How I Filmed Nanook of the North

Adventures with the Eskimos to Get Pictures of Their Home Life and Their Battles with Nature to Get Food. The Walrus Fight.

By Robert J. Flaherty, F.R.G.S. (1922)

In August 1910, Sir William MacKenzie whose transcontinental railway, the Canadian Northern, was then in the initial stages of construction, commissioned the writer to undertake an expedition to the East Coast of Hudson Bay to examine deposits of certain islands upon which iron ore were supposed to be located.

All told I made four expeditions on Sir William's behalf, during a period of six years, along the East Coast of Hudson Bay, through the barren lands of the hitherto unexplored peninsula of Ungava, along the west coast of Ungava Bay and along the southern coast of Baffin Land. This work culminated in the discovery of the Belcher Island archipelago in Hudson Bay - a land mass which occupies 5,000 square miles - upon this land mass were discovered extensive deposits of iron ore but all of too low a grade, however, to be of economic importance. As a part of my exploration equipment, on these expeditions, a motion-picture outfit was included. It was hoped to secure films of the North and Eskimo life, which might prove to be of enough value to help in some way to defray some of the costs of the explorations. While wintering in Baffin Land during 1913-14 films of the country and the natives were made as was also done on the succeeding expedition to the Belcher Islands. The film, in all, about 30,000 feet, was brought out safely, at the conclusion of the explorations, to Toronto, where, while editing the material, I had the misfortune of losing it all by fire. Though it seemed to be a tragedy at the time, I am not sure but what it was a bit of fortune that it did burn, for it was amateurish enough.

My interest in films, from then on, grew.

New forms of travel film were coming out and the Johnson South Sea Island film particularly seemed to me to be an earnest of what might be done in the North. I began to believe that a good film depicting the Eskimo and his fight for existence in the dramatically barren North might be well worth while. To make a long story short, I decided to go north again - this time wholly for the purpose of making films.

Mr. John Revillon and Captain Thierry Mallet of Revillon Freres became interested and decided to finance my project. It proved to be a happy arrangement, for among the Revillon Freres' vast system of fur posts which lie scattered through northern Canada I was enabled to use one of these posts as the nucleus for my work. This post was on Cape Dufferin on northeastern Hudson Bay and about 800 miles north of the rail frontier in northern Ontario. The journey thither began on the eighteenth of June, 1920. With Indians by canoe, I followed the Moose River to Moose Factory on James Bay. From thence northward a small schooner was taken to my destination where I arrived in the middle of August. The resources of the Revillon Freres fur trade post at Cape Dufferin were at my disposal. One of the two living quarters which comprised the Post was mine as living quarters and film laboratory combined.

My equipment included 75,000 feet of film, a Haulberg electric light plant and projector and two Akeley cameras and a printing machine so that I could make prints of film as it was exposed and project the pictures on the screen so that thereby the Eskimo would be able to see and understand wherever mistakes were made.

Of the Eskimo who were known to the Post, a dozen all told I selected for the film. Of these, Nanook, a character famous in the country, was my chief man. Besides him and much to his approval, I selected three younger men as helpers. This also meant their wives and families, dogs to the number of about twenty-five, their sledges, kayacks, and hunting impedimenta.
As luck would have it, the first film to be made was the walrus hunt. From Nanook, I first heard of the "Walrus Island" which is a small island far out at sea and inaccessible to the Eskimo during the open water season since it is far out enough so as not to be seen from land.

On the island's south end, a surf-bound beach, there were, in summer, Nanook said, many walrus, judging from signs that had been seen by a winter sealing crowd of Eskimo who, caught by a break up of the ice, had been forced to live the until late spring, when, by building an umiak of driftwood and sealskins and by digging out the open water lands of ice which had not yet cleared from the coast, they succeeded in getting on to the mainland. Nanook was very keen about my going, for, as he said, "It is many moons since I have hunted the summer walrus."

When I had decided upon taking the trip the whole country-side was interested. There was no lack of applicants for the trip. Everyone gave me some particular reason why he should be included in the expedition. With an open-seas boat twenty-five feet long rigged with a leg-o'-mutton sail we started, a throng of Eskimo, their wives, children and dogs assembled on the beach to see us off.

A few miles from the Post we reached the open sea when for three days we waited on the coast for easy weather in order to undertake the crossing. We finally reached the island one day at nightfall, and landed on what was nothing but a low waste of bed rock and boulders a mile and a half long and the whole of its shoreland ringed with booming surf. Around the luxury of a driftwood fire (driftwood is rare on the mainland) we lounged far into the night, speculating mainly on what chances there might be for walrus. As luck would have it just as we were turning in, from Nanook suddenly came an exclamation "Iviuk! Iviuk!" and the bark of a school of walrus resounded through the air. When early the next morning we went over, we found much to our disappointment that the walrus herd had gone into the sea again but presently one after another and near the shore the heads of a big school of walrus shot up above the sea, their wicked tusks gleaming in the sun. As long as they were in the water no films could be made and we returned again to the camp. For the next two days we made almost hourly trips to that beach before finally we found them- a herd of twenty- asleep and basking in the sand on the shore. Most fortunately, they lay at a point where in approaching, we could be screened from their view by a slight rise in the ground. Behind the rise, I mounted the camera and Nanook, stringing his harpoon, began slowly snaking over the crest. From the crest to where they lay was less than fifty feet and until Nanook crawled to within half that distance toward them none took any alarm. For the rest of the way, whenever the sentinel of the herd slowly raised his head to look around, Nanook lay motionless on the ground. Then when his head drooped in sleep, once more Nanook wormed his way slowly on. I might mention here that the walrus has little range of vision on land. For protection he depends upon his nose and so long as the wind is favorable one can stalk right in to them. When almost right in amongst them, Nanook picked out the biggest bull, rose quickly and with all his strength landed his harpoon. The wounded bull, bellowing in rage, his enormous bulk diving and thrashing the sea (he weighed more than 2,000 pounds), the yells of the men straining for their lives in their attempt to hold him, the battle cry of the herd that hovered near, the wounded bull's mate which swam in, locked tusks, in an attempt to rescue- was the greatest fight I have ever seen. For a long time it was nip and tuck- repeatedly the crew called to me to use the gun- but the camera crank was my only interest then and I pretended not to understand. Finally Nanook worked the quarry toward the surf where he was pounded by the heavy seas and unable to get a purchase in the water. For at least twenty minutes that tug-o'-war kept on. I say twenty minutes advisedly for I ground out 1,200 feet of film.

Our boat, laden with walrus meat and ivory- it was a happy crew that took me back to the Post, where Nanook and his fellows were hailed with much acclaim. I lost no time in developing and printing the film. That walrus fight was the first film these Eskimo had ever seen and, in the language of the trade, it was a "knock-out."

The audience- they thronged the post kitchen to the point of suffocation, completely forgot the picture- to them the walrus was real and living. The women and children in their high shrill voices joined with the men in shouting admonitions, warnings and advice to Nanook and his crew as the picture unfolded on the screen. The fame of that picture spread through all the country. And all through the year that I remained there every family who came wandering into the Post begged of me that they be shown the "Iviuk Aggie."
After this it did not take my Eskimo long to see the practical side of films and they soon abandoned their former attitude of laughter and good-natured ridicule toward the Angercak, i.e., the White Master who wanted pictures of them— the commonest objects in all the world! From that time on they were all with me. When in December the snow lay heavy on the ground the Eskimo abandoned their topecks of sealskin and the village of snow igloos sprung up around my wintering post. They snow-walled my little hut up to the eves with thick blocks of snow. It was as thick walled as a fortress. My kitchen was their rendezvous—there was always a five-gallon pail of tea steeping on the stove and sea biscuit in the barrel. My little gramophone, too, was common property. Caruso, Farrar, Ricardo-Martin, McCormick served their turns with Harry Lauder, Al Jolson and Jazz King orchestras. Caruso in the Pagliacci prologue with its tragic ending was to them the most comic record of the lot. It sent them into peals of laughter and to rolling on the floor.

The difficulties of film development and printing during the winter were many. That convenience of civilization which I most missed was running water. For instance, in the film washing, three barrels of water for every hundred feet was required. The water hole, then eight feet of ice, had to be kept open all winter long and water clotted with particles of ice had to be taken, a barrel at a time, from a distance of more than a quarter of a mile away. When I mention that over 50,000 feet of film was developed over the winter with no assistance save from my Eskimo and at the slow rate of eight hundred feet a day one can understand somewhat the amount of time and labor involved.

The walrus hunt having proved so successful Nanook aspired to bigger things. The first of the bigger things was to be a bear hunt at Cape Sir Thomas Smith which lay some two hundred miles northward of us. "Here," said Nanook, "is where the she-bear den in the winter. I know, for I have hunted them there, and it seems to me that there we might get the big, big aggle (picture)."

He went on to describe how in early December the she-bear dens in huge drift banks of snow. There is nothing to mark the den save the tiny vent or air hole which is melted open by the animal's body heat. He went on with a warning that one should not walk there for one would fall in, in which case the she-bear might be angry! His companions would remain at either side of me, rifles in hand, whilst I filmed (he was going to make sure of my safety in the affair at least). He, with his snow knife, would open up the den block by block. The dogs, in the meantime, would all be unleashed and like a circle of wolves would gather around him howling to the skies. Mrs. Bear's den door opened, Nanook, with nothing but his harpoon, would be poised and waiting.

The dogs baiting the quarry—some of them with her lightning paws the bear would send hurtling through the air—Nanook dancing here and there (he pantomimed the scene on my cabin floor using my fiddle bow for harpoon) waiting to dart in for a close-up throw—this he felt sure, would be a big, big picture, (aggie peerualluk). I agreed with him.

After two weeks' preparation, we started. Nanook with three male companions, two sledges heavily laden, and two 12-dog teams. My food outfit comprised one hundred pounds of pork and beans which had been cooked in huge kettles at my post and then put into a canvas bag and frozen. These beans chopped out with an axe from the frozen mass along with dried fruit, sea biscuit, and tea comprised my food supply. Nanook and his companions' diet was seal and walrus augmented by tea and sugar from my supply and, most important of all, tobacco, that most valued of the white man's treasure.

We departed on a bitterly cold day— the 17th day of January— every profile of the landscape blurred with drifting snow. For two days we made good progress for the travelling ground was hard and well packed by the wind. After that time, however, a heavy gale with falling snow wrecked our good going. Day after day we slowly made our way along. Ten miles or less was an average day's travel. We had hoped to cover the 200 miles to Cape Smith in eight days but, when twelve days had elapsed, found we were only half way. We were discouraged, the dogs all but worn out, and to make matters worse the supply of seal and dog food was near the point of exhaustion.

The low coast line off which we travelled for days on end— was the confusing mirage hanging in the sky,
so that Nanook could not locate himself and our position in relation to Cape Smith. Constantly as we travelled along in that monotony of days, our nearness to Cape Smith became the subject uppermost in our minds. "How near are we?" was the hourly question that became the plague of poor Nanook's existence. The few times he tried to predict, he was invariably wrong. Finally, we had travelled to a point where the Cape, Nanook was sure, was no more than two days on, for he was certain that he had spied through the haze and rime old hunting country of former years. Within the day, his companions found hat he again was wrong. They could not contain their impatience and irritation. Poor Nanook became disgusted and as we continued he kept his head averted and steadfastly refused to ever look upon that confounding mainland again.

We were on our beam ends the day we finally reached Cape Smith. Our brown leader dog, that for the last three days we had been carrying on top of the sledge in the attempt to save her, was dying of starvation. Nanook ended it all with his harpoon and as he held aloft the carcass said: "There is not enough left for dog food."

Well, anyway there were seals at the Cape, that we were sure of, and moreover we would be there within the day, so we continued cheerfully enough. The great land mass of the Cape rising a sheer 1,800 feet stood out boldly before us. By nightfall we reached our treasure land of bear and seals and plenty. We halted before the rise of an old camp ground of Nanook's, and, abandoning sledge and dogs, climbed eagerly to a vantage for the welcome sight of the seal grounds. We gazed there a moment or so before we realized that the seal ground we looked out upon was like all the barren ground we had travelled- a solid white field and no seal-hunting lane of open water anywhere. We forgot about bear hunting; for two and half weeks we tried for seals wandering from day to day along the broken ice foot of the Cape. In that interval two small seals were killed and they were just enough to keep the dogs alive. For four days, at one time, we had no seal oil and our igloo was in darkness. The dogs were utterly weak and slept in the igloo tunnel. Whenever I had to crawl out of doors I would have to lift them to one side like sacks of flour for they were too weak and indifferent to move away. The irony of it all was that bears there were every where; four of them had passed within a thousand feet of our igloo one night but the dogs were too weak to bay them or bring them to a stand. My own food supply was nearing its fag ends. For days past I had been sharing it with the men.

I will never forget one bitter morning when Nanook and his men were starting off for a hunting day on the ice fields at sea. I suddenly discovered that none of them had touched my food at breakfast time. When I remonstrated with Nanook he answered that he was afraid I might be short!

Our luck turned that day at nightfall, however, when Nanook crawled into the igloo wearing a smile from ear to ear, and shouting the welcomed words "Ojuk! Ojuk!" (the big seal). He had killed a big seal that was "very, very large" and enough for us and dogs for all the long trail south to home again.

What a feast those men had through that memorable night! When it was over, said Nanook in deep content, "Now we are strong again and warm. The white man's food has made us much too weak and cold." The flesh of seal is certainly warmth giving to the greatest degree. When I awakened the next morning all of them were still asleep, their bodies were covered with hoar frost and vapor lay floating over them in the cold igloo air.

Though the problem of our food supply was now solved we were still not able to travel, for the dogs needed feeding up. During this interval we hunted along the gigantic flanks of the cape for signs of bear dens. Tracks there were everywhere, but of dens only one and that one had been abandoned. Had we had the time to spare it would have been only a matter of days before we would have found one, but I had a great amount of filming to do at my winter post and more time could not be spared, so reluctantly enough we left the Cape and started off on the down trail for home.

We arrived there on the tenth day of March and so ended the six hundred miles and fifty-five days of our Nanook's "big picture" journey. But it was not all loss: I was richer by a fuller knowledge of the fine qualities of my sterling friends, the Eskimos.
photo captions

NANOOK AND HIS BROTHER ESKIMOS LANDING A WHITE WHALE

Mr. Flaherty, immediately after taking a moving picture of these hunters when they harpooned and landed a walrus, developed the picture and projected it for the Eskimos who had seen and taken part in the hunt. So realistic did it seem to them that they shouted and cheered, and yelled advice and encouragement to each other, just as they had done when the hunt was in progress.

NANOOK AND HIS FAMILY BUILD AN IGLOO

Using an ivory knife they cut out blocks of snow and start a circular wall, laying the blocks spirally, and making each turn more restricted than the one below, somewhat similar to a snail shell. When the igloo is finished a small hole is punched in the roof for the escape of heated air. A door is cut in the side, the chinks are closed with snow - perhaps a window of clear ice is added and the habitation is complete.

NANOOK'S DAUGHTER AND A PUPPY THAT WILL ULTIMATELY BECOME A BEAST OF BURDEN


© 1998, David Pierce, on editing and revisions (if any)

Return to the Silent Film Bookshelf Home Page

CLICK HERE TO VISIT THE WORLD 1000!