

FATS AND OILS

By Oliver Cameron
with Ole Wik

One time the mail plane left word that there was a herd of caribou south of Ambler. Ronald Barr and I went up the Kobuk to a place where a slough came in, just around the first turn. We walked up that slough through timber for maybe a couple of miles and then came out into the open, where we could climb up the bank and look out on the tundra.

Around noon we saw a small herd of caribou, maybe six, within shooting distance of the slough. We crawled up on the bank and shot all of them.

Of course the days were short, so we were in a hurry. We gutted them out, pulled them together, and left them to pick up the next day with a dog team.

By that time I was thirsty and he was too, but he never mentioned it and neither did I. We got down into that slough out of the wind, and when we first came to where there was timber, there were some dead trees.

I said, "Some tea would be good right now."

He agreed, but said, "How?"

I had some tea bags and two rounded aluminum bowls that fit inside each other, with loops on one side so you could hold them over a fire, so we melted water and made tea.



Oliver's camping bowls. Image: Curt Madison

I also had a sack full of pemmican. I got the bag out and offered him some. Ordinarily that much pemmican would have been enough for me to stay out overnight. I ate a little bit, but he finished the whole works.

The next day I met his wife, Evelyn, at the post office or someplace. She asked, "What was that stuff you gave Ronald yesterday?"

I said it was pemmican, and described it to her. She said, “When Ronald came home, I had a big supper for him, but he wasn’t hungry.”

That pemmican was half fat and half meat, by weight. It doesn’t take much for me to get a meal of that, but eating that much didn’t seem to bother him any. If he felt a little queasy from eating so much fat, he didn’t show it.

Did you ever get really sleepy after eating a lot of fat?¹

I suppose I have, but ...were you talking about any kind of fat meat?

One time Don Williams stopped by our camp and gave us some fresh, really fat moose meat. Sasha and I had a big meal off it, and we both got very sleepy, right in the middle of the day. Later I learned that the Eskimos have a word for that reaction—*niqinnguuliq*.

Well, I don’t know. When we were boating around, I used to carry that type of food with me. I don’t remember ever getting drowsy after eating a meal of it, but in the evening I was drowsy regardless. I usually took a little nap after eating, and then went back to work again for another hour or two.

I also remember the first time I had dinner with you and your family. I’d only been in the country for a few days. After the meal, Lorene brought out a small jar of black meat in seal oil.² I could tell by the way she presented it that it was a special treat, coming from the coast and all, but I wasn’t yet up to eating oil.

Seal oil was something I had to learn to like. Eventually I would have a craving for it, even if it had started to turn.

I never was much on oil that had started getting strong, but I remember going down to Kotzebue one summer to work on an airport job. The first thing I did was to go visit Clara Forsland. I mentioned that I was hungry for *niqipiaq*³. She seemed delighted. I guess it wasn’t every day that a white guy came around begging for Eskimo food.

Anyway, she went to her storage room and brought out several brand new plastic buckets of all kinds of fresh delicacies from the spring hunt at Point Lay—black meat, half-dried trout, maktak, you name it, all put down in sweet, fresh oil. Just what I was craving.

The reason I’m laughing is that it reminds me of the time I went to some friends’ place. I’d heard that they had seal oil to sell. I had taken a four pound lard bucket. We went into their *siglauq*⁴ and the lady uncovered a barrel. The surface of that oil was completely buried in dead flies. Without thinking about it or batting an eye, she just pushed them aside with her dipper and filled my container with seal oil.

I got to where I’d eat so much seal oil that I’d sweat at night.

One time they were having a quarterly meeting⁵ or something in Ambler. Some friends from Kotzebue stayed with us. We had foam pads and made a bed for them on the floor. In the morning when they got up and I started to take the bedding up, the floor was just soaked with their sweat from eating all that oily food.

It made me realize why some guys could be out wearing cotton gloves when I had to have heavy mittens.

Tommy Douglas once told me that if he ate a good breakfast with lots of seal oil, he could be out hunting all day long and never get cold.

I remember him talking to me about that too. But even so, I think that those Eskimos, growing up the way they did, could eat a whole lot more fat than I could.

1) This essay stems from a series of telephone conversations that Ole Wik had with Oliver between December 2007 and February 2008. Highlighted text indicates remarks made by Ole.

2) Half-dried bearded seal meat put down in seal oil.

3) *niqui* means meat, or more generally, food. *niquipiaq* (literally, “real food”) refers to Eskimo food, as opposed to *nalauarmiutak*, “white man food”.

4) *sigluaq*: Covered, uninsulated arctic entryway.

5) “Quarterly meeting” refers to a periodic gathering of members of the Friends Church. The meetings rotated from one village to another, drawing many visitors from out of town.