TEACHER'S CORNER: NELSON'S DIARY

When the Inua exhibit (see p.11) travels to Alaska, it will be accompanied by a special school curriculum packet Of Kayaks and Ulus: The Bering Sea Eskimo Collection of Edward W. Nelson, "The Man Who Collected Worthless Things." Written by Ruth Selig and Ann Bay, the packet will contain five student booklets, 20 slides, a tape and a teachers' guide. Original Nelson letters, a previously unpublished journal, Eskimo myths, and festival descriptions will give students a unique opportunity to learn about a great Smithsonian collection, its collector E.W. Nelson, and the remarkable 19th century Bering Sea Eskimo people whose culture lives on through Nelson's writings and the beautiful objects on exhibit. The curriculum packet will be completed by Spring 1982, and inquiries regarding availability can be made at that time by calling Ruth Selig, 357-1592 or Ann Bay at 357-2111.

To enable your students to learn about the Bering Sea Eskimo culture, we are reproducing excerpts from one of the curriculum packet's student booklets, A Sledge Journey in the Delta of the Yukon, Northern Alaska, by E.W. Nelson. The original journal on which this booklet is based was circulated by the Royal Geographical Society of England, but has remained virtually unknown to all but a handful of scholars. The Journal describes a remarkable two month dog-sled journey made by Edward Nelson into the interior of southwestern Alaska during the winter of 1878-1879.

We hope you will use this lesson in connection with a visit to the Inua exhibit, but it is designed to be complete in itself. To facilitate the duplication of this material for classroom use, the Journal is printed as a separate pull-out section of Anthro-Notes. For further background information see the article "Spirits" on Exhibit (p.11).

A SLEDGE JOURNEY IN THE DELTA OF THE YUKON, NORTHERN ALASKA

BY E.W NELSON

During the four years dating from the middle of June 1877, the writer was stationed at St. Michael's Redoubt [station] on Norton Sound, Alaska. From this point, several extended sledge [dog sled] expeditions were made in different directions. The first of these expeditions was made during December 1878 and January 1879 and covered the territory lying between the mouths of the Yukon and Kuskokwim rivers....

My trip was made in great haste, with the most inadequate means, and with no instrument but a compass....

The arrangements for the expedition were very simple: a stock of goods consisting of leaf tobacco, ammunition, beads, brass jewelry, needles, and other small wares were selected to be used in buying ethnological specimens and to pay the incidental expenses of the trip among the natives.

Nelson's Snowshoes
In a list of specimens brought back from Alaska Nelson made a note under the entry for this pair of Ingalik Indian snowshoes: "pair used by myself on two expeditions about 1800 miles."

On December 2, 1878, Charles Petersen, a fur trader living on the lower Yukon.... arrived at St. Michael's with four dog sledges three of which were to be laden with goods for the fur trade, one being placed at my disposal. On the 4th, at about 6 a.m. long before daybreak, we filed out of the enclosure and were off through the snow fog which filled the air, and marked a temperature in the vicinity of zero and still falling rapidly. With difficulty each sledge followed the one in front, and the leading team had an Eskimo ahead as a guide over the trackless snow....

December 5th, at 1 a.m., we arose, and after a hasty breakfast of bread, tea, and dried fish, left our camp and proceeded directly to the coast, along which we travelled when the darkness was rendered more intense by the rising wind filling the air with flying snow. This forced us to hug the shore closely, and make our

way by following the line of driftwood which marks the beach in the vicinity of the Yukon mouth.... As darkness was drawing near, we reached the village of Fetkina....

In the evening I announced through my interpreter my desire to buy samples of all the tools and implements used by the villagers, as well as toys and ornamental carvings. This unusual request produced quite a flutter of excitement and a number of interesting articles were secured. Some of these must have required a considerable expenditure of skill and labor, yet they were parted with at what appeared to be a ridiculously low price....

December 7th, we rounded a spur, and passing some natives at work on their fish-traps, drove swiftly up to the station of Andreievsky, amid a great din of yelping dogs and shouting men. We remained at the station for the next three days, preparing for our start into the little known country to the south, where the main results of the trip were to be obtained.

Andreievsky consists of a group of a half-dozen log buildings forming a square, and joined together by a stockade; it is an important center of the fur trade on the lower Yukon. Mink, land-otter, white and red foxes. with a few black bear, wolves, beaver, and marten, comprise the peltries secured here -- the mink largely outnumbering all the other kinds....

[One year later Nelson returned to Andreievsky on a second sledge journey. During this visit, he had the opportunity to witness the Bladder Festival which he described in his Smithsonian Report as follows:]

> At a little village on the Yukon near Andreievsky, on January 17, 1881, I found the people performing their final dance at the close of the bladder feast.
>
> The bladders used in this festival are supposed to contain the shades or inuas of the slain animals. After an animal is killed the hunter carefully removes and preserves the bladder until the time approaches for the festival. When this time arrives songs are sung and the bladder is inflated and hung in the Qasgiq [men's house]; the shade of the animal to which the bladder belonged is supposed to remain with it and to exist in the inflated bladder when it is hung in the Qasgiq.
>
> The feast is given for the purpose of pleasing and amusing the shades and thus propitiating them, after which the bladders are taken to a hole in the ice and, after being opened, are thrust into the water under the ice so that the shade may return to its proper element. The shade is supposed to swim far out to sea and there to enter the bodies of unborn animals of their kind, thus becoming reincarnated and rendering game more plentiful than it would be otherwise. If the shades are pleased with the manner in which they have been treated by the hunter who killed the animal they occupied, it is said they will not be afraid when they meet him

in their own form and will permit him to approach and kill them again without trouble.

(E.W. Nelson, The Eskimo About Bering Strait, B.A.E. 18th Annual Report, 1900.)

On the 11th, we left Andreievsky and descended the river to Kashutok. On our way to this place, we found that the cold was sufficient to render the snow crisp and hard, and make the iron runners of our sledges drag almost as if on sand. To obviate this we halted and had a pair of false runners made of the hard sap or outer part of the stick of young fir....

We found the country between the Kusilvak and Askinuk mountains low but very hummocky and difficult to traverse.... In the evening we crossed four lakes lying at the base of the Askinuk mountains, and arrived at a miserable Eskimo village of two huts...., in the midst of a terrific storm of wind and snow which was so fierce just before we reached the village that my sledge was torn from me, hurled over several times and broken in many places. We found our quarters in an earth-covered hut, less than four feet high in the center and sloping on every side....

December 14th, leaving these mountains, we crossed a range of low hills to the south and arrived at Askinuk, where we were welcomed by the entire population, numbering nearly 200 Eskimo. The people here were among the most hospital I met on my expedition. As we approached, their smiling faces made a pleasant sight, and we were scarcely in the village before our dogs were unharnessed and the sleds placed upon the framework, and were invited into the large roomy Qasgiq, or council house.

While I wrote up my journal, the natives were practicing songs to be sung at some festival to be given later in the winter. Before I retired a very large number of fine ivory carvings and other objects of great ethnological interest were secured, in exchange for small articles. Many of the carvings obtained here are remarkable for their elegant finish and the excellent but somewhat grotesque character of the workmanship....

On December 21st, we...made a hazardous passage for several miles along a narrow ice-foot which bordered the seaward face of the mountains. Finally we were forced to abandon this track, as the shelf narrowed so that it would have been impossible to avoid falling into the open sea, which surged back and forth below. We were caught in a terrific wind and snowstorm on the mountains, and by great good fortune reached the village of Tanunak at Cape Vancouver, with only a few slight frostbites....

On December 25th, a heavy rain commenced, which drenched us through in spite of our seal-gut waterproofs; and on the 26th it continued with great violence, accompanied by wind. All day we plodded drearily on through the rapidly melting snow and the pools of water, reaching a shelter....just as darkness came on. Here we stopped over a day....and dried a portion of our clothing by getting some of the natives to wear it for us, and thus evaporate some of the moisture from it by the heat of their bodies....

From Chalitmuit to Koolvagavigamiut the coast country is very low, and we found large areas covered with a heavy layer of sea ice forced up by the late storms. Blocks of ice from three to four feet thick, which were found several miles inland in many places, showed how extensively the sea had overflowed this area.

The village of Chalitmiut narrowly escaped being razed by the ice which was carried about it by the water, and on the night of December 29th, the people sat upon the roofs of the houses, driven from the interior by the three or four feet of water which poured in and compelled the occupants to cut their way through the roof in some cases. The loss of entire villages with their people is not rare on the lower Kuskokwim country during storms of this character, and during spring freshets.

The village of Kongiganagamiut contains about 175 people, and is one of the places which has seen but one or two whitemen since the occupancy of the country by the Russians. The children, as in many other places visited, were terrified at my approach, and rushed shrieking to their mothers as if an ogre were about to seize them. From Kashunuk to this last named village, walrus are taken more or less commonly along the coast, and the natives are very expert at ivory working, many of their carvings showing evidence of great artistic skill, considering the rude tools used by the workmen....

A series of low hills thinly clad with spruces was crossed, and before us lay the Yukon with its white snow-covered path winding away to the horizon, and facing us the rugged but not high mountains which line the river.... From this point we ascended the Yukon to Paimiut, the upper limit of the Eskimo on this river, and then returned to the sea coast and St. Michael's by way of the well-known and much-travelled river route.

During this expedition, over 1200 miles were traversed, the same dog team being used throughout....

[At the end of his journal, Nelson summarizes his reactions to the terrain, the people, and the culture which he has observed during the previous, intense two month trip. His summary is a classic description of the Bering Sea Eskimo of the late 19th century, and expresses well why Nelson's work among them was both timely and important.]

The general characteristic of the country over most of the region between the lower Yukon and Kuskokwim is that of a barren waste, whose streams and lakes with the bordering seashore support a population of over 3000 pure-blooded Eskimo. These are among the most primitive people found in Alaska, and retain their ancient customs, and their character is but slightly modified by contact with whites. They present one of the richest fields open to the ethnologist anywhere in the north. They retain their complicated system of religious festivals and other ceremonies from ancient times. Their work in ivory and bone bears evidence of great skill, and all their weapons and utensils are well made.

Time and space forbid my entering more in detail here upon many points of interest in regard to this region. In reports upon which I am now engaged, however, these subjects will be duly elaborated.

NELSON'S JOURNAL:
Questions for Students to Answer

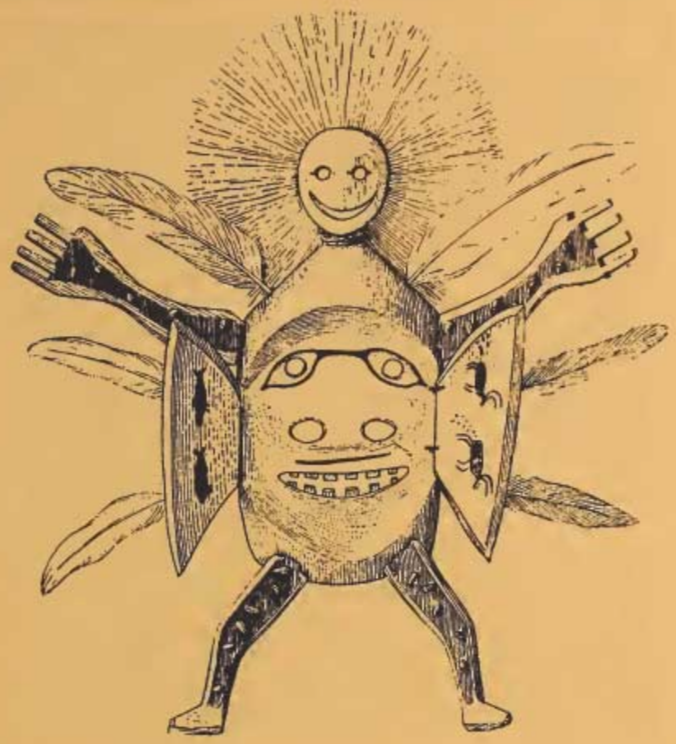
1. Did Nelson make elaborate preparations for his trip? Why or why not? How did Nelson travel? Who went with him? What did he take along to use as money? For what purpose was this "money" used?

2. In his journal, Nelson describes in quite matter-of-fact detail a number of difficulties he faced in the course of his journey. Briefly describe at least two of these difficulties and explain how Nelson managed to deal with them.

3. Judging from Nelson's behavior in the face of these difficulties, what conclusions can you draw about his character and personality?

4. In a number of places in this account, Nelson describes the Eskimo people he encountered. From these descriptions, what conclusions can you draw about Nelson's attitude towards the Eskimo? Write down evidence to support your answer(s).

5. After reading this journal (and hopefully viewing the exhibit at the National Museum of Natural History, Inua: Spirit World of the Bering Sea Eskimo), how would you describe the major purpose of Nelson's 1879 Yukon sledge journey? How would you evaluate Nelson's contribution to our understanding of Eskimo culture?



"SPIRITS" ON EXHIBIT

Inua: Spirit World of the Ber-Sea Eskimo continues at the National Museum of Natural History/National Museum of Man through January 2, 1983. The exhibit provides a unique opportunity for students to learn about a fascinating Eskimo culture and people whose descendants continue to live in Alaska today. Organized by anthropologists William W. Fitzhugh and Susan A. Kaplan, the exhibit provides an important new view of Eskimo culture, which has been seen for too long through the stereotypic pictures of snow igloos and small families moving across dark frozen tundra to search for scarce game. Unlike the Northern Canadian Inuit (for example, the Netsilik featured in the M.A.C.O.S. films), 19th century Alaskan Eskimos in the Yukon/Kuskokwim delta lived in large permanent settlements of semi-subterranean sod and wood houses; relied largely on fish, birds, and small mammals for food; had a complex ceremonial life with elaborate songs, dances, masks, and costumes; and created an oral tradition of story and myth rich in symbolism and drama.

(continued)

The Inua exhibit presents a comprehensive view of 19th century Bering Sea Eskimo life, its prehistoric roots, and its modern legacy. Most of the finely crafted hunting implements, domestic utensils, and ceremonial objects in this exhibition were collected by Edward W. Nelson, a young naturalist sent to the Alaskan frontier in 1877 to gather weather information for the U.S. Army Signal Service, and to serve, unofficially, as an observer for the Smithsonian Institution. While stationed at St. Michael, Nelson traveled extensively in the unmapped and unexplored territory along the Bering Sea coast and in the interior of the Yukon/Kuskokwim region (see p.7). During his four-year stay, he recorded his observations not only of the region's natural history, but of the customs and life of the Eskimos of western Alaska. His collections, photographs, and notes caught Bering Sea Eskimo culture at a time when the Eskimos had been little affected by contact with American whalers and traders, and prior to the rapid cultural changes brought on by gold rushes and the spread of Christianity in the region at the end of the 19th century.

The exhibit itself is divided into five major sections. Among the Animals focuses on the Bering Sea Eskimo hunter's weapons and techniques. Here students can learn of the Eskimo hunter's all important belief that his people's physical and spiritual well-being depended on the respect he showed his prey and its spirit, or inua. Around the Hearth brings the visitor into an individual semisubterranean sod and wood home of the Bering Sea Eskimo woman who spent many hours preparing food, manufacturing clothing, and caring for young children. With the Spirits is designed to simulate the Qasgiq, or men's house. Larger than other houses, this rectangular, earth-covered log structure with its high pyramidal roof was the center of Bering Sea Eskimo social, religious, and ceremonial life. It served as both the principal dwelling and workplace for the village men, but was also the place where festivals and social gatherings were held for the entire community and guests from other villages.

A fourth major section of the hall, Neighbors, relates the Bering Sea Eskimo to the people surrounding them who spoke different languages, followed different ways of life, but had resources used by Bering Sea peoples.

In the final section, Past and Present, the exhibit relates 19th century Bering Sea Eskimo culture with prehistoric Arctic cultures and modern Eskimo artists. A "gallery" of modern Eskimo art reflects both the deeply rooted traditions of Eskimo culture and the influence of Western civilization.*

(see p. 15 for special school programs on the Inua exhibit.)

* This description was adapted from the exhibit pamphlet prepared by Meredith Weber under the direction of William Fitzhugh and Susan Kaplan.