

LEARNING THE ESKIMO LANGUAGE

WAS LIKE PLAYING A GAME

By James Y. Nicol

OTTAWA

Many traders and missionaries need seven years to master the Eskimo language. Leo Manning required two.

Today he holds a unique position, that of editor of the Eskimo Bulletin, a government publication circulated by the Department of Northern Affairs through the R.C.M.P. and other interpreters with information about health and diet.

"To what learned scholastic society do you owe your success?" I asked the blue-eyed, fair haired 51 year-old linguist.

"A bunch of Eskimo children about so high - age five to 12," he replied. "I started with the Hudson's Bay Co. in St. John's, Nfld., as an office boy-stenographer, at 15. I was sent to Labrador and at 17 I went to Lake Harbor on Baffin Island as an apprentice clerk.

"In my spare time around the post I made friends with the youngsters. They were pleased by my interest and didn't lose patience when I tried to pronounce their words. They had no inhibitions about correcting me, once I put myself in their hands. I needed all sorts of correcting. What fun we had! Every lesson became a game."

Many a white man thinks Eskimo may not be difficult when told that the vocabulary has about 1,700 words. Soon he discovers that a single root word may develop as many as 160,000 variations and wind up as a complete sentence. For example, Nuna-tsia-ungitok means: "It is not a nice country." Simple? Yes, but the translation works in reverse, and literally means, "Country nice a not is it."

And to keep the spelling from becoming too easy, a K or T meeting certain consonants will be changed into an L or G. Then across the Arctic, east, centre and west, one may encounter up to seven dialects.

"I stayed with it because I have a good memory," said Mr. Manning, "and my ear was keen enough to catch the inflections I could hardly let go when I found that Eskimo words are descriptive and loaded with humor. Draw up a chair," he invited, "and I'll give you an Eskimo lesson."

Taking my notebook, he marked down; Issuma - thought or idea.

"From that," he went on, "you get the word issumatark. It means, 'One who thinks for us,' or 'One who thinks much,' and also 'chief.'

"Supposing the district manager came to the post, the Eskimos would refer to him as issumatark; the same for a police superintendent. And they would give his clerk the imposing name of Titaktoyaktiyak. There you have a sort of amalgamation of other words to convey the meaning of one who scribbles down

everything and in a great hurry while someone else is standing there yacking at him," my instructor said with a laugh.

Thumbing his English dictionary, he cited the word ABCD-arian (pertaining to the alphabet) as the classic example in our language of onomatopoeia (the formation of a name or a word by the imitation of the sounds associated with the thing or action designated).

"I can match that in Eskimo," he went on. Puffing his cheeks, he exclaimed: "Pu!" That gives the idea of swelling he added. "From that we get publaut (air pump), pubviark (bird crop), publarpok (blown with wind swollen), and pudjuksaut or pudlak (baking powder). It swells the flour, you see."

Since his appointment in 1952 as technical officer for the Department, Mr. Manning has joined the government's patrol ship, C.D. Howe, each summer as it brings X-ray equipment to eastern Arctic outposts to examine the natives for tuberculosis.

Mr. Manning served more than 30 years at 11 trading posts in the eastern, central and western Arctic.

About 25 years ago in Cumberland gulf Mr. Manning was in a whale boat with an Eskimo who made the sad mistake of wounding a baby walrus. "We had no motor, only oars," he said. "The Eskimo had no more bullets in his gun. The enraged mother walrus came after us. I picked up my own gun and fired five shots, each one hitting her in the head as she charged. Her sixth and final leap missed the stern of the boat by just an inch, and that was lucky, for my sixth shot was my last."

Mr. Manning described the missionary as the "most maligned man in the Arctic." He has done the Eskimo untold good, he asserted, and never received the recognition due him, more often criticism for taking the native from his own customs. "When people lament that the Eskimo is being spoiled by the white man's habits, consider this: Since family allowances were introduced quite a few Eskimos have confided in me that they were sorry their baby girls had died some years before. In plain words, infanticide has stopped."