



Old Woman's Last Hunt

Photo-story by Lyn Hancock

Susie Tiktalik, or Old Woman as she is called by the hunters on Banks Island, Northwest Territories, is my Eskimo mother. For courage and endurance, for hunting skills, for wisdom and humor, there is no one in Sachs Harbour more honored than she.

While men go out with their snowmobiles, Old Woman goes out with her dog team, hiking a hundred miles to her trapline with no one but Bella, her 11-year-old granddaughter who, in Eskimo tradition, she has adopted as her daughter. In winter as in summer she travels Banks Island further and more often than the men of the village who come to her to learn where the caribou are.

Mother of five living children, grandmother of 23 and great-grandmother of four, Susie is a living legend. No records were kept back when she was

born but they say in the village she is more than 80 years old.

"I've lived for a long time," she jokes in Eskimo. "No wonder I am old!"

As she laughs, her eyes disappear behind slits in a sea of wrinkles, her cheeks bulge and her mouth becomes a great cave. Her brown moon of a face, tattooed a long time ago to make her look pretty, is dried like an old apple and her teeth are worn to stumps by long years of chewing hides but she has no fillings. Her hair is still a glossy black and her laugh is young.

When I first met Susie Tiktalik she was sitting on the floor of her frame house making mukluks, pursing her lips into crinkles of concentration as she looked up to the light to thread her needle.

Beside her sat Bella, pulling strips

from a chunk of caribou sinew to make thread. Bella, who looks more Chinese than Eskimo, is the most beautiful child I have ever seen — dark liquid eyes; perfect complexion; shiny, white teeth and long, black hair parted in the middle to shroud her face but not conceal her mischievous grin. Alert and impish, Bella at 11 is still in grade one, not through any lack of intelligence but because most of her time has been spent hunting with Granny.

Men say that Susie is afraid of nothing and tell of the time she drove away four polar bears.

She was out with dogs hunting seals through the ice. Using hooks, she had pulled up several seals which lay beside her. Suddenly the dogs sounded the alarm and Susie looked around to see four giant polar bears approaching.

She had no gun. The dogs couldn't

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Prologue

In the summer of 1981 I flew to Sachs Harbour on Banks Island. I had intended to spend time on the tundra with Susie Tikalik, my adopted Eskimo mother, her granddaughter Bella, and Bella's baby son, Vernon. I had just seen the family two years earlier when we had all gone fishing and hunting at Fish Lakes. It was an incredibly beautiful day in the arctic: the ice had just gone out of the harbour and we had to push the icebergs away with our paddles. I vowed to return. I remember Susie's last words as translated by Bella were, "Next time

attack because they were tied to a sled anchored in the ice . . . and they were no match for four polar bears.

Susie didn't panic. She swung the seal hooks around and around her head, making them sing. They were brightly polished and glistened in the sun.

Then she crouched low, making coarse, guttural noises that rose to a shout as she moved slowly toward the bears. A few yards away they stopped and stared at this strange apparition. They turned and shambled away.

Three weeks after I met Susie I went roaming with her on what was to be her last caribou hunt. I thought I would capture some of the traditional romance of the Arctic. With Bella to act as interpreter, I would walk the tundra with Susie, camp out on caribou skins, share dried seal meat and tea and pack our kill home by dog team. Our only link with modernity would be matches and a rifle.

Nothing turned out as expected. Gone forever were the igloos, the kayaks, the harpoons. Now native people drive snowmobiles, use outboard motors, and are taken on government or oil company planes to hunt their game. The white man's technology has overwhelmed Eskimo traditions.

Plans changed even before we started. Most caribou at this time were still 200 miles north of the settlement. "Granny says we can find caribou closer if we go to Johnson's Point," Bella reported. "And Edith wants to come, too."

Edith Hoagak was Susie's daughter, a plump, middle-aged mother of four who had been widowed 12 years ago when her husband's canoe overturned and he died in the frigid water.

I arranged for the four of us and five

come for the summer. We will camp if I am still well."

I came but Susie Tikalik died in Sachs Harbour September 19, 1980. Our fishing trip had been her last. Bella and Vernon had gone to Paulatuk.

Susie did not speak English. I did not speak Inuktitut. We communicated only by smile and gesture and touch. But I felt a bonding that transcends other barriers. Edith Hoagak, her daughter, said simply, I miss my Mum." Edith, so do I. I print this story of our first hunt together in Susie's memory.

dogs to fly with Northward Airlines to Johnson Point, a winter base for oil exploration about 150 miles to the northeast. We would hike on from there.

At the Sachs Harbour airstrip the unexpected happened in earnest. Susie had exchanged her usual long, fur-trimmed atigi for a pair of jeans and a faded blue nylon jacket — hardly photogenic attire for a film of the Great Caribou Hunt.

Then while we were loading the DC3 she decided that her fifth dog was too mean to take aboard so that meant she wouldn't take the sled but would make canvas packsacks for the dogs. The four dogs were hauled into the plane by

Susie's face was tattooed. She had never left Banks Island (top left). Edith, Bella, Susie, and the author, leave Johnson's Point on the caribou hunt.



their chains and tied to upturned, empty seats along the aisle.

Our intention was to camp overnight at Johnson Point base, enquire from pilots about the possible caribou areas, and set off early next morning with the dogs.

But Johnson Point hospitality overwhelmed us all. Mac the helpful, jovial type in charge of the radio installations drove our gear to the base. Cece, the foreman, insisted we spend the night not in our tent on the tundra but in a large orange trailer set high off the ground on movable tracks. The dogs were tied up behind it.

The trailer was very comfortable. It had three rooms, eight beds, a fridge full of canned food, pop, fresh fruit and vegetables — even a freezer full of salmon slices. Another empty trailer next door provided washrooms, showers and hot, running water. A few yards away, in the mess hut, we were offered three-course meals.

Elijah, a former trapper from the Mackenzie Delta was the only Eskimo in camp. He hurried over, beaming enthusiastically, with clean sheets to make up the beds.

The way they settled in was a fascinating mixture of the old and the new.

They took their boots off at the door — and washed the dishes left in the crowded sink — but, spurning chairs, sat crosslegged on the floor to eat. Not



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for them a lavish dinner in the mess hut with the construction workers, or even the steaks and salad brought over by Elijah, or the goodies left in the refrigerator.

Susie opened a green plastic bag full of leather-like dried meat, hung it on the upside-down legs of one of the piled-up chairs and then, with her ulu, cut off chunks of meat and handed them around.

"My mum eats mostly dried meat. Just once in a while she eats white man's grub like bread, fresh fruit, sardines ... stuff like that," Edith informed me.

In all honesty I can't say I liked dried, black seal meat better than fresh sirloin steaks but it was beginning to look as though eating was the only thing I was doing Eskimo style.

After we had chewed to repletion Susie took from one of her cardboard boxes a pile of sewing material — pieces of sealskin, fox fur, buttons, thread, scissors, half completed ookpiks, mukluks and igloo ornaments.

Equipment for a hunting trip? Yes. Susie had learned that a trip to Johnson Point was lucrative. She could sell her artifacts to the isolated men at the base. I was relieved, however, that our trek across the tundra had not been entirely forgotten when she started sewing canvas packsacks for the dogs. We might just go caribou hunting yet!

None of the pilots at Johnson Point had seen caribou within 60 miles of the base so Mac suggested that he drive us a few miles out of camp on a rolligon, so that we could hunt while making our way back. Since caribou are always on the move, he figured perhaps by the time we got out there, they may have moved in.

The weight of a rolligon is borne by rollers which rest on top of air bags and transmit the driving power. The smooth air bags take the place of wheels, exerting a gentle pressure over a large area. On the dashboard of the large cab are controls with which the driver can adjust pressure in each of the vehicle's air bags to match the changes in the terrain and thus protect the fragile tundra.

Obviously worried about our welfare, Mac ran the rolligon up an 800-foot incline en route to set up a surveyor's tripod as a handy landmark and lent us his watch to note the days. Later, when several planes a day buzzed overhead, I realized he'd radioed pilots hauling fuel between Johnson Point and Prince Patrick Island to check our progress.

It rather dampened my romantic notions about four women alone on the remote tundra. Even Eskimos have difficulty getting away from it all! Yet it is easy to feel lost in this type of terrain. For hundreds of miles in any direction the tundra stretches flat to the horizon — treeless, empty, silent. You discover infinity in such a land and you realize afresh how small and vulnerable is Man.

After a long slow crawl of about four hours, Susie picked a camp spot on a point beside a lake, protected by a knoll from both the wind and oncoming caribou. After several cups of warming tea and more expression of concern, Mac, with Elijah who had come along to keep Mac company on the way back, started back to Johnson Point. My long awaited caribou hunt had finally begun.

The camp was primitive but adequate. Our tent was a piece of old canvas stretched on the ground and then raised on a ridge pole scrounged from the lumber pile at Johnson Point. In case of rain I'd brought a plastic tarp to double as my mattress but it proved a cold substitute for the Eskimo women's mattress of caribou hide and I was to find myself snuggling into theirs at night for warmth.

Next morning I opened my eyes to see Susie huddled



Susie glasses the tundra for caribou in a midsummer snowstorm.

over a pot of boiling coffee. As usual, she was the first one to crawl from under her blanket, reach out for the pot of boiling water left outside our tent the night before, crack the ice in it and pump the Primus stove.

"Ker no it bin?" (How are you?) said Edith as she emerged from her caribou skin and brushed its loose shedding hair from her blouse. "Look how white I am. I'm old before my time!"

"We're all old before our time," gurgled Bella merrily as she sat up and blew long, white hairs from her nose and mouth. "Ooh, I'm cold, Edith, I'll give you \$25 for your blanket and no extra for the caribou hairs."

Always the Eskimos joke and laugh. But when Susie laughed it was so joyous and uproarious that you wanted to laugh, too, even when you had no notion what had caused it.

Susie decided to leave camp where it was that day and go hunting in the direction of a caribou she had spotted through her binoculars the night before. The dogs kept up an enthusiastic anticipatory howling as soon as unstacked and I felt their vociferous

presence would send a flying every caribou within hearing distance.

Bella and Edith roped the empty packsacks on the dogs to support the hoped-for meat back to camp. Susie, with binoculars and sealskin-encased rifle slung by ropes around her neck, looked as though she was cutting off her breath supply.

Edith had slung over her rifle a piece of canvas to hold dried meat and a pot of tea. Bella also packed a round canvas sack.

Off we went with the dogs trotting in the lead. "Granny didn't pack food for the dogs," Bella told me, "in case they messed up the plane and, besides, they don't work as hard if they eat too much."

Nevertheless, I was glad that the men at Johnson Point had fed them the leftover sirloin steaks from the night before.

Before every rise we would stop for Susie to lie flat on the tundra and sweep to the horizon with her binoculars. Every little while we also would have to stop to retie the packsacks the kept slipping around the dogs' bellies and tripping them up.

We spotted no caribou but in this seemingly empty land I thrilled to the sight of a fox and to the call of loons

on a lake.

After three hours we stopped to make tea. Susie dug a depression in the ground, Bella arranged roots she'd been collecting along the way and Edith, the only one who smoked, offered cigarette paper when the caribou fat wouldn't burn.

On other days when we carried camp with us on the dogs' packs, Susie would tear off a piece of canvas and dip it in the stove oil to make the fire.

Water in this land of lakes and streams and melting snow was the one commodity that was always handy. Our lunch, like every meal, was dried caribou or seal, the former edible but the latter too tough for my teeth or enjoyment.

Susie and Edith would tear off strips with their hands but Bella would grab hers with her teeth and slice off pieces with her ulu. She laughed merrily when I feared for her nose and teased me further by slicing the meat closer to her face.

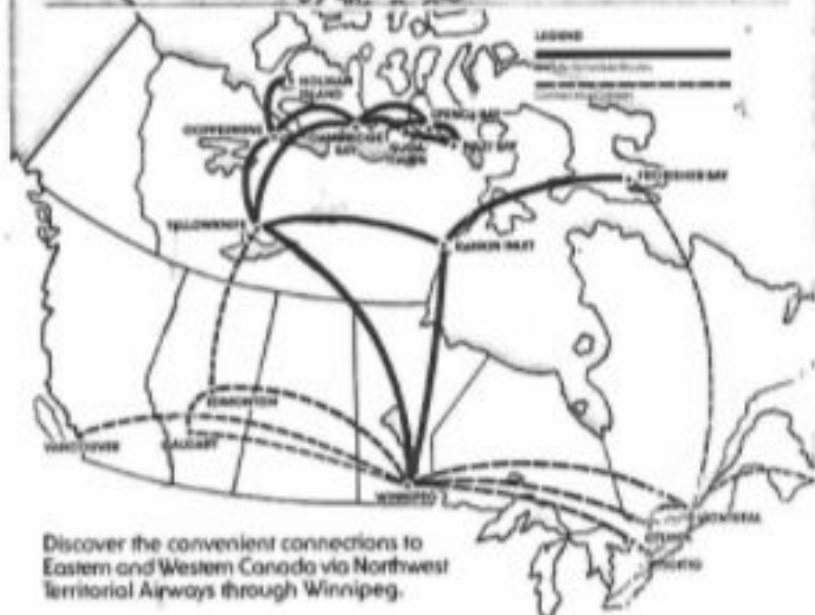
By early afternoon we had walked a wide circle of many miles crossing hills, fording streams and edging lakes, still without seeing caribou despite coming across tracks and lots of dung, a few pieces of which Susie said were "really fresh." The dogs fought crazy over

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We stopped to fish at a lake close to camp. While Susie and Edith sedately threw out a simple hook and line, Bella pranced over the rocks along the water's edge and turned over stones to catch little fish which she popped, live and wriggling, into her mouth.

She, as the only successful fisherman, merrily trooped back to camp carrying her fish on a flat rock in front of her.

Susie decided next day we would pack the dogs and start walking back in the general direction of Johnson Point, covering about 12 miles a day in wide loops and continuing to look for caribou.

We didn't see any but for me those days will be memories to treasure as rapport grew between us despite our problems in communication.

We must have looked a motley crew as we trekked across the snow drifted tundra. "Caribou run away from bright colors," Edith had said. So I covered my orange parka & 1/2 of the mail's blue & hunting slicker. But it

was the dogs that were the most odd with their clumsy loads topped by rolled up caribou hides that kept falling to one side and dragging on the ground.

As we trudged on I could see Susie was tiring.

She now held onto one of the dogs with a rope and stopped more frequently, kneeling on the tundra and supporting herself with a tent pole while she caught her breath. She planned more frequent tea stops and had Edith carry the binoculars. Even Bella became more subdued and complained for the first time about "packing."

One night when we stopped to make camp, Susie's remarks were translated as: "I'm so tired I'll sleep right here without waiting for the tent." And although she had refused all my other offerings, this time she accepted a chocolate bar with the Eskimo equivalent of: "I'm so hungry I could eat anything."

I realized that the last day had come when Edith left the steel dog stake sticking in the tundra and burned out tent poles for firewood. Susie looked more weary; she coughed a lot and complained of a sore throat.

Half a century younger than Old Woman, even I felt stiff and looked forward to a warm mattress at the trailer instead of a cold, plastic tarp on the bumpy ground.

Mac, who must have been out look-

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Bella catches fish with her hands and pops them into her mouth.

ing for us hourly, walked the last mile to meet us and seemed clearly relieved, though a little surprised, that we had made it.

Inside the trailer Susie fell onto the bed in exhaustion but still managed to laugh and joke as I put her feet up and pretended she was an invalid.

It was, indeed, Old Woman's last long hunt. She was to get her caribou the next day, and ironically, without my help.

Leaving her and Edith settled on the floor of the trailer and their sealskin sewing artifacts, and Bella happily riding the rolligon with Mac, I flew back the next day to Sachs to collect the sled, Susie's parka and Bella's dress parka. If I couldn't get caribou at least I could pictures! Within 24 hours I was back at Johnston Point with the supplies.

As the plane taxied to a halt Mac came rushing towards me.

"Quick!" Bring your cameras. Susie has just shot two caribou half a mile from the trailer. She saw them from the steps as she was sewing. They're sectioning them to fit on the rolligon when I left. You may get some shots for the end of the story — but you'll have to hurry."

It was ironic that while I was making arrangements with white men to find caribou in the old way by wandering great distances, the Eskimo women

had quietly found their own in the new way, sighting them from a warm house, stalking a couple of hundred yards to the kill then signalling the white men to pack the meat home by motorized transport.

Next day Susie and Edith sat on the ground outside the trailer to skin and cut up the meat. Using their ulus they cut off the heads by boiling, the fore and hind quarters for roasting, the sinew for sewing and the ribs and chest for slitting into strips which were hung on a sawhorse to make dried meat.

Each hide was stretched out on the ground and the women knelt alongside and scraped off the fat. As soon as I'd taken a few pictures, they moved operations inside the trailer, it being too cold and windy for them to work outside.

Mac packed their meat in plastic bags for storing in the company freezer until they were ready to leave.

Old Woman, had indeed, trudged the tundra with her dog team and in all seasons. But not any more. Once you've been taken by plane and truck to the hunt, why go back to the dog team? Especially if you're over 80!

And as Edith said: "It's fall now and so cold. Better to hunt in the summer. It's good we hunt every day at Johnson Point and come home every night to the trailer. The caribou will come to

us."

Susie is perhaps the last of the Eskimos to live in the old way. But no longer does she live in a snow house and warm her frozen body over a seal oil lamp. When her hunting days are over she will not have to walk quietly out into the cold and die.

The government will take care of her food and shelter and, when she gets sick, a government plane will take her to hospital.

In murdering the lifestyle of the Eskimo we have given them independence from the elements and security from starvation but have they retained their personal dignity, their self-respect and their pride in a culture that harmonized with those elements?

I think of Cambridge Bay where more than 600 Eskimos are living in stereotyped houses in an area devoid of wildlife and where there is little to do except sit and wait for a welfare cheque. I think of white man towns like Probysher Bay and Inuvik. There, too, drink is the great escape.

Then I think of my time on the tundra and the words of Old Woman on our last day: "We'll miss you when you're gone, Lyn Tiġalik."

I feel sad we have lost respect for the value of diversity in human culture. And I feel sad that Susie has made her last hunt.

To
Sachs
Rupa
Puma
and