

Selections from the Edward W. Nelson Alaska Diaries, 1877-1881

- **Notes on Cranes: May 18, 1878**

“Nothing new observed. Game being scarce, we moved to the mouth of the crooked canal where we tried to obtain something without success. I took a stand at a pond nearby and saw several swans and cranes fly by, out of gunshot. A pair of cranes chanced to alight and enact a courting scene about one hundred yards from me, and I had a fine opportunity to witness their ludicrous movements. They first called several times their shrill "Kr-r-ru." Then walking in a gingerly manner near each other, one turns its back and bows solemnly and gives a quick leap into the air, then whirls about and bows gravely to his partner who acknowledges by another formal bow and leaps into the air. Then a sudden fit of politeness seizes them and they try to rival each other in the most comically grave and ceremonious bows, followed by several hops, owing to their legs apparently becoming envious of the neck having so large a share in the performance. These ridiculous ceremonies are kept up for a long time without a note being uttered, which increases the mock solemnity of the scene. Their movements appear stilted, and the birds act as though puffed up with vanity; after each maneuver they look about as though challenging administration.”

- **Bear Hunting: May 6, 1881**

“Here among the natives of St. Michael and probably among other Innuits the idea is held that if the red or the black bear is made sport of or called by any disrespectful terms the bear will know it at once, and the next time the one who reviled him goes out away from the village he or she will be torn up by a bear and killed. Consequently the natives always speak respectfully of them. They say it makes no difference even if the one thus speaking is in his house and the bear in the mountains, the latter will still know it.”

- **The Kashim[Men’s Ceremonial House] in Kushunuk: December 15, 1878**

“The kashim we stopped in is the smaller and is about 30 by 30 feet wide and 20 feet high in centre. Its construction is exactly like that at Askinuk. Split logs placed with planed faces inward and in an upright position extend about 10 feet from the floor, which is of heavily-hewn planks and has the usual central hole for winter entry. A large log lies along each side on the floor about three and one half feet from the wall and forms a sleeping place. Three feet above this but about six inches nearer the wall is a second log with hewn planks between it and the wall, forming a platform around the room for sleeping. The roof forms a rectangular pyramid, flat at apex with logs, planks and earth as shown in following outline of building. The entrance hole is provided with a pair of walrus tusks on each side set into the floor so that instead of putting your hands on the floor as usual and getting them covered with dirt, these rests are used.”

- **The Bladder Festival at Kushunuk: December 1878**

[The Bladder Festival Hall]

“**December 15** Hanging over the centre of the room [in the kashim] was a fantastic bird which they said represented a gull. It was attached to a long remain passing through an eye in the support fastened to the roof by means of which it can raised and lowered. Back of this stood a pole about 10 ft high, to the upper end of which a small bundle of rosin weeds was bound. The pole was banded with red and white, and four strips of deer skin were attached to it in pairs, on opposite sides, to the middle portion.

On the left side, midway between roof and floor, was suspended a bundle of large spears, the ends projecting both ways, and to these spears were fastened a mass of some hundreds of seal and

walrus bladders spotted with blotches of white paint. On the opposite side hung a large bundle... of rosin weeds. About the roof of the building and among the bladders were arranged quite a number of various weapons used in killing seal and walrus. In small bundles and swinging in other parts of the room were hung other bladders of deer.

On either side of the mass of rosin weeds and bladders were placed 30 to 40 hunting hats made of curved [bent] wood, often ornamented with carved ivory and always painted -- some white, some brown -- with white blotches, and bearing the picture of a woman's privates. Back of the entrance hole a walrus skull completed the decorations.

[Nelson, the trader]

As we entered one of my dogs followed me in and one of the natives at once seized a drum and began drumming to exorcise the influence of the animal, which was quickly turned out. Afterwards, I was looking about and felt the bladders to see what the paint was, when a howl was raised at the desecration and only desisted when the goods from the sleds were brought in. Two natives took drums and as the cloth goods came in they drummed softly, humming a low song, but as traps, guns, and hard substances were rattled about on the floor the drumming and song arose to drown the noise. This was done so as not to alarm the spirits of the animals represented by the bladders.

[Bladder Festival: Day 1]

In the first part of the evening a great howling was raised outside by boys. Then no other performance took place until about an hour afterwards, when the hunting hats were ranged in a circle around the room enclosing the walrus skull and the pole. Soon after, a bundle of straw such as is used for boot insulation was thrown through the hole in the roof and was placed against the foot of the pole after being carried around inside the hat ring, held above the man's head who carried it.

After the walrus is brought in, no one must go out until the performance is over. The hole [in the center of the house floor is] supposed to be into the sea. The hats were then put on by the men and boys after which the bundle of straw was taken and after being waved overhead, was laid in the ring inside of where the hats were arranged.

The drums began beating and two young fellows seated themselves on the floor under the bladders and rosin weeds, on opposite sides of the straw ring and imitated the notes of the eider (*S. V-Nigras*). Then, keeping time to drums and song (which was guided by a leader who shouted the words to be sung in advance), the men seated on floor began imitating the motions one of a murre (*Uria lomvia*) and the other imitated a loon (*Colymbus pacificus*). The men swayed their heads and bodies into the most irregular positions and making motions as though diving and remaining underwater, then on the surface, pecking, then flying etc. This part ending by their making the call of the bird they imitated.

A single singer and drum then followed for a few minutes while other dancers took places. One imitated a beaver at work, and the other showed how it fought and escaped from the enemy during one of the battles they had formerly. Suddenly one of the singers leapt up and seizing the water disappeared through the hole. Then the rest made a rush and each tried to put his hat as soon as possible on the rosin weed platform. The singing was all at the top of their voices -- men, women, and children together, the women sitting behind the men.

Afterwards nearly all went out and a kantag of food was brought in by a man who at the outer entrance had his parkie removed (stripped to his waist). He entered and carried the food about

held above his head as an offering to the bladders; then he stamped three times and the rest entered bringing kantags of food which they proceeded to eat.

During the night, the lights were suddenly extinguished and the shaman was heard uttering unintelligible words for some time on the roof. When he had ended, a low shout was heard. The lights were lit and a kantag of water was placed under the bladder. Then a man and three boys stripped and one boy was placed on the man's back holding on with his arms and legs; the other boys stooped in front of the kantag opposite the man, the latter then began throwing the water upon the boys with his hands, but it fell back on him and the boys. After some time of this he went around the room throwing up water. The boys then knelt in the centre of the room and a kantag of cold water was sprinkled over each. Soon after a groaning noise was heard below and a man with a parkie hood over his head and a paddle in his hand came in and stood in one corner. Then another, and two others, followed the first, changing his corner, and the others following in rotation; as each came in he took the corner the first had occupied. They then marched several times around the room lifting the bladders with their paddles and knocking down the spears. They then left and the spears were gathered up and their points taken off. At the same time some rosin weeds were fastened to the foot of the pole. This closed the night's performance.

[Bladder Festival: Day 2]

In the morning the end of a bundle of rosin was lit and motions were made in various directions; then it was placed at the foot of the pole. We were told in the morning that we must not stamp our feet in the kashim today. I also learned that before these bladders are placed in the water they must hang in the kashim seventeen days, during each day of which they have a different performance. About noon a man took a torch of rosin weed, lit it, and waved it around the bladders. Then went around the room and out the passage; then returned and placed the remains under the rosin weed platform.

They were splitting wood outside the kashim in the morning, with a kind of pick made of a walrus tusk in a wooden handle.

After last night's performance the bladders were lowered to the upper sleeping platform where they are to remain until put in the water.

Soon after noon a sealskin bag was brought in from which the men took urine in kantags and went out with them and the bag which was wet with urine; then they shouted several times and returned and removed their shirts. Soon the gutskin cover for the roof hole was removed and the four hunting hats worn by the men with paddles last night were let down, attached to the sealskin bags. (These hats had been put on the four paddles placed in the snow in a row across the front of the kashim last night after the paddle ceremony, where they had remained until this time). Attached to the hats were small bunches of the heads of the wheat-headed grass growing here, like what was put on the floor last night. Attached to each bunch of grass were one or two small gull's feathers.

The hats and bags were first hung on the pole; then the bunches of grass were taken off by the men, each placing some on the bladders of seal or walrus killed by him. Then the hats were put on the floor at the foot of the post and the sealbag was inflated and attached by its nose to middle of bladders. On each of its hind flippers hung a single wing feather of a gull. In the kashim during the day whenever we made any sudden noise a number of men would imitate the note of the eider so to make the bladders think the noise was made by them and not by men.

[Bladder Festival: Evening, Day 2]

Early in the evening people gathered in the kashim and the walrus head and mat were placed as before. Suddenly a burning rosin weed was waved about in the hole and then a head appeared and a kantag was slid toward a corner near the bladder and pole. A man followed and stood near us. The performance was repeated until four men were ranged in front of the bladders. The first then took a rosin weed baton with the spear points attached (which were taken from the spear last night) and lit it, waving it about the corner, and then raising it over his head, turned once about, then waved it over his kantags, then about the kantags which contained water for the seals and walrus last night but which were empty tonight. These kantags were then put in front of the hole. The torch was waved about the bladders and replaced against the foot of the pole, and the man made motions as though throwing the food from the kantags to the bladders. Then a man seated in the shade in a corner gave a strong pull to a cord attached to the support of the bladders, causing them to oscillate violently. The same performance was gone through by the others. Then the drums began and the men began a peculiar dance, jerking first to one side then to the other, then forward, passing up and down in front of the bladders which were swung as the dance begun.

The dance changed from jerking to alternate sides to making a kind of oblique galloping movement. The arms were thrown up and down and a jumping motion was made; then the legs were alternately thrown up and while they hopped on the other. Then they made short hops sideways, then long jumps in front, all the while keeping as perfect time to their movements as possible. During this dance a half-grown girl stood opposite them swaying her body slowly back and forth. The same movements were repeated in regular rotation until the dancers were exhausted, when they stopped and a second set followed going through the same performance, then a third. Each set containing only relatives. This dance lasted about an hour and one half, after which the kantags of food were passed around the hole and then the contents eaten.

In the evening two natives stripped to the waist were seated in front of the hole on mats. Below were others with numerous small bundles of straw of the kind before mentioned. The first received it and were told to whom it belonged, and the owner gave from below a speech to make known when he received it, which produced great merriment. He also stated that this straw was for a bed for the bladders. The second, on receiving the bundle, broke it in halves and, binding two ends together, lit the rosin weed torch on which were the seal spear points and passing it around the stairs on every side, said in native, "When they sit down they are sleepy," and fell down, laying the small bundle of straw on the floor. This was repeated for every man in the village.

[Bladder Festival: Day 3]

December 17 During the night another speech was made by shaman to bladders from the roof, followed by shouting imitating the sounds of blowing of seal and walrus.

At 4 am the natives got up and went through the preliminaries of the dance last night, the only difference being that only a few motions were made with arms and the upper part of the body, and the woman who came with each party passed an unlighted torch about her kantags of food, after which they were offered as before to the bladders. Then a man who acted as a kind of priest took a lit torch and passed around the room holding it close to the floor and then encircled each dancer with it, and the dancer then took off an outer parkie and the torch passed around it. The interpreter said this was to prevent everyone from getting sick. Afterwards a parkie from each hunter was treated in this way. Then four men seated themselves under the bladders, then arose behind them and sat on the platform, after which a woman came in with food and passed a lighted torch about and offered it to the bladders, then stood in front of them so close that when they were violently swung they brushed her back each time.

The shaman then took a boy about 12 years old stripped to waist and laid him face down over the hole then knelt over him and kept imitating the note of the murre while a man below led a song sung by those in the room. As soon as this was through a [wish] was made, and as quickly as possible the bladders were taken down, each man attaching his to the end of two or three of his spears. After a song the bladders were placed in front of the [pole] and the pole was taken down, as were also all the other ornaments. Then the rosin weeds were all attached to the upper half of the pole, forming a long brush-like bundle. The shaman then went on the roof and taking off the cover to the skylight put his head successively and repeatedly in each corner of the opening and made a noise exactly like the grunting of a newly born puppy when trying to find its mother. This same noise was made during the performance on the roof both nights; also another shaman knelt over the hole in floor and made the same noise. As soon as they were through, the bladders tied to the ends of the spears were passed out through the hole in the roof and the owners went out under the floor and taking their bladders ran rapidly down to the foot of the knoll on which the village is placed. When all were out, the large rosin weed brush already mentioned was lighted and was passed up through the hole in roof, and taking it, the shaman ran rapidly, followed by the men with bladders and then by the whole village, shouting and making all manner of noises. The scene appeared fantastic in the extreme by the light of the larger flaming torch. They soon reached the lake where the bladders were to be burned [sunk] and then the torch was stuck upright in the snow and each man made an opening in his bladders to let the air out and taking a paddle went several times around the square hole in the ice dipping the point of his paddle and the collapsed bladder in each corner. Then the bladder was placed on the end of the paddle and pushed under the ice.

Soon after daylight the four men who came in with paddles the night before last came in again and as the first arose from the hole he was greeted with a yell by all present; the others were greeted by a kind of groan. They walked around the room exactly as before but did not make any movements with the paddles. About an hour after this everyone was told to be quiet, and two men took a bundle of small sticks and went through nearly the same performance as the two did with straw last night, only the sticks were all held by one man and were not passed up through the hole.

[Noise]

During the entire day no work was performed by the natives, and they requested us not to work because if any one works in the village during the day after putting the bladders in water the people will die. They also wished us to be careful about making noise, and whenever a sudden sound was made by any article falling they began the *pistrak* notes. In the latter part of the afternoon the jumping dance described last evening was performed again by three men. During this performance the drums and song went on as usual.

[Trading]

Yesterday and today I bought a large number of ethnological specimens at what to a white man seems ridiculously small prices, a half dozen gun caps, a few matches, beads, or three or four needles purchasing a beautiful ivory carving on which a great deal of labor must have been spent.

[Parkas]

Many of the natives here and at Askinuk are wearing parkies made of various waterfowl skins such as geese, loons, ducks, etc. One parkie was almost all made of emperor goose skins. This village is situated on a slight rise in the flat tundra which stretches as far as the eye can reach, except to the southeast where a white line shows the salt-water ice.

[Conclusion]

In the evening the shaman stripped and sat on a mat in front of the hole and his hands and feet were securely bound and a long remain with a slip noose was put around his neck. Then two assistants carried him below and he sat on a mat under the floor with the cord passing around under his knees and over the back of his neck, holding his face close between his knees. Before going below a fur hood was put on his head. One of the assistants came up but one pretended to go out to keep the dogs away, and another took the coil of "remain" (one end of which was fast around the shaman's neck) and stood in the room, keeping it taut. When a mat was spread over the hole the remain began to run out and for some minutes kept running out or slacking up. All the time the shaman was below the drums and songs were going on. After a while he gave a groan and they seized a light and ran below where he was seen on his knees still bound and about 5 feet in front of where he had sat at first though the "remain" had been pulled out 10 or 15 yards (of course by the other man below as it was impossible for the shaman to do it without aid).

Upon being unbound, he returned and sat in front of the hole and told a long yarn about catching up with the bladders, saying that he saw and spoke to all but two and that he saw some of his playing together; that some of the bladders were pleased with the men who killed them and that others were displeased as their owners had not fed them well and treated badly. He also said the bladders swam faster this year than last. Soon after this, two men lay down on either side of the hole with two kantags of water in front of it. The reason for this I could not ascertain.

About midnight all arose and after we had removed all our effects a great fire was made and all took a bath in the usual liquid (urine) after which everyone was at liberty to go about his usual labors."