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Along Alaska's Shore: A Visit to the Coastal Eskimos of Seward Peninsula

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A Visit to the Coastal Eskimos of Seward Peninsula

Text and Photographs by

Joel M. Halpern

(25 slides and script)

ALONG ALASKA'S SHORE

A Visit to the Coastal Eskimos of Seward Peninsula

(Deering and Kotzebue)

Today, it's quite different from what you may imagine. In their villages they go to school and learn the same things we do. Many go to church on Sunday. They buy soap, clothing and even canned foods at the village store. But, of course, their lives are different from ours in many ways. Despite many modern techniques, they have found that, for certain things, the ways of their ancestors are better than anything modern civilization can offer. For example, no factory-made product can beat their home-made fur parkas, and nothing keeps your feet drier than seal-skin mukluks ( skú - lúk).

The Eskimos we are going to visit live on the shores of Seward Peninsula, the projection of land on the west coast of Alaska which reaches out into the Bering Sea, almost to Siberia. These Eskimos make most of their living from the sea, just as they have always done, but their view of the world is much broader than that of their ancestors. Some of the men have been half-way around the world when they served in the United States Army. A few have become pilots, and some have even been elected to the Alaska Legislature. Their country, however, is a difficult one to live in, and although they have many modern conveniences life is still not easy. But Alaska is a land which the native (and the visitor, too) always wants to

Text and photographs by

Joel M. Halpern

(taken July, 1950)
A Visit to the Coastal Eskimos of Seward Peninsula

What do you picture when you think of Alaska? A cold, barren land covered with ice and snow, with Eskimos clad all in skins and furs, crouched before an igloo or skillfully harpooning a seal with primitive tools?

What we are going to see in these pictures is how the Eskimos live today. It's quite different from what you may imagine. In their villages they go to school and learn the same things we do. Many go to church on Sunday. They buy soap, clothing and even canned foods at the village store. But, of course, their lives are different from ours in many ways. Despite many modern techniques, they have found that, for certain things, the ways of their ancestors are better than anything modern civilization can offer. For example, no factory-made product can beat their home-made fur parkas, and nothing keeps your feet drier than seal-skin mukluks (muk'lux).

The Eskimos we are going to visit live on the shores of Seward Peninsula, the projection of land on the west coast of Alaska which reaches out into the Bering Sea, almost to Siberia. These Eskimos make most of their living from the sea, just as they have always done. Yet their view of the world is much broader than that of their ancestors. Some of the men have been half-way around the world when they served in the United States Army. A few have become pilots, and some have even been elected to the Alaska legislature. Their country, however, is a difficult one to live in, and although they have many modern conveniences life is still not easy. But Alaska is a land with such great charm that the native (and the visitor, too) always wants to return again.
Alaska is a Territory of the United States, and many people think it should become the 49th state. Its size is 586,000 square miles, which is more than twice the size of Texas. Much of this vast land is uninhabited, however, and its population of 1,200,000 is centered in the few towns and along the coast. This is because the rugged mountains and harsh inland climate are too difficult for human settlements. White settlers are engaged mostly in transportation, commerce and mining, while the Eskimos and the Indian groups of Alaska are occupied with fishing, trapping and hunting.

Al-Can Highway

1. How can we get up to Seward Peninsula? The Al-Can Highway is perhaps Alaska’s most important link with Canada and the United States. It starts in Peace River, British Columbia, passes through the town of Whitehorse in the Yukon Territory and continues clear up to the city of Fairbanks in central Alaska. It certainly is a long trip, but the beautiful scenery along the way makes it worthwhile.

2. Indian graveyard, Whitehorse

On the way, there is something very interesting to stop off and see in Whitehorse. In the Indian graveyard there, instead of tombstones the dead are buried in houses built to resemble those they lived in when they were alive. Some of the Eskimos have similar graveyards. "Elsie and Harry" are buried here — the missionaries gave them these names to replace their original Indian ones.

3. Communications centers

Continuing along the Highway, we pass many communications centers such as the one in the picture. They are maintained by the United States Army. Since in Alaska there is no commercial telegraph company such as Western Union, if you want to send a telegram the United States Signal Corps will send it for you.
4. **Fairbanks, Alaska**

Fairbanks is the largest city in Alaska, larger, even, than the capital, Juneau. The main street looks just like any other American town.

But life there is different, because of the great range of temperatures there. Since it is inland, it has what we call a continental-type climate, with very, very cold winters often going down to 25° F below zero, while in the summer-time it gets hot for a short period, often exceeding 80° F.

5. **University of Alaska**

Just outside of Fairbanks is the University of Alaska. It is a land-grant college similar to many of our state universities in the United States. One can take a wide range of courses and get a degree just as in the U.S. There are a few Eskimos who are enrolled there, and quite a few United States students have studied there.

6. **Arrival at Deering**

From Fairbanks we fly over Alaska to Kotzebue (Kot-ze-bue) Sound, on the Bering Sea, where we will visit two Eskimo communities, Kotzebue and Deering. In Alaska people use the plane as commonly as we do a car, otherwise they would never be able to cover the great distances between settlements and towns. This small plane brings all the mail and supplies to the Eskimo village, and it is their only regular means of communication except for the government supply boat, which only comes once a year, in the summer. As you can see, the coming of the plane is a big event, and many of the villagers have come down to the landing-strip to meet it.

7. **Eskimo children**

The Eskimos are a friendly people and they like to smile. One little boy is frowning because he is afraid of the camera; his younger brother doesn’t seem to care. But their sister enjoys being photographed because she can show
off her fine fur parka. Even now, in July, it can get cold enough for her to wear this fur coat; yet on other days it can be warm enough to take a dip in the sea.

8. **Kayak and cabin cruiser**

Since they must make their living from the sea, every Eskimo family has its own boat. A few of them are the traditional Eskimo skin kayaks, like the one in the foreground, propelled with a double paddle by one man. More often, however, they have outboard skiffs and in many cases high-powered cabin cruisers like the one in the background. The floats you see in the water are salmon nets.

9. **Summer fishing camp**

Here is the summer fishing camp for the Eskimo family who own the boats we just saw. Aside from the dark blue parka worn by the mother, they are all dressed pretty much the way we do. The salmon caught is used mostly for dog food, and the money gained from selling it is used to purchase clothing and flour. The make-shift tent is of canvas, with two of the supporting rods projecting through the roof.

10. **Cutting up seal is a messy job.** The liver makes excellent eating and some consider it tastier than calf’s liver. It has more vitamins, too. The rest of the meat is also eaten, and the skin is used to make clothing. Sealskin boots are better than those made from rubber. The knife the woman is using is called an *ulu* and is, as a matter of fact, very similar to choppers we use in our kitchens today. Her parka is made of calico, although not as gay as most patterns, and is trimmed with fox fur.

11. **Sitting by the shore of the Bering Sea,** a man and his wife and daughter are busy cleaning the fish they have just caught. It is a kind of whitewash and is
one of the staples of the diet. Everyone must help with the work when the catch is brought in.

12. Seal meat and fish drying

Here is the seal meat and the whitefish hanging up to dry in the sun. This is how it is preserved so there will be food for the long winter. The seal meat is in the foreground; though it may not look appetizing to you, it can give a lot of nourishment and is easy to carry on hunting trips. The whitefish, in the background, have been skinned but the heads are intact.

13. Whale hunting

Seals and fish aren't the only things they hunt. Whales are also sought, in hunts which today use high-powered outboard skiffs, motor cruisers and rifles as well as steel harpoons. This small variety is called beluga (be-loo-ga), or small white whale. A school of them had just been forced onto a sandbar, and when they surfaced the hunters fired at them with their rifles. You can see the red bullet holes in the white hide. Larger types of whales are also hunted.

14. Whale meat drying

The Eskimos call whale meat muktuk (muk-tuk). They consider it a delicacy. It is cut the way you see in the picture so that a maximum amount of sunshine can get at the fresh meat and facilitate the drying. After it is thoroughly dried, it is stored in a cool place — which is not hard to find here.

15. Sod house

It is a good idea to protect your shack with thick sod blocks, for in the winter strong constant winds blow; this adds strength to the house and provides insulation as well. This is an all-year-round house except when the owner is away on hunting trips. Formerly, this type of house had no window nor stove, but now they have a small plate-glass window and a wood-burning
stove, the pipe of which is sticking through the roof. In Alaska the Eskimos don't build igloos or houses of blocks of ice but rather this type of sod house.

16. **Tar-paper shacks**

Some houses aren't protected by sod blocks and are little more than tar-paper shacks like these. To the left is a winter sled, hauled by dogs. On the right are the empty gasoline drums which you will see all over the Arctic, for they are used to bring in all the different kinds of petroleum products used by the people to run their engines, and to light and sometimes heat their homes. As you can imagine, these are not the best kind of houses in which to spend a long cold winter.

17. **Hospital**

Although their homes may be poor, all the Eskimos receive good medical care in a first-rate hospital provided by the government. This hospital in Kotzebue serves the entire northern and western coast of Alaska. One of the nurses there said that the equipment in this hospital was even better than that in the Chicago hospital where she used to work. In this area, tuberculosis is a great problem, and the death rate from this disease is several times what it is in the United States. To the left of the hospital is a greenhouse where vegetables especially for the hospital are grown. Do you see all the empty oil drums?

18. **Little girl in pink**

This shy little girl is wondering why her picture is being taken. All dolled up in a pink and black store-bought dress and a hair-ribbon to match, she has just returned from church. The Eskimos had their own form of religion, but the many missionaries in the region have converted them to various forms of Christianity. See how crudely her home is constructed.
in operation. Here, instead of a hole being dug in the rock to bring up the
gold ore, the ore is found in the gravel, which this huge machine washes.
Since the gold is heavier than the gravel and muck, it sinks to the bottom
and the rest of the stones and mud are washed away by the strong stream of
water you see coming out at the end of the dredge.

23. **Gold-miner**

This old-timer works on the dredge and pans the material which
remains to separate out the gold particles more carefully and to keep a
constant check on how much gold the dredge is picking up. This fellow is
originally from California, but he has lived in Alaska most of his life.
There are many Eskimos working at this mine, too.

24. **Vegetable garden at the mine**

Vegetables can be grown this far north during the summer, because for
a brief period the sun shines from 12 to 18 hours a day, and so the plants
mature much more quickly. This garden is at the placer mine, but some
individual Eskimos are starting to plant vegetable patches, too, - a thing
they never did before. The vegetables being raised include carrots, lettuce
and cabbage.

25. **Midnight sun**

For a few weeks of July each year, the famous Midnight Sun shines
on the Alaska coast. In this latitude, just slightly below the Arctic Circle
(66° N.), the sun is just on the horizon at midnight. It is a little hard
to get used to it being light all the time, but the Eskimos are accustomed
to it, of course. It is as much a part of their life as their whaling,
seal-hunting and colorful parkas.