



# Caretakers of the Earth

Martha Gould-Lehe

## Eskimos of Yesterday and Today

The word Eskimo means “eaters of raw meat.” It is an Algonquian word and was a name given by outsiders. People of this north polar region do not traditionally call themselves Eskimos. Depending upon their geographical location along the Alaskan coastline, they refer to themselves as Yupik, Iglulik, or Inuit.

In the past, these Alaskan natives lived almost completely off the sea and its resources. The Yupik, Iglulik, and Inuit caught fish and hunted seal, walrus, sea lion, and whale. In the summers they traveled to fish campgrounds where they put up salmon, dried meats, and picked berries. They often ate their food uncooked because Alaska’s northern coastline has no trees, so firewood was rare.

Animals provided many of their needs. Animals were eaten as food. Animal fat was used as oil for lamps or as lotions. Animal furs were made into clothing, blankets, or shelter. Women tanned the animal hides and spent hours making mukluks, parkas, and snow pants. The sinew was used for thread. In the winter the Natives wore two sets of clothing. First, they put on a set with the fur side in (close to their body), then a set with the fur side out (away from their body). This double set of clothing kept them warm even in the coldest temperatures.

The natives usually lived in igloos of animal skins, wood, mud, or sod. Ice igloos were used only when they hunted or fished near the sea. Ice igloos were temporary shelters. They could be constructed in less than an hour and were invaluable when hunters were caught far from home. Entertainment in and around their homes consisted of string games, ball games, and many games of strength and endurance. Stories, songs, dances, and laughter also filled their nights. Eskimos today still enjoy traditional foods. The Eskimo people petitioned the International Whaling Commission to obtain and retain the right to keep one of their traditional lifestyle customs alive. As a result, they were granted the right to harvest a limited number of bowhead whales, a species placed on the endangered species list.

Eskimos still use dog sleds, but many more use snowmobiles for winter travel. Some Eskimos today still live off of the land. Others hold jobs in the villages or cities. Whether they choose to live life in

traditional and/or modern ways, Eskimos strive to keep their proud heritage alive in song, dance, and story-telling. William Tyson represents one such storyteller who shares memories of life in the days when he was a boy.

### Reflections of William Tyson

In 1916 William Tyson was born in an Alaskan Yupik Eskimo village called Kanillik (Gung e lik). Thirty to forty people lived in the village located near the Bering Sea coast near Sheldon's Point. When William was a young man, most of Alaska's rural Indians and Eskimos lived off the land. Villagers found the land good and plentiful, and they were careful to take only what they needed.

Spring, summer, and fall were busy times for William. He and his family gathered vegetables and berries from the tundra. As a small child, William was shown wild rice, celery, herbs, and roots, which he learned to recognize and gather before the cold north wind brought snow and sub-zero temperatures. His family stored these treasures in fish or grass baskets. Other items were stored in seal or whale stomach bags.

In the spring and summer William's family watched for the beluga whales and seals that came to the Bering Sea on their northerly migration routes. The men would venture out in kayaks, always searching the sea to catch sight of these animals. When the whales were sighted, the men paddled toward them quickly. Hunting of several whales was needed to feed a village, because of the small size of the beluga. The whale fat, called blubber, and meat were part of William's diet. His family used the oil in lamps so the long, dark Arctic nights could be brightened. No part of the whale was wasted.

The seal was another mammal William's family needed. Seal fur was tanned and made into clothes. Seal fat was rendered out and the precious oil was painstakingly saved in seal bladder containers. A time without seal oil was to have a time without flavor, because the oil was used to dip dried fish in and was poured over other foods as gravy is poured over foods today. Fish gathering was a part of every season. Fish was William's main diet and still is today.

As winter came and claimed the land, William was still very busy. He had his dogs to care for, his traps to run, and furs to skin. He caught many animals like squirrels, fox, land otters, and, once in a while, a wolverine or wolf. From these animal skins, his mother made beautiful

parkas and other articles of clothing. His family took some of the furs across the frozen bay to the white man's store where they traded furs for items such as knives, utensils, guns, ammunition, and blankets. They traded for very little food because they did not like the white man's food very much; however, they found many of his tools quite useful.

William was content as a young child. Season followed season. . . harvest followed harvest. Each season had offerings. The cycle of life was balanced and predictable. William and his family never took from the Earth without giving back, and they had great respect for all things. They knew they were not greater or lesser than any—just a part of it all.

In 1927, William's life changed drastically. He was sent away from home to school. It was a time of great changes. Laws were passed in far away places and many more white people moved into the area. William's people could no longer hunt whenever and for whatever they wished. Now there was something called "open season" and "closed season." It was very hard for them to understand why the caribou could no longer be killed for their potlatches (ceremonial feasts). The cycle of life he lived now had restrictions decided by people he didn't know.

Paper money and coins were also foreign to William. What did this paper mean? It had no place in his memory. He had no idea of how much it would buy or even how hard he should work for it. It took a long time for him to gain some understanding of money. A new people had come with new ways. The time of predictability was gone.

William stayed in his village learning the new ways until 1972, when the Alaska Native Land Claims Act was passed. In that year he went to Anchorage to work as an interpreter. He is now retired and, whenever he can, spends his time performing Eskimo dances and speaking to young people.

Today as William presents to a group of young people he tells them, "Dancing is good. It is a good way to be happy and to keep the old ways alive." He tells them how he used to make his own drum by carefully selecting a willow that had the right grain. The grain is very important because the wood has to be pliable when it is steamed and shaped into a hoop. Now drum makers use airplane fabric to stretch over the willow and twine to secure it. In the old ways a drum was made by moistening walrus or seal stomachs and stretching these over the hoop. The stomachs were then secured with sinew from the seal. As the sinew and stomach dried, they became very taut. Then when the drum was struck with various size rods, a variety of pitches would vibrate outward. William smiles as he demonstrates. "A drummer and dancer can make his own rhythm," he says,

“for to the Eskimo the dance is a story of deeds or the re-enactment of a legend. The drum adds cadence to the re-telling.”

After this statement, William gets quiet. His mind sees days long past. . . days that can only be demonstrated now. A lifestyle has passed and he is leaving us a legacy. No one speaks as William’s downcast eyes rise to survey the young audience. “It was hard for me,” he tells, “but it will not be like that for you.”

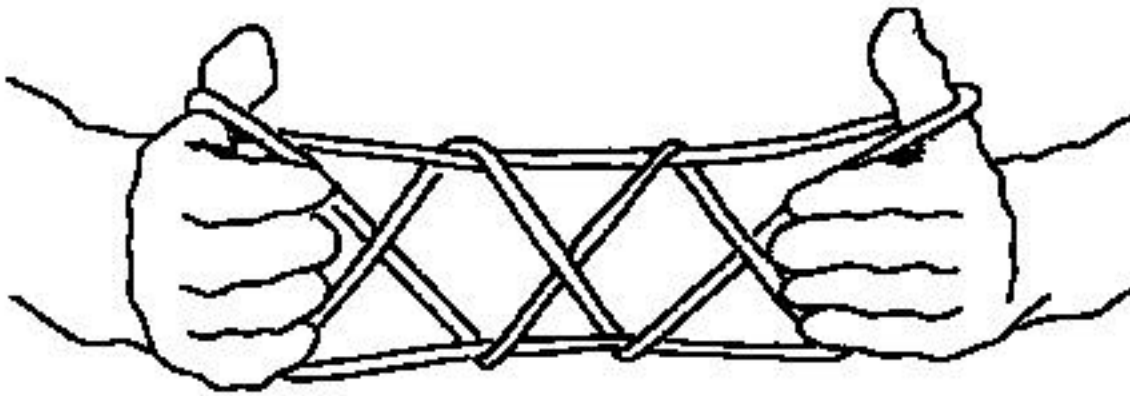
He tells of a time when his parents showed him everything. They were his teachers. William smiles at the children as he tells them that his parents did not spank or hit him. “The old ones believe you always show love, because love will keep a people together. If you hit a child, the child will grow up to be angry. So that is why we don’t hit children.”

He pauses here, his grey head bowed, gathering time and direction before he proceeds. “Now-a-days parents don’t teach their children like my parents did. They leave it to the school or the babysitters. Things are very different, and it seems to me that many young people are forgetting to respect the older people who give them knowledge. . .” His fingers tighten around the drum handle and the children wait. They seem to sense the respect that he commands.

Sometimes memories are difficult to remember. We visit places, people, and things of the past, and we know we are just visiting because time moves forward. The new becomes the old all too quickly. William looks up and with a smile strikes his drum. “When I was young, I could dance all night,” he says, “but now I am old and I get tired. So, tell me what you learned today.”

He holds the drum and striker loosely in his hands as he calls on a little girl in the front, “I learned it is important to show respect,” she says. “And to show love so people won’t become angry,” adds her friend. William points to a boy in the back row, “Let’s see what you heard today.” “I learned that we need to have people like you to teach us, so that the old ways won’t be gone forever,” the boy answers seriously. “Good! You have all been excellent listeners. Now remember what you heard today, and teach it to others.”

William holds up his drum in a kind of salute as the students stand and file pass, thanking him for his time and information. The presentation is over. William has instilled a sense of the Eskimo way of life in a much younger generation, a generation that can only see his memories in museums, film documentaries. . . and through his words and deeds.



**Illustration:**

String game known as: Two Diamonds by Osage

Twin Stars by Navajo

Lightning by Zuni

Diamonds and Turtles in Caroline Islands

One form of Navajo Storm Clouds

Sixth move of Alaskan string game, The Mouth

The same pattern is also found in Hawaii and New Guinea with a similar pattern of Cat's Cradle made by the Australian aborigines.

## Discussion Questions:

1. Why do you think William Tyson is invited to speak and perform in schools now, but he was not allowed to practice his culture as a child?
2. If you could go back and meet William as a child, what sort of things would you like him to show you? What questions would you ask him?
3. How does William feel children should be treated? Does he imply that children are treated differently today than when he was a child?
4. What did William and his family use as valued items for trade?
5. Why do you think the Eskimo people were always careful not to take too much from their environment?
6. Could people today learn from William's family? If so, what?



## Art

### Eco-Cube

This lesson follows the food web activity.

#### Objective:

Students will demonstrate an awareness of the many varied ecosystems by constructing Eco-Cube mobiles. They will also report orally or in written form on a living or nonliving member of one of the ecosystems on their cubes.

#### Materials:

- cube patterns
- crayons, markers, or colored pencils
- old magazines with plant/animal pictures
- scissors
- glue

#### Exploration:

Have students select six members of a food web. On each face of the cube draw or cut out a picture of one of the members of the food web. Have students color the Eco-Cube. (**Note:** Do not color on the glue tabs.) Cut out pattern. Fold the connecting lines between each illustrated environment. Form a cube by folding the sides upward and glue the tabs together.

#### Seminar:

Assign an ecosystem from the cube to each group and have each student in the group choose a different member of that environment to make an oral or written report on.

**Invention:**

Recall the usefulness of your ecosystem. Each environment supports a large number of unique species of plants, fish, insects, birds, and other animals.

**Application:**

Have students compile information about their particular ecosystem and draw or make a model of that system to present to the class along with their reports.

