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ESKIMO SONGS FROM ALASKA

Recorded on St. Lawrence Island
by MIRIAM C. STRYKER

edited by Charles Hofmann



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Small Owl
How Much Will I Get for Ivory Carving?
Looking for Someone Who Wants to
Eskimo Dance
Balloon Song
Walking from Savoonga to Gambell
Cowboy Song
Praise, Praise God
Two Helicopter Songs
Drum Song
Like A Little Girl
Little Indian Boy
Indian Exhausted
Rise Up, Helicopter, Like A Bird
Guitar Song
Eskimo Rock 'n' Roll
Little Cowboy
Swing Your Drum
I Couldn't Wait
Old Song

ESKIMO SONGS FROM ALASKA

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Recorded on St. Lawrence Island in the villages
of Savoonga and Gambell by Miriam C.
Stryker

Edited by Charles Hofmann

Department of Education, American Museum of
Natural History, New York City

Dedicated to Rev. Arthur French and my
many Eskimo friends on St. Lawrence
Island who have helped to make this
recording possible.

Descriptive notes and photographs by
Miriam C. Stryker



These are recordings of Eskimo singing made
in the villages of Gambell (Savoovuk) and Savoonga on
St. Lawrence Island, which lies off the coast of
Alaska, south of the Bering Strait.

The Island is a little over a hundred miles long
and varies in width from ten to forty miles. Eskimo
legend relates how this Island came to get its peculiar
shape. "The Sea Goddess, picking up a handful of

ooze from the bottom of the sea, squeezed it between
her fingers, forming the mountains that are part of
its interesting terrain."

Rocky cliffs on the north shore are inhabited by
thousands of nesting sea birds. Great rock piles
that stretch beyond the tops harbor several species
of auklets, puffins, etc., that nest in the crannies
and rock burrows.



Removing blubber from skin.
This is done before splitting the skin. Note the ulu or woman's knife.

The Eskimos have occupied this Island back into antiquity, as their ancient villages testify. At present the two villages, each with 360 to 380 Eskimos still carry on many customs of their forefathers, although these Eskimos, like the others throughout the Arctic, are now in a state of transition to new ways of life.

The St. Lawrence Island Eskimos, as well as those of King and Little Diomedé islands, speak a Siberian dialect. The mainland Eskimos from Alaska across the Canadian Arctic and Greenland speak a common language that is not understood by the other group.

The village of Gambell is located at the north-western end of the Island on a gravel beach. It is just two miles from the International Date Line and thirty miles from the Siberian mountains, which can be seen on any clear day. Behind the village is Gambell Mountain with lovely Troutman Lake at its base. This lake is the source of the water supply for summer. In winter, ice or blocks of snow have to be melted for use.

Savoonga is about midway on the north shore of the Island. Cindercone Mountains, which the Eskimos call the Kookooligit Mountains, are of volcanic origin and are some five or ten miles behind the village. Rolling grassy tundra stretches out on either side of this village for miles. Colorful Arctic plants grow in profusion during the brief summer of twenty-four-hour days of continuous light. There are no trees except for some dwarf birches and several species of willows that grow only a few inches high. Permafrost, or permanently frozen ground, keeps roots that would grow deep in the ground from penetrating this frozen soil.

Eskimos make use of this natural refrigeration for their meat cellars.

The Eskimos in both these villages hunt the walrus when these animals migrate north in the early spring and again when they return in the fall. Several species of seal are also hunted. Gambell secures an occasional whale. Fish, birds, and birds' eggs also supplement their diet.

The Eskimos obtain from the tundra some highly prized "greens." From them they make an interesting dish called "Eskimo ice cream." The "greens," with a little water, are put in a seal poke or nail keg, if one can be procured, and are allowed to ferment. This is later put up on the roof and kept frozen until used.

On special occasions this frozen fermented green is then shaved off, mixed with seal oil, Mazola, or Wesson oil, and beaten until three times its size. It is considered quite an Eskimo delicacy.

In this area the large skin boat or umiak is used: not the kayak. The umiak is now powered with outboard motors which are suspended from a framed well which supports the motor and is placed several feet from the stern. Another white man's gadget is the binocular which enables the Eskimo to extend the range of his vision and spot game at great distances. The transistor radio gives him contact with the mainland.

The radio station at Nome supplies a valuable service throughout the arctic called Ptarmigan Telegraph. They receive postcards and broadcast the messages the same day. It is much faster than the mails which may take several weeks to arrive when the weather is bad. Everyone uses this service by means of radios or small transistors

that they own. Some of the messages are quite touching; others are humorous; all are interesting.

Sugar, tea, flour, cloth for snow shirts to cover skin parkas are among some of the items now considered necessities. Some of the white man's clothing has replaced the old-style clothing for summer. Rubber boots often replace the skin mukluks, but the Eskimo's own type of clothing is still superior for warmth in the winter, particularly for the hunt on the sea or on the sea ice.

The Eskimos are warm, friendly people, resourceful, and skillful hunters. Most of the people on this Island still depend on the environment to supply them with the things they need. A people who can wrest their living from such a rugged environment command our respect. From these Islands in the Bering Sea come some of the finest ivory carvings and skin work. This gives them a source of income for some of the things they like from the white man's culture.

The recording on Side I was made at Savoonga on May 7, 1963 during an Eskimo "sing" at the home of Tim Gologergen. The kashim or community house was not used by the St. Lawrence Island Eskimos. Singers gathered at the home of one of their members by invitation for an evening of singing and dancing.

To get in the mood for listening to one of these "sings," envision a small room, about 9' x 12', with a number of Eskimo singers lining one side of the room, sitting on the floor with their backs against the wall and feet stretched out in front of them. Each had a big tambourine-shaped drum with a handle, and a long thin wooden beater.

Between each pair of singers is a plastic bottle filled with water to keep the drumhead wet while drummed. This gives greater resonance to the tone. Most Eskimo drumming is done by striking the beater on the back edge of the frame, rarely on the skin itself.

As the drumming and singing progress, the room fills with men, women and children. Young people fill the entranceway, and even the windows frame spectators looking in. The only cleared place is a very small area directly in front of the singers. This is for anyone who wishes to dance.

One of the singers starts a song, very often one of his own. It begins slowly and softly as each singer picks up the words or syllables, melody, and beat. When the leader of the particular song feels satisfied with the performance he indicates his approval by an accented beat on the drum or by a loud vocal ascending declaration ---- ooOOOPS. The group of singers then assume tempo and volume.

Some of the singers perform with closed eyes as if to get the full effect of the song; others with the whole upper body in motion and in rhythm with the song. There is a great deal of physical effort that goes into a "sing" as well as a dance. The whole room throbs with sound.

From time to time one or several get up and dance in the small space in front of the drummers. The men's dancing is vigorous and virile. The individual dances are of short duration and call for intense bursts of physical activity. Women's dancing is much more passive; feet remain stationary, movement is only from the waist up and includes use of the hands and arms.

To see Eskimo music and dancing performed in this way, the warmth and enthusiasm of the performers, the receptiveness of the audience, and to be a part of it, is an experience to remember.

In some of the individual songs in this recording one can pick up the introductory reviewing of the song and the perfecting of the performance before the real song begins. Listen for it.

There are hunting songs, animal songs, story songs, game songs, songs of derision, songs about a balky motor in a boat, and songs about a strong childhood objection to learning long division. Almost anything can evoke the inspiration for a song.

The text of the song often is very meager. The audience is expected to be familiar enough with the



Theodore Kingeekuk standing with three skin boats behind him. The skin boats are kept on racks when not in use. These are now "powered" by Evinrude or Johnson motors. In the background is the Bering Sea.

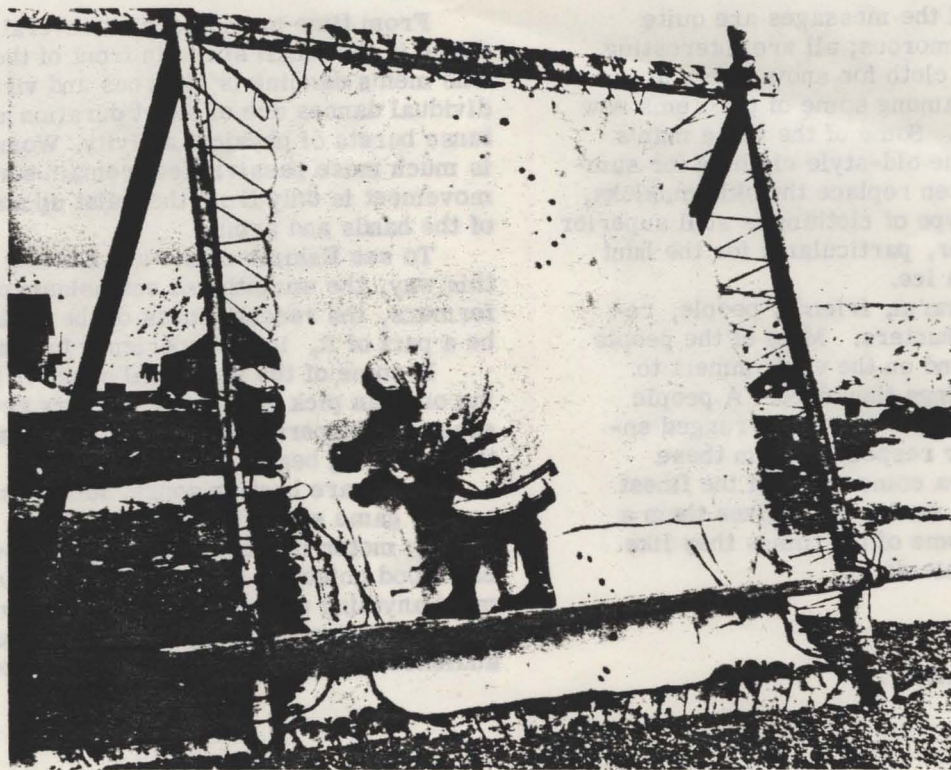


Photo by- E. G. Franz Sauer

Daisy of Gambell splitting walrus skin for the umiak or skin boat. These skins about two inches thick are split and used to cover the umiak. Skin covers may last from three to five years before needing replacement.

situation and subject to fill in most of the meaning. Many songs have only the syllables "eya," or "ha-ya," or "aayaaa-yaayaa," or "yaiyaa."

Not all songs are contemporary: many are ancient songs carried in the memory of the old men and passed along. Frequently these old songs seem quite monotonous to our untrained ears.

The songs from these two villages are contemporary ones and have been composed by the individuals mentioned. They reflect incidents and experiences in their everyday life, as well as new experiences somewhat strange to Eskimo life - "Cowboy song," "Helicopter Song," "Eskimo Rock 'n' Roll," etc.

Side I VILLAGE OF SAVOONGA

Drum sing at Tim Gologergen's home in the village of Savoonga, May 7, 1963.

Small Owl (Nick Wongatilin)
How Much Will I Get for the Ivory Carving?
(Nathan Noonwook)
Looking for Someone Who Wants To Eskimo
Dance (Amos Penayak)
Balloon Song (Nick Wongatilin)
Walking from Savoonga to Gambell
(Paul Jensen)
Cowboy Song (John Apongalook)
Praise, Praise God (Nick Wongatilin)
Helicopter Song (Nathan Noonwook)
Second Helicopter Song (Nathan Noonwook)
Drum Song (Nick Wongatilin)

Side II VILLAGE OF GAMBELL

An Eskimo "sing" at the home of Thomas Apassingok, August, 1961.

Announced by John Apongalook.

Like a Little Girl (Laurence Kulukbon)
Little Indian Boy (Fred Angi)
Indian Exhausted (Fred Angi)
Rise Up, Helicopter, Like A Bird (Fred Angi)
Guitar Song (John Apongalook)
Eskimo Rock 'n' Roll
Little Cowboy
Swing Your Drum
I Couldn't Wait
Old Song (John Apongalook)