



Walrus

➤ JUST ABOUT now, enjoying such warmth as the northern sun provides at this season, baby walrus are getting their first baptism in the Arctic Ocean.

Clinging to its mother's neck with its front flippers, the baby walrus gets a free ride while its mother swims and dives in search of the clams, snails, shrimp and starfish on which it feeds. This burden, weighing perhaps a hundred pounds, bothers the mother not at all, for she herself may weigh up to 2,000 pounds. By comparison an Indian squaw with her papoose on her back is hopelessly encumbered.

The baby walrus gets none of the sea-food. For many months to come, until its tusks have grown big enough for it to dig for its own clams, the young walrus will subsist on its mother's milk. It will not go off this nursery diet until its tusks are three or four inches long, when it is about two years old.

The tusks of an adult walrus, the distinguishing mark best known to laymen, are formidable-looking weapons. They may grow to more than three feet in length

and weigh as much as nine pounds. During the breeding season, these tools take on a more belligerent function than digging clams. They become the court of last resort where rival claims are gorily adjudicated. Broken tusks are not uncommon, testament of some embattled courtship.

Walrus are good swimmers, but they are not long-distance champions like their cousins, the seals. They like to snooze on drifting ice floes, letting the current ferry them to the next destination. If by miscalculation, while clam-digging for example, they let their ice raft drift off so far so that they can not overtake it, they will light out for the nearest land. There are recorded instances of walrus finally beaching themselves in such a state of exhaustion that they lay helpless while slaughtered by Eskimos.

It is by such ice ferry that the southward spring migration to the Bering Sea is made. Because they are such heavy animals, sometimes too many of them will congregate on one side of an ice floe. Then the whole raft may pitch over, dumping the dozing herd unceremoniously into the drink.

Walrus hide is very thick and tough, and is much prized by the Eskimos for leather. The tusks are made into implements and tools. The animals are valued as a source of food and oil. Originally, walrus-hunting was a hard and hazardous business, requiring the hunters to work up dangerously close to get within lance or harpoon distance.

Now, with the white man's rifle, the odds are heavily in favor of the Eskimo, although an animal that is only wounded must be approached with greatest caution.

Science News Letter, June 12, 1954

BIOCHEMISTRY

Tobacco Radioactivity Cancer Role Questioned

➤ DOES A tiny amount of radioactivity in tobacco play a part in making cigarette-smoking cause lung cancer? This question is raised by Dr. D. K. Mulvany in *Lancet* (May 8).

He differs from some scientists who hold there is little or no radioactivity in cigarette smoke. Instead of testing the smoke with a Geiger counter, he estimates its potassium content. This estimate, he believes, reflects its radioactivity because there are 11 parts of radioactive potassium in 100,000.

In the smoke of 20 cigarettes, Dr. Mulvany finds, there are 300 micrograms of potassium, compared to 150 micrograms in the laboratory air where he made his tests. Some authorities say that it would take daily smoking of 20 cigarettes for 20 years to produce lung cancer. That would mean a daily intake into the lungs of 300 micrograms of potassium, of which 11 parts in every 100,000 are radioactive.

The active beta radiation of the potassium 40 in a cell undergoing abnormal mitosis, as in areas of chronic irritation or involuting glands, might, Dr. Mulvany suggests, be a factor in the start of a cancer.

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Questions

ASTRONOMY—What is a supernova? p. 375.

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GENERAL SCIENCE—How have scientists reacted to the Oppenheimer decision? pp. 374 and 375.

□ □ □

GEOPHYSICS—What is the object of glacier studies in Alaska this summer? p. 380.

□ □ □

HERPETOLOGY—How does controlled heating help keep zoo snakes in good view? p. 377.

□ □ □

PHYSICS—How is dry ice aiding guided missile studies? p. 377.

How could an artificial meteor trail be made? p. 381.

□ □ □

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INVENTION

Mechanical Dancer Puts Rumble in Rhumba

➤ YOUR DANCING partner grips you first by the right leg and then by the left. You hold her gently by the handlebar.

Then you are ready to glide across the ballroom floor in a spectacular display of flashing lights, pulleys and spring-loaded levers—perhaps with a few squeaks thrown in on tangos and sacroiliac-snapping sambas.

Your dancing partner would be a mechanical contraption which won patent No. 2,679,116, recently for Ralph Lyman Holcombe of Ada, Okla.

Mr. Holcombe's machinery is designed to rumble over dance studio floors on ball-like casters. Perched on top of the machine are two lights connected with levers and pulleys to your right and left knees.

The lights project images of your feet on the surrounding floor area so that a number of students can follow your smooth footwork as you whirl around gracefully clasping the tender handlebars of your velocipede-like partner.

The inventor explained:

"The apparatus provides to a group of students a means for instantly learning poise, grace and skill while remaining free and unhampered from physical contact with an instructor, as is conventionally the case, thereby saving the student from such personal embarrassment usually attendant in the primary stages of instruction of the character set forth."

In other words, if you do step on the projected foot, nobody's corns get squashed.

Science News Letter, June 12, 1954

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