



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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