

HISTORY & CULTURE

WHALE RIDER

John Hickes Recalls the Whale Riders

The Whale Riders are one of those things that makes Churchill stand out and John Hickes is the name most associated with, well, riding whales.

He explains how the whale riders started. 'When I came back from the navy, I started a few businesses in town. We lived down at the Flats and had a boat tour service to Seal River for a while, built the Beluga Motel and eventually got involved with Fisheries and Oceans to catch live whales.'

The Department of Fisheries & Oceans were in Churchill studying and capturing beluga whales for relocation to aquariums across the world. Fisheries and Oceans were using hoop snares and nets and not having much success.

John remembers everyone's first impression, 'They couldn't catch whales worth shit. They didn't know the river or the whales, just came up here and thought it would be easy. After a couple whales drowned, we figured we could do a better job.'

'We grew up on the Churchill River and knew the rocks, the sandy spots, every part of it. A lot of life focused on the river back then.'

Whale meat used to be sold for mink ranches. Between 1967 and 1974, North American mink ranches dropped off significantly and so did the demand for whale meat. It was in this transition that the Whale Riders started. In 1972, aquariums began hiring local whalers to live capture whales in the Churchill River.



John Hickes explains the Whale Riders to one of his rescued dogs at his kennel up in Rankin Inlet, Nunavut

John explains how it started, 'There were these two crazy yahoos that I hung around with, Francis and Bennett Spence. They were FBIs... you know what FBI is? Good... Francis was a big boy, he must have been 250lbs. Anyway, I asked them if they'd consider jumping on a whale's back to live capture whales and they said yes.'

'I went and had a chat with the feds to get them to understand that we had more understanding of the whales and their habits. They gave us a contract and, as far as I know, Francis and Bennet were the first people on the planet to catch whales like this. They were the first Whale Riders. A lot of people think it was me that started it but it wasn't, I just tweaked what they already knew.'

The Whale Riders would herd pods of beluga whales into the shallows of the Churchill River. Whale Riders avoided rocky areas that might injure the whales. Once the whales were

beached on a sand bar, they selected the individuals they wanted to catch and the show was on.

'You didn't take anything under 7', under seven feet they're not weaned so there's no point. Usually between 8-10' was what they were looking for. We were selective about that whales we harvested. We'd pick the whale and get close enough for the boys to jump overboard and grab on to it. One whale rider would secure the head with a lasso while another went for the tail.

'It was the most humane way to do it. There was not blood drawn except our own. You see, as soon as you grab a whale, it starts to roll. You could get pretty scraped up if you weren't careful.'

'Whale captures carried on in Churchill for about ten years or so. Aquariums started breeding their own and after a while, they didn't need to be caught in the wild.'

'Over time, the whale riding crew was Frances and Bennet, Norman Spence, Larry Spence, Allan Oman, Jack Batstone, Dennis Compayre, George Lundie, Walter Lundie - Geronimo, I can't remember... there was a lot of guys over the years.'

'We set up the Beluga Motel down at south end of the Flats. There was a motor repair shop, motel, river tours and eventually portable tanks for the beluga whale capture.'

'You have got to be adaptable to change if you are going to develop. The Churchill Whalers' Co-op was like that, whaling was dying off and we were trying to make tourism grow. We even tried a sports hunt for a while but nobody really wants to come up and harpoon a whale and besides twenty people in a boat pays more!'

'Things change and there's nothing wrong with that. Now we can go into the water with the whales, their ancestors don't know fear of man, which is a good thing. I sold Mike Macri his first boat and then he took the whale industry to another level. The method of viewing is different today than it was back then, remember every whale was hunted. Now, they are not and I think that's a great thing for Churchill. There's not many places where a whale will come right up to your boat.'

'People don't give enough credit to the pioneers of Churchill. They were very receptive to change, very open to trying new things and taking up a challenge. They were a proud people.'

- prepared by Kelsey Eliasson, based on an interview with John Hickes

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HISTORY & CULTURE

NEWFOUND NASCOPIE

The S.S. Nascope in the Twenty-First Century

The Hudson Bay Company ship *S.S. Nascope* was a familiar sight for many residents of the North for much of the first half of the twentieth century. Carrying supplies and people, there were few communities in the eastern Arctic and Hudson Bay that the *Nascope* never called on. Captained by some of the most experienced ice masters of the time, the *Nascope* would make 34 passages through Hudson Strait between 1911 and 1947.

The *S.S. Nascope* was built in Scotland in 1911 and owned jointly by the Hudson Bay Company and Job Brother's, a merchant fishing and sealing company in St. John's, Newfoundland. Until the Hudson Bay Company bought out the Job Brother's, the *Nascope* would function as a sealing ship in March and April off the northeast coast of Newfoundland.

During the First World War, the *Nascope* was contracted by the Russian Government to carry supplies across the Atlantic to the Russian ports of Archangel and Murmansk, braving not only weather and ice but also German submarines. It was on one of these runs that *Nascope* was to have one of its more famous encounters. Not far from Murmansk, *Nascope* was confronted by a German U-boat on the surface. The two vessels exchanged fire (the *Nascope* had been equipped with a 3.7 inch naval gun for just such a confrontation) and the *Nascope* scored a direct hit. Badly damaged, the U-boat conducted a crash dive and escaped, although it appeared to those in the



convoy that *Nascope* had sunk the German attacker. It wouldn't be until the end of the war that German records would show the truth, but for many sailors it didn't matter; the *Nascope* was still the arctic ship that sunk one of the hated U-boats.

As the years rolled by *Nascope* would see many interesting stories and an awful lot of arctic ice. In 1934, *Nascope* carried the first Governor of the Hudson Bay Company to actually visit Hudson Bay (...Oh! This is where my wealth comes from...). During the Second World War, she would once again make a valuable contribution to the Allied effort, carrying vital aluminum ore from Greenland to Canada. However, *Nascope's* days of sailing the arctic sea were numbered. On July 21, 1947, *S.S. Nascope* would strike on unmarked rock just outside of the harbour of Cape Dorset. *Nascope*, remaining the tough old lady to the end, held on long enough for the entire crew to escape, her hull pierced and lodged upon the rock. Shortly after, she broke apart in a storm and now *S.S. Nascope* lies on the bottom of the sea she traveled over so many times.

But, you can't really keep a good ship

down. In the early 1990s, the new Hibernia oil platform off Newfoundland needed a supply boat. Now, we're not talking an ordinary tugboat here. This ship would have to be very powerful and built to take the mountainous seas of the North Atlantic. So in 1996, in a shipyard in southern Newfoundland, a new ship with a familiar name was christened: the *Maersk Nascope* and like her proud namesake, she has no fear of arctic ice.

The most important duty that the *Maersk Nascope* is tasked with is deflecting icebergs away from the rig. She does this by towing the bergs away. How can it do this you ask? With tow ropes and a 9600 brake horse power engine that's how! *Maersk Nascope* can tow a berg weighing up to 250,000 lbs. It's hard, dangerous work that also saves lives. I think the *S.S. Nascope* would be proud.

- prepared by Duane Collins

David Thompson 200

This summer marks the start of the David Thompson bicentennial celebrations across Canada. David Thompson was an explorer and surveyor who mapped much of Northwest Canada. This event commemorates his extensive journeys between 1807 and 1811.

Thompson got his start in Churchill, arriving at Prince of Wales Fort in 1784 to start his North American exploits. Over the next 66 years, his travels would cover 90,000 square kilometres and he would ultimately map 3.9 million square kilometres of North America.

Parks Canada is bringing two costumed performers up to re-enact aspects of David Thompson's and his wife Charlotte Small's lives. They will be performing throughout July at the train station and at venues throughout the community. Keep an eye out for them!



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