the families of his six or seven crew members. In exchange for their support and work, the *umialik* provided them food, clothing, shelter, and goods (Rainey 1947; Spencer 1959; Sheehan, in press).

The Sledge Island specimens found by Tumichuk appear to relate most directly to the *umialik's* role as a boat owner and whale hunter. They also reflect the technology and spiritual beliefs described by ethnographers during the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Murdoch 1892; Rainey 1947; Spencer 1959). The presence of glass trade beads and lack of other European materials suggest that the specimens themselves probably date to the first half of the 19th century.

Whales played a critical and indispensable

role in northwest Alaskan Eskimo culture. Since whales were the primary source of food and oil, manipulation and propitiation of whale spirits were central to northwestern Alaskan Eskimo religion. Like their southern neighbors, the northwest Alaskan Eskimos believed that every living thing had a spirit, capable of revealing itself to man. The spirit of a bowhead whale was a young woman. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, some Eskimos believed that the spirit resided in the whale's head and they were careful to return this part of the giant sea mammal to the sea. The released spirit would seek the body of an unborn whale which it would inhabit. If treated well, the whale spirit would return to be captured in future years.

The close association between whales and women was reflected in taboos and traditions of the Alaskan Eskimos, as well as in their material culture. The *umialik's* wife had to remain in her house while her husband was whale hunting. Failure to remain still and calm would make the pursued animal restless. He might panic and escape, possibly overturning an *umiak* in the process. Women never stooped very low when entering houses, for fear that the whales their husbands killed might die under the ice, where they were difficult or impossible to retrieve. One ivory and two wooden figurines in the collection express this association between whale spirits and

women. They are whales with humanlike images on their undersides. The wooden figurines (Fig. 1), possibly magical floats, have quartz crystal eyes, which may have enhanced the vision of both the whales and the hunters.

The whaling complex and its interweaving of social, economic, and religious activities and relationships was a central focus in the lives of northwest Alaskan Eskimo people. It involved an elaborate series of ritual events designed to influence the whale spirits, as well as practical tasks associated with equipment manufacture and repair, outfitting the *umiak*, the hunt, and the distribution of meat, skin, and blubber. These activities commenced each fall, when the sea-ice began to freeze, and ceased only with the final celebration, in May or June, after a hunting season.

In preparation for the hunt, boat equipment and hunting weapons had to be manufactured, repaired, and cleaned on an annual basis. The performance of these tasks served a number of functions. One, of course, was to ensure that all the necessary gear was in good working

6

Bentwood buckets associated with whaling ceremonies often were embellished with ivory animal carvings and elegant ivory handles. (NA 4778, 17 cm. tall. Photograph by Susan Kaplan and Richard Jordan.)



7

Real and mythical creatures represented on *umiak* harpoon rests served as hunting charms, as did the long chains dangling from the harpoon rests. Each chain was carved from a single unbroken walrus tusk. (NA 4798, 63 cm. long, chains included. Photograph by William Clough.)



8

A wooden board bearing a relief carving of a bowhead whale was hung in the bow of an *umiak*. This charm, as well as personal charms carried by the *umialik* and his crew, attracted whales, kept equipment in working order, and pleased animal spirits. (NA 4789, 30 cm. long. Photograph by William Clough.)

order. Equally critical was the need to make the weapons beautiful, because whale spirits were attracted to beautiful objects. Finally, everything had to be cleaned, for if equipment showed wear from the previous year's hunt, the whales would be offended. Thus, every effort was made to make equipment strong, clean, and attractive.

Among the items in the Sledge Island collection used in the manufacturing process is a bone container carved in the shape of a bowhead whale (Fig. 2). It holds five whetstones used to polish and sharpen slate endblades and knives. The symbolic association of manufacturing tools and prey served to acquaint the weapons being manufactured with their prospective quarry.

Whale-shaped boxes, made out of wood and stuffed with a cushion of dry grass, held the fragile slate blades used to tip harpoons and lances. The blades, stored in the whale-shaped containers, symbolically accustomed themselves to the body of the intended quarry and magically became effective weapons. Three boxes in the collection are whale-shaped (Fig. 3). A fourth box has been carved to represent a polar bear, one of the most powerful and cunning hunters in the north (Fig. 4). While Eskimo hunters were concerned with pleasing the spirits of their intended prey, they also called on the spirits of other predators to aid them in the hunt.

Warmer weather, lengthening days, and the arrival of flocks of birds signaled the coming of spring and the onset of the whaling season. *Umialiks* and their crews hauled their boats onto the sea ice and established camps close to the open water leads (Fig. 5). Many taboos were enforced at this time. One of them included the prohibition against the use of fire for cooking. Thus, food was brought to the hunters in bentwood buckets. Although the three buckets in the collection may have served a number of different functions, one specimen in particular may have been used as a food or water container. The bucket (Fig. 6) is decorated with small ivory figurines in the form of white whales, seals, and bears. Its ivory handle

9

Every object associated with the hunt had to exhibit a high degree of fine craftsmanship. A poorly made lance might break and would offend whale spirits, who would refuse to venture near such weapons. (NA 4821, 6.5 cm. long blade. Photograph by Susan Kaplan and Richard Jordan.)



is finely carved with incised whale flukes and raised whales, while the underside of the handle contains the incised footprints of Raven, the creator-spirit. Other bucket handles are intricately carved with raised whales and dangling ivory chains which terminate in whale flukes.

The *umiak* was obviously critical to a successful hunt; hence a great deal of maintenance equipment and spiritual paraphernalia were associated with the boat. The Sledge Island whaling outfit includes a long handled scraper used to remove ice which might accumulate on the sides of the skin boat. Extremely long shafted ice hooks were used to fend off ice chunks and to grapple with a variety of icy, wet lines.

An elaborately carved ivory rack was lashed to the bow of the *umiak* and served as a cradle for the harpoon. Often, harpoon rests were carved in the shape of two whales, though mythical creatures, such as otter-like polar bears, were also represented (Fig. 7). Ivory chains, up to three feet in length, dangle from a number of the harpoon rests in the Sledge Island collection.

A trianguloid wooden board, with a raised carving of a whale on one face, served as a charm and was tied to the boat frame (Fig. 8). The Sledge Island assemblage contains five of these boards. Variations in lashing hole patterns suggest that at least one of them may have served as the whaling captain's seat, with the image of the whale on the seat's underside.

Just before the *umiak* was launched, the *umialik* placed a wooden box containing personal amulets under his seat. These amulets, often representing animals, were carved out of wood, ivory, and bone, or chipped from quartz crystal and chert. Parts of animals were also kept as powerful amulets. The Sledge Island collection includes an eagle's foot, a bundle of ptarmigan feet, two bear claws, two pieces of hide, and a walrus tooth. In all likelihood, among the "stuffed birds" left in the Sledge Island cave was the skin of a raven, the first creature to reach a dead animal. According to Froelich Rainey (1947), an Alaskan anthropologist and former Director of The University Museum, the *umialiks* from Point Hope wore ravenskin headbands. These various amulets served a number of magical functions. They kept the long hide lines from tangling, they guided the flight of the harpoon, they attracted the whale to the *umiak*, and they ensured that the boat would move quietly and swiftly.

Once an *umialik* and his crew spotted a whale, they launched their boat, silently sliding it into the water. The harpooner stood at the bow of the boat, with harpoon in hand, poised to strike the animal. The *umialik* was at the stern, directing his crew of six men who

paddled the boat toward the animal. The whale was struck by a harpoon, tipped with a bone or ivory head, which became deeply embedded in the wound. Long thong lines with three inflated sealskin floats were attached to the harpoon head. As the whale attempted to escape, the great lengths of the line with the three floats were thrown clear of the boat. This was a tense and dangerous moment. If the lines became fouled they might snap; if they became tangled around a man or part of the boat this could spell certain disaster. But if all went well, the floats would act like drags, and the fleeing animal would soon tire. The whale was then dispatched with lances tipped with stone points, of chert and obsidian (Fig. 9). The collection includes a dozen of these weapons.

Once the whale was caught, crews not directly involved in the hunt rushed to the animal, for all crews that came in contact with a whale received a portion of the catch. The first line thrown over a captured whale was weighted with an image of the animal. An ice hook was used to draw this line around the underside of the body. A series of lines were attached to the whale so that it could be towed to a secure landing place.

When the whale was brought to the landfast ice, the *umialik's* wife left her house and went down to the ice edge with a container of fresh water and offered the whale a drink. The animal was then butchered, and the meat was carefully distributed. A large slate flensing knife and approximately twenty smaller slate blades in the Sledge Island collection were probably used in this butchering process.

At the conclusion of the whaling season, the crews paraded through the community and visited the children in their houses. The *umialik* was at the front of the line, followed by the harpooner. These men wore wooden face masks and chest plaques decorated with whaling scenes. They both frightened the children and caused great merriment. The community then gathered for a feast of whale meat and blubber. During this feast, the nature of the captured whales was discussed, the animals' spirits and the quality of the meat were praised, and all expressed the hope that the whale spirits would be pleased enough to return the following year.

Concluding Remarks

This discovery and preservation of the Sledge Island whaling outfit is important for a number of reasons. Northwest Alaskan Eskimos were an eminently practical people living in an environment which was often harsh and unforgiving. The collection stresses the importance of the *umialik* in his role as boat owner, coor-

inator and director of the hunt, and provider for the village. The aesthetically pleasing objects from Sledge Island certainly elicit a sense of admiration for the consummate care and skill of the Eskimo craftsman or craftsmen who produced them. Yet, the artistic elaboration of utilitarian weapons and utensils also reflects the Alaskan Eskimo world-view in which the everyday activities of killing game and consuming food were elevated to, and intermeshed with, the sacred spiritual realm. In the modern industrial cultural tradition, the secular processes of production and distribution are the primary domains of economists and businessmen. Not so among the Alaskan Eskimos, who believed that success in these matters was intimately dependent upon a balanced and harmonious relationship with the spirit world. The Sledge Island collection in particular, emphasizes the central role of the bowhead whale, not only in the Eskimos' subsistence economy, but in their cosmology and world-view as well.

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