87-31

Ruben Gaines narrates the story “Our heritage” which is based on a painting by Magnus “Rusty” Heurlin

The cold created him, the north man. Taught him life and shaped it. Destined him in servitude to nature which obedience in turn became his armor. Survival was religion and its profit was the man who found a better way to live. The man who told how best to fit the Eskimo to nature’s asking. This closeness of agreement was survival. For the Arctic Earth he lived on was no gentle motherland. No suckler for his wants and comforts.

The woman called his earthly mother bore him in a time of utter loneliness. No helping hands were lifted while her agonies were borne in silence. Though her inward being raised a cry of hope - the first born, would it be a man? For only then could this one live. She keened a silence savage plea that she be spared a women child whose fate would be to die unnamed. For men were needed. Back beyond the generations there’d always been the need for hunters first. So her crying was in silence, ‘til at last a single scream was wrung from her and a man child came. The issue of a pain spent body and a tortured spirit, product of a battle hardly known to him – the north man called the Eskimo.

There were men ordained called hunters. They were men of nature wisdom. Finders of the better way. Ones who counseled with themselves devising ways for Eskimos to live. The hunter’s mother made the ulu, women’s knife, the expeditor of a thousand tasks. And he the harpoon and the spear. Together they made arrowheads of flint and bone. These pointed weapons destined for the heart of game were thrown by men who knew that all was needed. There was use for meat and fat, for bone and sinew, hide and gut, for feather, tusk and tooth, for horn, the flipper and the beak. Each meant living for the Eskimo.

As still, but swift as arctic tern above the pools where tiny char swim unaware as stealthy as the fox before he knows his presence to the hare. As quietly as settling frost he poised to try to his spear. The distant caribou was less a conquest than a harvest. For the animal had what the people needed. Meat for food and fur for clothing, sinew for the needle and the bowstring, the spear shaft light and from a sapling arrow straight. Washed up on current from some distant orient. Keen balanced seemed familiar at first grasp. The hand and shaft attuned as though by ordinance.

A prey of mighty size sought harvest of his own. The bear, respected entity. With cunning merely on a different plane. The two were equal in their instinct for survival. Yet the man had hunger for refinement. Appetite of mind and spirit to prevail. And curiosity to shape the tools of that dominion. Over patient time from inspiration he could not explain the hunter’s fragile bow was shaped through subtle deadly contours to release the arrow with a greatest force. And so the bear for heavy fur for winter living fell to him.

The cunning of the Eskimo was born in need. He gauged the thunder of the ice for depth. He watched and waited as the sea congealed when summer but a breath between the winter blasts had come and gone. And the sun dog was his sign for telling weather when the wind blew crystals of the sparse and fleeing snow. For natchiq seal he felt affection, but it was expressed in

need. Smallest and the swiftest of the swimmers under ice, the seal was sacrifice agreeable to nature's scheme which was providing for the north man. Victim of the sure harpoon the skin prepared and weathered in the wind natchiq gave to man the kayak.

Where the shore ice clinging to the continent because it was a trenchant yearly borne not like the lordly pack that kept the pole a captive. Lost its grip the leads of open water gleamed. The shifting world was there. Ice masses, flows and cliffs and rearing bulks in every mold. From stark to turbulent. Where shades of dusk and dawn distorted senses, but was homing ground for hunters after ugruk. The kayak had traversed these devious and risky ways before. That big and bearded cousin of the seal which gave the kayak would contribute bigger craft. The umiak the one of many ribs length enough for many men.

The hunter brought the ugruk in. And as the women sewed the hides of seven of the bearded ones with sinew braid to fit the driftwood frame they nourished their society with talk. At times up inland came dimension. Land of richness where a people's wants were soon fulfilled. Up inland men were taller and the women larger, finer featured. Ice and water bound and captives of the coast by need and custom. Talk among the sewers made a wishful picture. Up inland would be visited sometime not now. The working days were precious, but perhaps next season.

For now the battle for survival mattered. The umiak commanded by an ancient hunter had pursued, harpooned and put to bay an aġviq, bowhead whale. The harvests of all harvests. Before the windswept sounds of triumph had reached the ears of those on shore the ritual of action had been followed by the leader in the stern whom younger ones obeyed. The slayer of a hundred whales. Their came the siting swift but sure approach. The proud harpooners deadly cast. The chase. The holding of the beast aloft with sealskin floats of captive air. The lances kill while doomed aġviq spout erupted bloody flame. The sign that still another creature's life had lent itself to nature's plan. The old one young as ever on this day would kill perhaps another score before his time had come.

At last the Eskimo conceded to the spirit in him held in check while nature took its toll of attention. Now Nalukataq, the dance of living. From the force that fathered gales and loosed the thunder in the ice came leave to free himself of Earth's demands and set the men to beating drums in cadence and to leap to strut to posture in what seemed insane gyration. While their eyes sought distances beyond the skies. Nalukataq, and women danced with grace and stateliness and spare of movement bent and raised and reached towards the bidding came. As the drum beats rose to final frenzy man the one for whom survival was designed had in this moment joined his hand in spirit with the force that made him. The Eskimo as even falling in exhaustion with the dying drumbeats knew he was in his element, a man of destiny.

Although the men and women of the Earth are not alike they stem from one great human family which was to rule the planet. People from the south were to meet and mingle with the north man. And they came. First whalers. They brought their flour and sugar, coffee and chocolate and tea and more. Among their gifts were things not seen, but heard to which the Eskimos responded. Song and music to enthrall them. So the men from distant places came to know the Eskimo and he knew them.

The north man was by nature and necessity a hunter, but the white man made his living many ways. And the traders came to ports the whalers made. Brought boatloads of fascinating stores to silent waiting groups of Eskimos still primitive with bow and spear. Their curiosity no less than that of whaling gulls attracted to the giant sailing ships. A magic storehouse moored offshore. There were men of character among them. Many found accord among the Eskimos and often they were married.

Each year they came and grew familiar with the north. And every gift and barter object brought its element of change. The traders served the women first. And starved for colors after many generations under finely made but somber furs they marveled over calico and like the music vivid hues brought new dimension to their lives. The holds of now familiar ships were yielding wonders in bright shades. The women of the north became the Eskimo in calico.

While once the north man was content to harvest whales as they were needed now the hunt became an industry. For white men needed many, whale bone not for food but fashion and for oil. But food was still a aġviq's greatest gift to Eskimos. And Natives of the Arctic never lost their taste for muktuk just beneath the skin of paper thinness. And the hunt for white man or themselves remained a great adventure as the boats the sting of death in their harpoons still combed the seas in whaling season.

Among the changes brought by enterprising whites were newer, quicker ways of living off the land. And young men soon grew prosperous by harvesting the wolf, the fox and wolverine with steel jawed traps and bringing furs for trade from trap lines running over ice a hundred miles.

And ships brought lumber yet another wonder for the wood-starved Eskimos who made their houses as the traders showed them. Better far than ordinary dwellings made of bone and sod. And stores and churches rose and sleds were built from wood. And not the least were jumping boards for children near the beach where cargo from the southern ships at distant anchor changed the face and profile of their village. Altered their society.

A northern animal he'd never known before was brought to him from far away. A hearty self-sufficient entity, the reindeer. Easily adaptable to purposes now part of him. A worker who could find the tender mosses deep beneath the hard-packed snow and forage for himself for dogs could not on long cold runs for fur and mail. The reindeer northerner by nature soon became a partner to the Eskimo.

The bird, a creature made by man and called tiŋŋun was first among the wonders to a people tied to land and frozen sea. In time they came to know it well, the airplane and the man who flew it bringing messages and passengers and cargo. And the children grew to take the giant bird for granted and to fly it for themselves. A wonder turned familiar and as conqueror of icy distances an ally.

And time had made the Eskimo an ally too to those who had come north to make a living, trappers, traders and seekers after gold and to their government. There came a war and people joined an army in the tundra and as guardsmen of the territory found another vocation as defenders of the land. They fought the longest ranging missiles ever sent by any enemy. Balloons

- bomb laden. They never saw the foreigners who sent them but the northland scouts were ready, felt allegiance and were partners in the war.

The north belonged to them from the beginning, but the Eskimos would win it on the terms that people on the southlands knew by law, by settlement. And young ones now could stake their age-old claim and face it with assurance. Build their shooting station, hunting lodge up inland in the country rich with game. As the richest native man on earth is once again and now a new mold a man of destiny.