

THE LUCK OF THE INUPIAT: WEE ONES ON THE TUNDRA

NOATAK — The Irish aren't the only ones with tales of the little people. The Yup'iks of western Alaska have many legends involving mysterious folks haunting the tundra. Tlingits from Southeast knew about them, too.

So do the Inupiat in northwest Alaska.

Take Kenneth Ashby. He no longer hunts or does the other rigorous chores of younger men. He is satisfied to spend his days lulled by the shifting seasons under the brow of the spectacular mountains near his home on the outskirts of Noatak.

But when Ashby tells visitors about the day in 1938 that he and his brother Bruce fetched water on the Noatak River, the frail retiree becomes an animated one-man theater, re-enacting a strange fight scene and slim escape.

He was 24 years old, he recalled, when he first encountered the Inukins, this area's version of leprechauns. He said they grabbed his brothers. The "wild people" were dressed in caribou skins and wore bowl-style haircuts, Ashby remembered in an interview recently.

Only after Ashby feigned throwing a rock did the brothers escape, he said.

"After that, our grandfather told us to always leave them alone," he says.

More than 50 years later, according to some local folks, this mysterious group of little people are still harrying them whenever they wander too far from town.

One man told the Arctic Sounder of an encounter with Inukins back in 1949, but refuses to give his name for fear of "them reading the story and coming after me."

Ashby isn't afraid to tell his stories. Neither is his wife, Ruth. The same summer of Kenneth's narrow escape, his sister Victoria chased away a couple of Inukins who were trying to steal salmon off her rack up the river, he said.

Nine years later, he and a bunch of relatives were camping 70 miles upriver on a hunting trip. Two people slept in a tent and the rest of the crew stayed in the small boat for the night.

It wasn't long before they heard stomping in the dry birch leaves.

The men got up and looked around. Nothing.

"They were playing hide and seek with us," he said.

The little people trailed them all the way down the river back