

Sun-Earth Day Special: Arctic Impressions

Barrow, Alaska

Full Journal for Day 2 (1-21-08)

[Dorian Janney]

Greetings from the top of the world on day 2 from Barrow, Alaska.

When I was on the plane heading from Fairbanks to Barrow yesterday, I met a really nice family who lived in Barrow. Their dad was named William and he was originally from Nashville Tennessee. His wife, Flossy, was Inupiat and had lived in Barrow all her life. They had 2 children, Joey, age 6 in 1st grade and Dessera who was 11 and was in 6th grade.



The kids told me all about Barrow and eating whale meat and all kinds of things that they really loved about living Barrow. They'd been gone for a month visiting relatives over winter break and had gone away on vacation where it was warm and sunny. They were really happy to be getting back to the good old cold.

Their parents told me to give them a call when I got settled in my hotel and they would give me the name of one of their good friends who would take me on a tour of the town area. So I did give them a call and today Bunna and his son Edward, age 2, took me on a wonderful 6 hour tour. Bunna gave tours of this area for about 10 years and knew everything about the wildlife, the geography and the culture of the people in this area and I learned so much. The weather report said it would be much colder; a high of 18 degrees and a low of -3....brrrrr.

This is an absolutely gorgeous part of our country that I had only seen in pictures before. Actually being here is an amazing experience! This town is in the most northern part of Alaska, and it is part of the tundra. There are no trees or any sign of vegetation at this time of year, although I am told there is some lichen for the caribou herds just under the snow.

Everything is white...just white stretching on and on as far as the eye can see. It is beautiful. When Bunna showed up around 11am, the twilight was just beginning to lighten up the landscape, Although again today the sun never rise

above the horizon. We began our tour by driving out of town a little ways to see if we could find any animals.



One of the things we saw on our tour was a “Whalebone Arch”. This is not advertising the local McDonald’s- as a matter of fact, there are no fast foods restaurants here. These are actually whalebones from a bowhead whale that was caught by Inupiat whalers using the small boats called 'skin boats' that are located to either side of the arch. The Inupiat are the name of the Eskimo tribe that has lived here in Barrow for the past 5,000 years. Most

of the 4,000 people who live in Barrow are Inupiat.

After we went to the Whale Bone Arch, then we went out to look for polar bears out on the tundra and by the shores of the Arctic Sea, but didn’t find any. However, we did see many snowy owls! They are mostly white in the winter, and can have a five foot wing span. They hunt lemmings, a little mink-like mammal that is also white in the winter.



The female snowy owls have some brown markings and Bunna referred to this as having some 'peppery coloring'.



The snowy owl is Barrow’s special bird, and here is a sign that welcomes people to Barrow and has an image of a snowy owl on it. Apparently, originally, Barrow meant, "town of the people who hunt the Snowy Owl". However, they don't hunt snowy owls anymore.

Barrow does not have any roads that you can drive on to get to any other town, and the only way to get to and from Barrow is by airplane. That is pretty expensive, so there are some people who have never left Barrow. Because Barrow is so isolated and is such a small community, all of the people in town know each other. They do many fun things together as a community. On the night that I arrived, they had a big firework display. It was supposed to have been

done on New Year's Eve, except that the man who was setting them off was sick. They all get together and play games, like races and shows of strength, on Christmas, and they have other contests and games throughout the year. In the spring, most of the town people get together for a big whale hunt. They take skin



boats out, which are made of wood and use the skins of seals stretched across them to float. They make these boats during the long cold winter. When they catch a whale, they share it with everyone in town.

The picture to the left is of the fishing camp where they drag the whale to get it ready to pass out to townspeople. There are drying racks made of wood to set some of the meat on to dry.

There is a very special treat that is made from the whale blubber that is called "muktuk". Bunna invited me to come to his house to meet his mother and to try some muktuk, so of course I did!

Bunna's mother's house looked very small from the outside which is pretty typical of houses in Barrow. Because they need to keep them warm throughout the long cold winter, they have small houses which are built up off the ground and have a lot of insulation.



Once I got inside her house it appeared to be absolutely huge because the ceiling was 2 stories high and let in lots of light. She had beautiful Eskimo masks hanging up on the walls and showed me a really neat video show of the whale being caught.

Then she served up the muktuk. It was very interesting... Ah, I think it was probably an acquired taste. I'm not sure I'll be going out and buying whale meat myself but I was happy to try it. What did muktuk taste like? Well it had very strong smell. Definitely it reminded me of the ocean and it tasted kind of chewy and had a really strong fish flavor.



Bunna's mother had boiled up the muktuk and served it along with some of the whale muscle meat. In her freezer, she has many bags of whale meat to last through the winter, and each family digs a small room out in their back yard, and uses this "freezer" to keep their fish and whale meat frozen throughout the fall, winter, and spring season.



Groceries are very expensive in Barrow because everything must be flown in, and so people try to live on the food that they can catch. When we were in the grocery store I noticed that small loaf of bread was \$5.45 and a gallon of milk was \$9.00. I guess I would be eating a lot of muktuk if I lived in Barrow myself.

Little Edward, Bunna's 2 year old son, loved the muktuk and he ran around eating it as though he were eating potato chips.

During the long winter, the sun never rises and it is twilight for only about four hours each day. Many people use that time to fix their boats and work on beautiful handmade crafts. They also have a health club, indoor tennis courts, an ice hockey rink, and a covered swimming pool in town. At the elementary school, there is an indoor playground for the children to play on during recess!

Well I'm looking forward to going back and getting a good night sleep and well see what tomorrow brings. Tomorrow I'm going to be able to go to the local high school and do some lessons along with a NASA educator so I'm really looking forward to that.

Signing off for tonight - Ms. Janney here at the top of the world.

