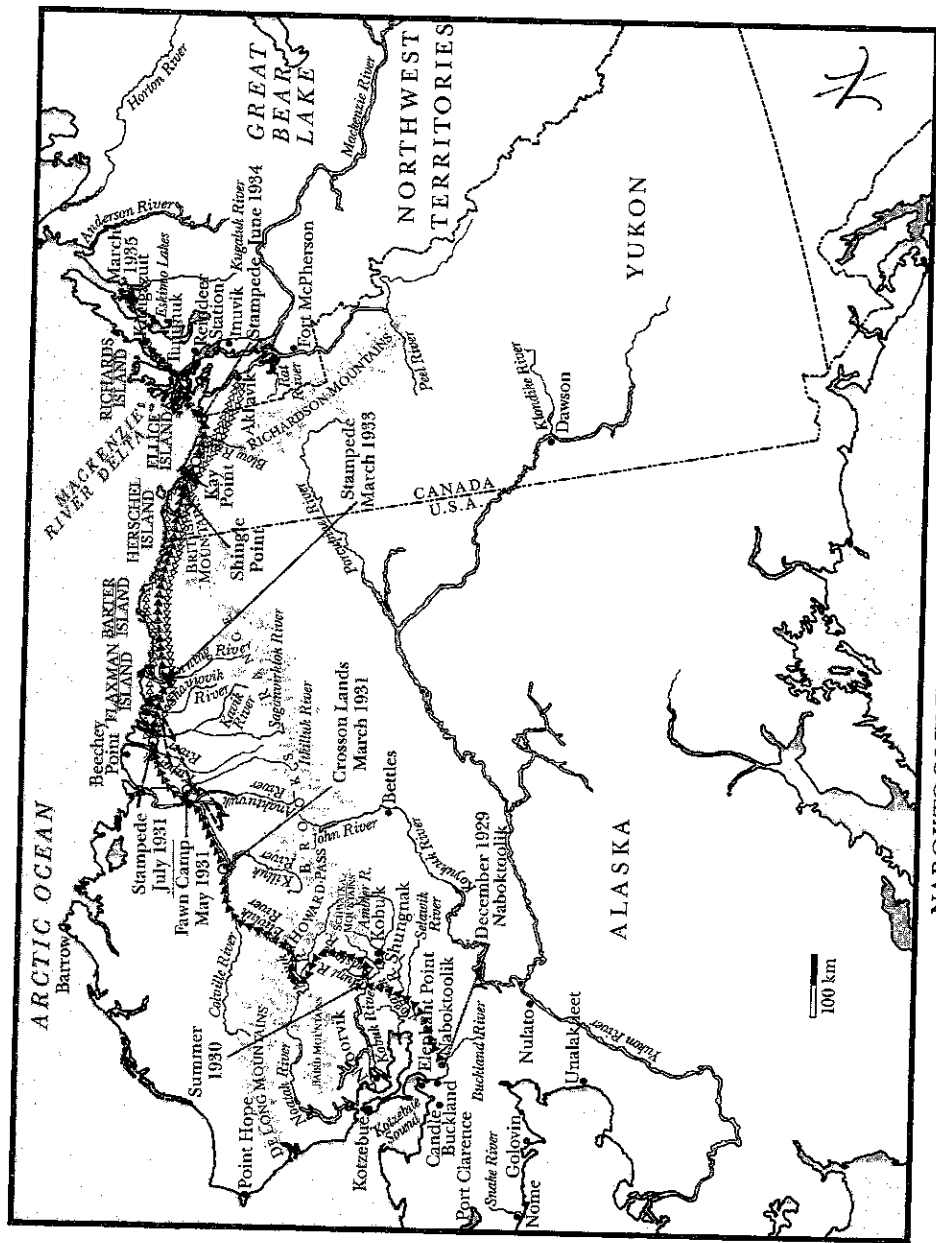


# PART TWO



NABOKTOOLIK TO THE MACKENZIE DELTA

*The First Year*

CHAPTER 4

## Off on the Wrong Foot

It is doubtful that any trail drive of such magnitude was ever launched with less fanfare. There were no celebrities, no speeches, no crowds, nor six-guns going off into the air, nor even relatives of the drovers on hand to wish them godspeed. In fact, it looked like the drive might not start out at all because of the lack of sled deer to haul supplies. Bahr had over-estimated the number of sledders around Naboktoolik; needing at least sixteen, he found but three, which meant he would have to quickly train thirteen more. The assembled herd had already consumed most of the forage around the camp so he culled thirteen steers to be trained, and sent the herd on its way under the tutelage of veterans Mike Nilluka and Ivar West. They set out on December 26, 1929. The temperature was thirty below zero Fahrenheit, moderate in a country

where the mercury often hit fifty below, and occasionally seventy below zero.

The herd of deer formed a half-mile-long undulating mass. From the air it might have appeared as a giant, formless amoeba, slowly moving across the land, constantly changing shape as it moved. The animals stood out against a sallow glow created by the sun which sulked below the rim of the globe for most of the day.

The perpetual twilight disclosed the herd as a montage of dark heads, grayish-white necks and shoulders, brown flanks, white rumps, dusky legs, and ponderous antlers that seemed almost top-heavy on some of the deer. The average reindeer was six to seven feet in length from the nose to the end of its stubby tail, and weighed three hundred pounds.

The fact that only two men could move such a large herd, at least for a short distance, was due to the psychological make-up of the animals. Like sheep they would follow if another went first.

A steady wind coursing in from the south was the principal complicating factor as the deer were herded out across the tundra. Since reindeer prefer to walk into the wind rather than with it, they hankered to quarter off on a tangent. The reason for this predisposition is that deer like to be able to scent what is ahead of them. (And in summer, walking against the wind keeps flies and mosquitoes at bay. Conversely, when travelling with the wind, the insects leisurely glide along with it, and with the

deer.) Nevertheless, the two Lapps and their herd dogs successfully managed to reach the initial objective, the low hills of the February Mountains, with a minimum of trouble.

Bahr was not completely at fault for the lack of sled deer. He had retired four years earlier and was unaware that deer were being used less and less as draft animals in populated areas, due to their vulnerability. Dogs running loose, and even in harness, would occasionally attack sled deer. Bahr had fallen victim to such a sortie a decade before he retired. He was run over by a dog team bent on the slaughter of his sledders. Lying on his back, he knifed several of the brutes in the stomach and drove them off, but not before one of his precious reindeer was flung down and killed.

The Lomens had taken this possibility into account and had laid out a route to avoid all settlements. This consideration had led Bahr to risk using deer rather than sled dogs to tote supplies because, for one thing, dog food had to be packed along to feed the canines, while deer could live off the land. Another advantage of deer was that they could haul and pack more weight than a dog. For example, at a reindeer fair held in 1917 in Alaska, one deer quite easily hauled up to a ton for a limited distance, while an entire dog team was needed for an equivalent result. Deer were also faster than dogs. *One* deer could pull a sled and driver over a ten-mile course in forty minutes while an average five-dog team took up to an hour.

Counterbalancing the reindeer's greater strength was the fact that sled deer garnered little rest when turned loose to graze, and thus tended to tire out after a few days. Dogs, if well-fed each day, did not have to hunt for food and so recovered their strength more quickly on a daily basis.

Bahr and the rest of the crew undertook the task of training the sled deer. Though this looked to be relatively simple, it took years of experience to be able to carry it off quickly and efficiently.

A two-piece wooden collar, fastened by thongs, was placed around the steer's neck, and along with it a band was run around its body just back of the forelegs. Side straps from the collar were attached to the body band. The deer was allowed to get used to this paraphernalia for a short time. Next, it was hooked to a sled with an extra long rope that extended from the underside of the band back between its hind legs. Upon being hooked up, the reindeer was given its head to run free, pulling the sled and driver across the tundra. A novice sled deer will instinctively veer toward another deer if it sees one, so a veteran sledder was pegged along the route of the beginner. When the trainee saw the other deer and stopped next to it, it was placed in harness with the older animal. The team was driven this way for a few miles, and by the end of this time the "apprentice" was supposed to know what to do.

Bahr completed the training in a few days, but in doing so sacrificed efficiency for speed. The range examiner, W. B. Miller, who was accompanying the

herd for the first stages, gave his own view of the extremely truncated training, based on many years engaged in studying the animals:

"A good, well-broken sled deer is one which has been used for two years." He went on, "The first year he should be broken with great care and in the gentlest manner possible until he is trained to pull good-sized loads, but to do the work easily without jerking and jumping around." Miller noted that after two years of such training, sled deer could be driven in strings of up to forty or fifty by only two or three men.

Bahr's deer were not trained with the same degree of patience and Miller noted the difference: "In marked contrast to this is the string of sled deer which has just been caught, tied up, and then started at heavy work after a few days time."<sup>1</sup>

The trail boss of this momentous field drive was starting out with a serious handicap. Deer schooled too quickly were like any other nervous draft animal: they tended to be skittish, and consequently were prone to injury. A deer seriously hurt would have to be destroyed. Aside from the financial loss, the crew would lose further time and expense to train a replacement.

Two days before the new year, Bahr put on his skis, adjusted the crude strap bindings, and set out with the sledders in the wake of the herd. The old Lapp was back among his friends, both the men and the deer they herded, out under the open sky. The pungent odour of the deer; their peculiar

lowing, *ogh, ogh, ogh*; the crack of their tendons as they walked; the grace and gentleness of the animals; and, yes, even their bovine-like stubbornness, brought back fond memories of his years spent looking after them, and he realized why he had elected to go one more time to the labour he had pursued since boyhood.

In addition to his financial needs, there were additional reasons for Bahr to leave the city of Seattle, as picturesque as it was. He mused over them as he led the sled deer across the tundra: the nip of thirty-below-zero temperature against his cheeks, the crisp crunch of snow under his skis, the excited bark of the shepherd dogs as they bounded to their task, the incredible brilliance of the aurora, the expanse of the land endless as time itself, and the renewal of old friendships — swapping yarns about comrades and events and adventures long past — had brought him back though he had no illusions as to the dimensions of the job ahead of him.

Fortunately, the novice sled deer proved to be surprisingly manageable, considering their limited training, possibly because they were still on familiar ground. Bahr and his crew went ten miles the first day and camped on a ridge abundant in lichens. Bivouac was on the tundra, and in this particular area there was no wood, or even brush to burn. The men crammed into one tent, setting aside the regular wood stove in favour of a primus that burned alcohol. The mercury plunged to forty-five below zero, beyond the range at which a small

camp stove could heat the large tent. And though the primus was sufficient for warming up food and water, it did not throw off enough heat to dry out clothes soaked in sweat from a day's work. The cold created an eerie atmosphere in the shelter. "So dense was the fog," wrote Miller in his journal, "from our breath and the warmth of our bodies that one could not see lighted candles across the tent."

The next morning, half frozen from the uncomfortable night, their clothes still damp and clammy, the men hitched up the sled deer and set out. Late in the afternoon they caught up with Nilluka, West, and the main herd, finally bringing together all of the components of the drive for the first time. That evening the entire crew bedded down in a ravine where there was alder brush for fuel, making it possible to fire up the wood stove. As a result, the sled deer contingent spent a much more comfortable night than the previous one.

The first few nights of the drive everyone crowded into one tent. Later, three or four tents were put up, depending on the temperature and the availability of fuel. When the drovers elected to remain in an area for several weeks or months, extra canvas shelters for mess and supply were utilized.

A ritual was followed when camp was made. First, the snow was trampled down by men on showshoes or skis. Next, the tent was put up and the sleeping area covered with reindeer or caribou skins. The rectangular Yukon stove was placed on green

willows or driftwood (from creeks) and the stove pipe run up through a pipe guard that protected the canvas of the tent. A fire was started immediately. Since heat rises, the warmest part of the tent was the crown. The men rigged a rope from the cross bracing and hung from it all of the clothes that needed to be dried while the men slept. Candles provided light. Before turning in, the drovers enjoyed a smoke, repaired equipment, or read magazines that were toted along, or if they could not read, scanned the white man's "looking papers" as the periodicals were called by the Inuits. And, of course, the men talked, swapping stories about the day's events as well as those of yesteryear.

A routine was quickly established. Each morning the men on duty with the herd scrambled out of their reindeer-skin sleeping bags, and went through the monotonous procedure of putting on their gear. This included two sets of deer skins, the "underwear" with the hair turned in against the body, and the outer clothes comprised of a reindeer-skin parka and hood lined with a wolverine-fur ruff, and reindeer-skin pants, both with the hair turned out. The clothing was worn loosely to allow for movement, and also so heat would be trapped between the folds. Mittens, like the clothes, were of double thickness. Often they were attached by a lanyard to the parkas to safeguard against loss. The function of a hood was to trap heat around the head and to keep snow off one's neck. Usually a tok (wool hat) was worn underneath the hood.

Knee-length reindeer- or caribou-skin boots called mukluks were slipped on over wool socks and sealskin soles. Since they allowed for air circulation and evaporation of moisture, one's feet remained dry and warm in the coldest weather.

The Lapps' traditional dress was different than the Inuits', but the Norsemen deferred to the traditional native garments because they were more easily obtained. Occasionally, however, the Lapps wore their four-cornered, handwoven, red and yellow wool hats, and their traditional boots which were turned up at the ends, and in which they stuffed dry grass for insulation. The calves of their legs were bound with red puttees when they used this style of boot.

The presence of alder at the ravine camp provided sufficient fuel, but it also added an obstacle in the way of an almost impenetrable thicket. The deer balked at walking through the dense scrub, and it fell to Nilluka, whom Bahr had selected as the main scout of the expedition, to find a path through the bush. While Nilluka was engaged in his search, two sled deer ran away from camp, and proved almost impossible to catch. Every time a herdsman approached and hurled a lasso at the deserters, the deer would jump nimbly aside and trot off. The delay caused by the evasive deer meant Bahr and his men saw out the year in the same camp.

Little did Andy Bahr realize on New Year's Eve, 1929, that he would still be on the trail five years

hence, and that a world which had been relatively tranquil when he first started out would have seen fortunes crumble, bread lines become common, and totalitarian states arise as an almost inevitable consequence of a depression which, plague-like, circled the earth. In 1929, Herbert Hoover was president of the United States. His counterpart in Canada was Prime Minister Mackenzie King. The German *Graf Zeppelin* circled the planet that year, the first lighter-than-air craft to do so. Connie Mack's Athletics brought the world baseball championship to Philadelphia for the first time in a decade and a half, and a Canadian, Percy Williams, reigned as the one-hundred-meter and two-hundred-meter Olympic dash champion. Prohibition was still in force in the United States. At the opposite end of the world from Bahr and the reindeer drive, Admiral Richard E. Byrd completed the first successful airplane flight over the South Pole that same year.

New Year's day the two fractious sled deer were caught, but the fact that they had fled in the first place and cost the drive two days in lost time fulfilled Miller's prophecy that the semi-wild deer would cause trouble.

Bahr and his entourage plodded forward. The drive now took on its pattern of individual responsibilities. Nilluka ventured as much as five miles ahead on skis, operating as a scout. His job was to avoid alder and willow thickets that could deter the

reindeer, and to make sure there was sufficient forage ahead of the herd. He did this by periodically scraping back the snow to gauge the growth of lichens, the primary winter food of the deer. He was expected to pick out a campsite at the end of each day as well.

Bahr initially glided on skis in front of the animals as a point man. Coming more slowly behind, he followed Nilluka's tracks while his men watched after the flanks and rear of the herd. West and Kingeak, along with Shelby David, August Ome, and Tom Nakkala patrolled the perimeter of the flock. Sam Segeok, Andrew Bango, and David Henry escorted the sixteen sled deer that hauled supplies and camp gear. The chores were interchangeable, depending upon the shift to which each man was assigned.

Through those first three weeks, Bahr and his men were able to gain only forty-seven miles, or an average of a little over two miles a day. Just about every conceivable situation arose during this period to slow down the drive, and at the same time to bring out the cantankerous traits of the deer.

The route lay across the valleys of a number of creeks that drained into Selawik Lake. These watercourses were overgrown with dense brush through which it was difficult to drive the fussy reindeer.

A male wolf's tracks were spotted and though the drovers did not see him, the lobo's attention to the herd was intense. His trail showed clearly that he was circling the reindeer, intent on making a kill.



The deer, too, knew the wolf was there, and became more nervous the longer he lingered on the periphery of the herd. They came to another creek with a particularly dense alder and willow thicket, and the reindeer balked at walking into it. The heavy cover was perfect camouflage for the predator and the deer's instincts warned them away. Bahr, already impatient from the frequent delays, pushed the sensitive animals too hard, crowding dogs and men up on the heels of the ungulates in a grand effort to push them forward. That was a mistake: about 200 deer split off and bolted for the home range. The trail boss debated whether or not to go after the malcontents, and then decided in favour of the move. Realizing that the dollar value of the deer was worth the effort, he told his men they would have to reverse the direction of the *entire* herd in order to pick up the deserters. It would be impossible to lead the mavericks back alone; the only way to reincorporate them into the main herd would be to bring the larger group in close proximity of the smaller one, whereupon the smaller group would instinctively merge with the larger. Individualists the deer were not.

Using the range dogs to advantage, the drovers turned the main herd around and down the back trail. Within a day the vagabonds were reabsorbed into the larger group. The wolf disappeared, possibly scared off by the ringing of cow bells attached at random to twenty of the deer.

No sooner was the roundup of the deer

completed than a storm struck the drive like a battering ram. Whenever the ice pack retreated, leaving open water, the air warmed up and absorbed evaporated moisture. Prevailing westerlies picked up the moisture which precipitated as snow when the winds collided with cooler air over the land. The herdsmen were forced to make camp on the crest of an exposed ridge, where they quickly put up their tent by draping it over a frame made of two sleds. The storm lashed the fragile shelter for two days before it finally moderated, leaving two feet of wet snow.

The tempest further illustrated the fickle nature of the deer. The presence of food beneath the snow often dictated whether a herd remained where it was or fled when hit by severe weather. In this case, the deer were grazing in an area heavy with lichen and the mass of animals stayed put. The exigency of food had won out over the urge to run.

The labours of Hercules had nothing on the travails of Bahr and his men. A sharp rise in temperature followed the blizzard, converting the snow into a glue-like slop in which the supply sleds slid and tilted at angles more akin to a sinking ship than a sled. This made the going extremely toilsome for the men who had to bodily assist the draft deer pulling the sleds.

Every stream bed or hilly ridge presented another problem: reindeer's wariness of going downhill. The herd balked again as they approached a hill overlooking Kouchak Lakes. The

reluctance of the deer to descend the slope took on the characteristics of a battle of wills as the drovers strove to uproot the reindeer. The intractable ungulates were equally as adamant in refusing to budge. Every time the men pushed too hard, the deer would go into a mill. This was the last thing the herdsman wanted to see, and it was happening all too often. The mill was a defensive mechanism. When the deer felt threatened, the herd circled in on itself with the weaker animals and fawns quickly working their way to the centre of the herd. The stronger animals moved to the outer perimeter for the purpose of fending off attacks. The mill began to accelerate, at first slowly, then faster and faster, until the entire coterie whirled in unison, like a spinning top, with the deer on the periphery racing at top speed. The only way the herders could stop the revolving mass was to slacken the pressure by backing off fifty or a hundred yards. Once the deer perceived there was no danger, the merry-go-round slowed to a halt and the animals resumed grazing.

The worst thing about the mill was that it occasionally gained so much speed that, as if subject to centrifugal force, it flew apart, ending up in a stampede, or series of small breakaways. When this happened, the deer became vulnerable to predators and the subsequent roundup was a great drain on the herders.

The stalemate at Kouchak lasted for several days. It was finally broken when several sledders were led back and forth a number of times through the worst

places in order to break a trail through the dense underbrush, and the others were coaxed into following along.

The warm spell hung on. A heavy rain suddenly swept in making the soft snow even worse. It became next to impossible for the sled deer to proceed without a trail being broken for them. Bahr elected to use the main herd to break trail for the sledders rather than the other way around. Yet, because *driving* the herd often instigated the mill, the drovers became irritated by Bahr's strategy. They felt the sled deer should be put to the fore in order to *entice* the herd to follow in the more typical manner, and in that way prevent milling.

Circling was to occur again and again, yet Bahr persisted in his refusal to use the sled deer as trail breakers. He maintained that the first leg of the trip was a learning experience for the herd as much as for the men. Miller quoted Bahr:

"We are now just training," the trail boss said. "Training sled deer, training the herd, training dogs, and training men. I must do much talking now to tell and show how things must be done. Bye and Bye everyone will know what to do."

Mother Nature gave no quarter. A sudden drop in temperature froze the rain-drenched land, blanketing the tundra with a coat of ice. The reindeer attempted to paw their way through the solid surface to get at the lichens underneath, but it was a futile effort as the ice was too thick. The only alternative for Bahr was to keep pressing the herd for-

ward until the deer either found ice-free patches or other forms of vegetation on which they could feed. And, as if that was not bad enough, a snow squall followed the downpour. The wind that pushed the snow was so fierce a man could almost lean against it. Several deer broke away from the herd. It looked like a mill was going to form again, so Bahr slacked off the pressure and again ordered the men to lead several sled deer ahead of the herd. This act successfully enticed the rest of the animals to follow along behind the sledders and a stampede was avoided.

Yet, as Bahr had feared, moving the sled deer to the front of the drive under such conditions took its toll. Some of the draft animals were injured or worn out by the strain of pulling a sled through heavy snow, and required prompt replacement.

The sled deer were not alone in their agony. W. B. Miller by this time was suffering acutely from the cold and exertion. Miller was in as good condition as the average man accustomed to the outdoors, but was not strong enough to withstand the blizzards, alternating rain and heavy snow, gyrating temperatures, and the constant grinding psychological and physical distress of trying to keep up with men to whom the struggle was second nature, and who were accustomed to surviving in the most savage climate on earth.

Yet another casualty was Mike Nilluka, who was troubled by a stomach disorder, probably brought on by the cold or the crude conditions under which the drovers sometimes gulped down half-cooked food.

Having been almost a month on the trail, Bahr saw this as a fitting time to make camp for a few days. Nilluka was suffering so much from his belly ailment that Bahr sent him back to the coast to see a doctor when a dog team became available. Miller, on the other hand, decided to stick it out a little longer. Bahr decided this was a good time to train more sled deer, so his men rounded up eight likely looking animals and proceeded to work them into harness. It took two days before Bahr was satisfied. He again put the herd on the move, veering from an easterly to a northerly direction, and crossed to the north bank of the Selawik river. A trapper offered Miller a ride at this point, and he, too, left the trail drive.

The loss of Nilluka and Miller was a setback for Bahr. Even though Miller was more of an observer than an active participant, his assistance would be missed. Nilluka's loss was more important; he was a veteran who knew reindeer and their habits. His absence put that much more of a burden on the men who remained.

Miller proceeded to Selawik and then to Elephant Point. There he advised Crowley of the adverse conditions that had been experienced by Bahr and his men. He went on to Nome where he told Alfred Lomen the same thing. Miller's comments were backed up by copious notes he had taken during the period he was with the trail drive. These trepidations centred on the slow progress of the herd,

which was averaging no better than two miles a day. In reviewing the three weeks he had been with the herd, Miller cited the weather as being the principal cause for the slow progress. One entire week out of the three, the herd was raked by blizzards, prohibiting any travel at all. The antics of the animals, ranging from frequent stampedes to desertions of sled deer, cost the drive three days. Thus, out of three weeks, the herd only moved forward on eleven days. These statistics were enough to incite Lomen to write to Dan Crowley suggesting he visit the herd to ascertain what assistance could be rendered Bahr, if any.

While Miller was making his report, Bahr's troubles seemed to go on and on. The up and down variations of the temperatures over the next several weeks were confusing. Frequently, a thaw would be followed by a plunge of the mercury, creating a crust on the snow not quite thick enough to hold the drovers' weight. As a result, they broke through at every step, making it extremely tiring to proceed.

When they reached the Kuchuk River Bahr called for another rest period, and proceeded to break in more sled deer. By now, the drive had been on the trail for thirty-four days, and had gone barely fifty miles. This meant their average had deteriorated to little better than a mile a day. At this rate, they would be fortunate to reach the Hunt River cache before fawning time in April.

Dan Crowley, after hearing from Lomen, quickly rounded up a pilot and, on the last day of January, flew from Elephant Point to Kotzebue. He sought out Nilluka, who had travelled on to Kotzebue from Elephant Point in order to be treated there by the resident doctor. The Lapp was up and around by this time, but was too weak to go back to the herd.

The flight was delayed several days in Kotzebue due to the usual topsy-turvy weather of the region. Finally, Crowley and pilot Victor Ross, along with a guide, Jack Hooper, took off for the reindeer camp.

The biplane was of the open cockpit type, which at the prevailing temperature of thirty below zero, was close to the lower limit the plane could fly. Ross did not know the location of the reindeer herd, but because his two passengers, at least, had a general idea of where it was, they were given the unenviable task of peering outside the cockpit to give the pilot directions. After only ninety seconds of exposure to the bitter cold, both men suffered frostbitten cheeks.

Ross flew southeast from Kotzebue to cross diagonally over Hotham Inlet and the Kobuk delta. Peering to his left, Crowley could see Noorvik, a tree-blessed hamlet on a channel of the Kobuk River. As the flight progressed over the gleaming white world of the delta, they overflew Selawik Lake and the town of the same name. They dropped a mail sack on the town, and from the size of the crowd, Crowley judged the plane was one of the few that had ever flown over the village.

The men flew on and enjoyed an eagle-eye's view of the Kotzebue basin. Finally, Ross brought the plane into a landing at the camp of Hooper's brother forty miles up the Selawik River, breaking a ski strut in the process. Ross set to work to repair the damage, which required staying all night. Dan learned from Hooper's brother that the herd was only ten miles distant. Since there was no dog team available, he decided to snowshoe in. The next day, after a valiant struggle, the superintendent reached Bahr's camp, where he found the trail boss hard at work training sled deer.

Bahr was pleasantly surprised to see Crowley, and took the opportunity to inform him that his goal would be to reach the Kobuk by spring, rather than to go farther on as had been the original plan.<sup>2</sup> He explained that the herd was in poor condition because of milling and stampeding. The marches and countermarches had worn out the deer. Bahr estimated they had walked two hundred miles for every fifty they travelled in a straight line.

The Laplander told Crowley he thought it would be better to spend the spring and summer on the Kobuk, where supplies could easily be obtained by boat from Kotzebue, than to push the herd into the mountains where the problem of resupply would be much more difficult. Also, incursions of indigenous caribou would be a constant threat, as the deer were prone to drift off with their wild cousins if a herd larger than theirs passed through the area.

Dan Crowley perceived the drovers to be in good

humour, but whether this observation was correct in view of his short stay at the camp, was doubtful. This seemed doubly so since Bahr himself was to state only three weeks later that some of his men wanted to quit.

During February the vagaries of the weather, and intolerable obstacles persisted. No sooner had the drive set out again after Crowley departed than it ran into an impasse in the form of a forest of willows and alders so dense the men actually found it necessary to hack their way through the thickets with their belt axes. This was no easy task because of the rubbery resilience of the scrub trees. In this growth, the snow had little chance to pack down and harden. It was so deep the sleds were constantly bogging down, putting everyone into a bad humour.

The deer, too, were becoming more cantankerous. The herd was passing through an area that had been swept the previous summer by a tundra fire that destroyed the lichen. Now the deer were scraping back the snow and finding no food. There was no way of telling how extensive the damage was, so Bahr pushed the deer forward as quickly as possible. Luckily, the reindeer walked out of the burn area before they became overly weak.

By now, the drive was nearing a tributary of the Kobuk and the first leg of the arduous journey was almost over; but the recriminations were not. The Inuits were disgruntled for two reasons: one because they were paid considerably less than the

lowest-paid Lapp, though most of them had as much or more experience; and two, some of them were not satisfied with Bahr's leadership. Even some of the Lapps were irritated with Bahr. They felt that his intransigence in not using sled deer more often to lead the herd was the reason for the constant milling and resultant irritatingly slow progress of the trail drive.

Crowley, too, was not altogether happy with Bahr's leadership abilities. He was convinced that Bahr had made a mistake in not moving to Nabok-toolik earlier in the fall to round up the deer and to train sledders. Crowley viewed Bahr's procrastination as the cause of the drive's delay.

On balance, Crowley understood that there were many aspects of the expedition over which the Lapp had no control, and for which he could not be blamed. Dan knew Bahr had not set the wages which were the root cause of the Inuit's disaffection, and also that Bahr could not manipulate the weather. As bad as the climate was in the Kotzebue basin, it was not always *that* bad. Nor was Andrew at fault for the wild condition of the deer which had been afield all summer. Though the total distance travelled was meagre, the entire herd was still en route, which is what really mattered that first winter.

## CHAPTER 5

# Reindeer Station

While Bahr struggled through that first winter to push the giant herd to the prearranged supply point on the banks of the Kobuk River, the Canadian Department of the Interior went ahead with plans to set up a camp to receive the reindeer in the delta of the Mackenzie River.

Oswald Finnie, Director of the Northwest Territories and Yukon branch of the department, sent for Bob Porsild as soon as the latter returned from a vacation in Denmark. Finnie assigned to him the task of choosing the site for the station, as well as building the camp. On March 14, 1930, Porsild set out for Aklavik in company with Wilhelm Hatting, a former trader from Bob's hometown in Greenland whom he had hired as an assistant. The two were destined to run into an adventure even before they reached Aklavik. They boarded a plane and

flew successfully from Edmonton to the first stop at Fort Resolution. After helping the pilot unload supplies there, Hatting and Porsild climbed back aboard the plane and took off again. The aircraft was airborne only a few minutes when the engine failed and they crashed. The three men crawled out of the wreckage unhurt, but it was a near fatal experience for all of them as the plane was a total loss. Bob then walked fifteen miles without snowshoes to summon a rescue party that fetched his companions back to Fort Resolution.

Another plane was called in and eight days later Porsild and Hatting were airborne again. This time they reached Aklavik successfully, landing in front of the tiny community on the west channel of the Mackenzie River on the twenty-second of March.

The general plan for building the reindeer station was perfected and drawn up by Bob's brother. He had submitted the concept to Finnie, who approved it. Under older methods of construction that were once in place in Alaska, reindeer were simply driven into enclosures made out of split poles buried in the ground, looking almost like scaled-down versions of an old western stockade. These permanent fixtures afforded no portability. After one or two roundups, the pasture in which the deer grazed could be destroyed for years to come.

Recalling a solution favoured by the Lomen brothers, Erling Porsild suggested that prefabricated, movable corrals be used. These were made of

rough lumber in twelve-by-seven-foot sections that were leaned up against wooden posts implanted in the ground along the corral at twelve-foot intervals. Herders could erect the enclosure in a matter of a few hours; when ready to move on, the sections could easily be disassembled and transported to another grazing area, leaving only the supporting posts behind. In this case, using the newer style of enclosure spared Bob the unenviable job of cutting about one hundred cords of poles that would have been required under the old system. He would still need, of course, to cut up enough logs to shore up the sections, and to build the main house and herders' cabins.

Bob Porsild's first duty was to find logs for the project. He and Hatting set out on April 12 with two dog teams and mushers James Edwards and Joe Greenland, whom he had hired to transport them to a timber patch sixty miles east of Aklavik. Another man, Jack Bowen, was engaged to pick up Bob and his partner on May 10. After two days on the trail, they found the right spot. The mushers dropped them off and returned home. The task of the two men would have been easier if they had kept one of the dog teams, as sled dogs were commonly used for hauling logs to build cabins and to stock up on firewood.

The tree line ran east and west across the Mackenzie delta from Aklavik. The growth here was composed of spruce trees that were spindly when compared to similar species that grow in more

temperate climates. The logging job took Porsild and Hatting almost the full month Bob had allotted for the task. They cut timbers ten feet in length for corral posts, logs of assorted sizes ranging from ten to fourteen feet for cabins, and longer, twenty-four-foot beams for buildings. It was gruelling labour harvesting timber in the deep snow. The fallers had to be extra careful that the trees toppled in the proper direction. If wrong in their judgement, they risked serious injury because their mobility was severely handicapped by the snowshoes they wore.

The chores were more formidable in a mantle of snow. When a tree fell, the men had to dig it out in order to trim it, and then, like draft horses, harness up and skid the logs out to the river bank.

The vicious elements added drama to each day a man was abroad in the Arctic. After completing the job of cutting logs, the two men wondered why Bowen had not shown up. They were in a vulnerable position, across the river from Aklavik on the east side of the delta.

Porsild wrote: "Jack Bowen did not arrive till in the evening the 16th of May, delayed by flooded ice around Aklavik. We were mainly living on fried rats [muskrats] for the last week in camp. Ice not thick this winter so had a rather hard time getting back, breaking through both men and dogs several times. Back evening the 18th of May."

The combination of hard work and lack of food had its effect on Porsild. "I lost 24 pounds in weight during the 4 weeks woodcutting, which is rather

hard work at this time of the year and without a dog team."<sup>1</sup>

Coinciding with Porsild's labours on the east channel of the Mackenzie River was the processing of lumber orders, which Finnie forwarded at Bob's request. It was of crucial importance to the reindeer project that the lumber be shipped that summer. Planks were not available in the delta. Upriver, Finnie, in the interest of fairness, decided to award half of the order for ten thousand board feet to one company, and half to another. As is often the case with an executive who has had considerable experience in dealing with supplies, Finnie's sixth sense envisioned a foul-up. This spurred him to stress to his employees working along the length of the Mackenzie to scrupulously examine and count the planks before they were accepted.

The contracts were awarded to two small mills, the lumber received, and the vouchers signed. The planks were then shipped downriver to Aklavik.

Bob Porsild, in the meantime, sought out three men to work for him for the summer of 1930. The principal problem in trying to hire anyone was the overlap of the proposed summer work with the springtime muskrat trapping season. Frank Carmichael, a local trapper, and Hans Hansen, another trapper and personal friend of Bob's, agreed to work for him, but held out for the amount of funds (about seventy-five dollars) they would lose from missing the remainder of the muskrat season which ran through the first week of June, *plus* the full



month's salary. Bob wanted each man to work for three full months (June to August), at one hundred dollars a month. The young Dane solved this difficulty with Solomon-like judgement. He evened out the pay and suggested a rate of one hundred and twenty-five dollars a month instead, but no bonus for lost trapping time. They agreed. Porsild also hired John McDonald, from Fort McPherson, at seventy-five dollars a month.

The question now was where to build the reindeer station? Bob and Erling had previously espied from the air the abandoned Inuit community of Kittigazuit, situated at the mouth of the Mackenzie River's east channel. They thought it might make a good place for the reindeer station, so as soon as the ice went out Bob went downriver by boat to check it out. However, on approaching the settlement, he became disenchanted with a maze of low islands and mud flats screening Kittigazuit, and elected instead to set up the station at a bend in the river to the south. He wrote: "We finally decided to choose a place about seven miles above [south of] Kittigazuit called by the natives Kooryuak, an old husky [that is, Inuit] settlement along a small creek. The country behind offers several advantages for placing the corral, as far as I could estimate from hikes in the neighborhood."<sup>2</sup> The advantages were the seemingly unlimited pasture for the deer, easy access from the river, and open terrain conducive to herding. The lack of timber near the camp motivated a transfer about sixty

miles upriver a few years later. The second, permanent camp was called simply Reindeer Station.

Porsild and his men went about moving the logs to the site and commenced building the reindeer complex. The planks for the interior work and the portable corrals were due to arrive, so Bob went to Aklavik to pick them up. When he got there, he was appalled at what he saw. The boards dispatched by the Liard Coal Company, at Fort Simpson, were thrown helter-skelter onto the shore, and were in shoddy condition. This was in stark contrast to the carefully bundled lumber from the other firm, the Wynn Company at Grand Detour, with which Finnie had placed an order.

The sizes of the planks from the Liard Coal Company were such a mismatch, that it was impossible to measure them, or verify that the correct number of board feet had been shipped, without taking what Porsild deemed was an unnecessary amount of time. He complained: "How much lumber there is I can not estimate, the lumber not being bundled and not two pieces in the whole lot of the same length and thickness. Most of it is of an average thickness of  $3/4$  inch, and too thin for our purpose, and it looks to me as if Mr. Cousins, the owner, considered this order a splendid chance to get rid of a lot of offal not saleable to anybody but the government."<sup>3</sup>

Bob estimated the lumber to be two thousand board feet short, but had no choice other than to sign the bill of lading; it was impractical to send an order back to the shipper when he was located

seven hundred miles up the Mackenzie River. He advised Finnie not to pay for it; then promptly departed Aklavik for the site of the reindeer camp, about one hundred and fifty miles away, and with no avenues of communication.

Finnie refused to pay for the mismatched lumber, whereupon Cousins sued the federal government. The parties to the dispute continued to haggle while Bob Porsild, who had ignited the furor, was secure at the reindeer camp and aloof from the infighting.

Finally, after a series of one hundred and twenty-two messages had been exchanged, Dr. U. A. Urquhart, government agent at Aklavik, took the responsibility of stating that the pile received had indeed been five thousand board feet. Finnie, relieved that someone had officially owned up to the fact that the total was correct, authorized payment to the company.

Porsild's unavailability was not entirely his own fault, since a wireless service was not always accessible, even when he was in Aklavik, but it was plain that Finnie was irritated with him. The director wired his complaints from Ottawa, objecting to the way the Dane had handled the lumber order, and added a few more gripes about the operation in general and about unauthorized expenditures.

Anecdotes from this correspondence were not always grim. Bob had wired Finnie that a typewriter he was supposed to be using was not in working order, and would be returned. Finnie replied by

letter wherein he patiently explained that the typewriter had been thoroughly overhauled and rebuilt in the department's machine shop in Ottawa before it was sent north. He explained that the typewriter, providing no damage had been incurred in the shipment, should have been in good condition when Porsild received it.

Bob Porsild gained the last word in this exchange when he wrote Finnie on the typewriter. Each time he came to a numeral key (none worked), he left a space and wrote in the number by hand!

By the end of the summer of 1930, Porsild could look at his accomplishments with satisfaction. Firstly, he had found a suitable place for the reindeer station. Secondly, he had hired a crew at reasonable wages; and thirdly, he put up the buildings needed. To successfully fulfill these tasks in such an isolated area was no mean accomplishment.

However, one chore had not yet been completed and it loomed over Porsild and his crew with the irksome persistence of an unpaid bill. This was the construction of the chutes and corrals.

An even more salient event was scheduled with regards to Bob Porsild's private life, this being the pending arrival of his fiancée, Elly Rothe Hansen, whom he had met many years before when he attended school in her hometown, Soro, Denmark. Her recollections have given an enlightening insight into what life was really like on the northern frontier.

Elly arrived at Aklavik by riverboat in mid-September. Since Bob was on a tight schedule, no

time was lost with respect to wedding plans, and they were married in the tiny Anglican church by Reverend Murray the day after Elly disembarked. A Mountie from the local detachment, Arthur Fielding, in full dress uniform escorted her to the altar, where Bob and his best man, Hans Hansen, waited, along with bridesmaid Dorothy Cunningham, a nurse from the area. Their exchange of vows was reported to be the first all-white marriage ever held in Aklavik.

No sooner had the ceremony ended than someone shouted "Steamboat!" and Bob and the best man rushed pell-mell to the boat, leaving the bride standing almost alone at the altar — albeit *after* the marriage. The bridesmaid provided company for Elly while the groom was occupied unloading the boat. The bride wondered why the steamboat appeared to be more important to the populace than the wedding. She was advised that the boat — the last one of the season — held the government's winter allotment of liquor, which amounted to twelve bottles for each white family. Natives were not permitted to drink alcohol.

That evening the owners of Aklavik's only restaurant gave a wedding dinner which featured a caribou roast with all the trimmings, and a wedding cake with icing so hard it took the combined efforts of the bride and groom to hack through it. Thirty whites were served at the first setting, followed by an equal number of natives at the second. There was more than enough food for all.

After dinner most of the guests adjourned to an empty warehouse where three Inuit fiddlers initiated the music and the newlyweds danced the first waltz. The groom then disappeared temporarily to act as host in distributing part of his liquor allotment.

Elly found the Inuits to be light on their feet and wonderful dancers. She enjoyed their company and recalled the native people — Gwich'in Indians were also present — as being jolly and happy.

Men of the Royal Canadian Signals Corps, who ran the newly installed wireless station at Aklavik, after midnight invited the couple to their complex for tea and ham sandwiches. Bob, by this time had completed his session as host, and he and Elly danced there until four in the morning.

Thus culminated the Danish girl's first experience with the friendly camaraderie of the people of the North. The bride, however, would quickly learn that tragedy went hand in hand with good fortune in the Arctic.

The next day Bob's job necessitated his return to the reindeer station. The couple left for the camp aboard a gas boat that had in tow a scow loaded with all of their winter supplies. Also aboard were Hans Hansen, and Donald Oliver, an Inuit youth considered by Porsild to be of outstanding promise, and whom Bob hoped to train in the reindeer business. The journey to the reindeer site took two days. Here, Elly found to her surprise that a two-storey house awaited her. Bob dutifully carried her across

the threshold, and she was then free to explore her new quarters.

She appreciated the scenery: "The view was grand, water for miles and miles and the mountains in the background. There were no trees, just some willow bushes. There were no neighbours for fifteen miles, no radio, and no telephone."<sup>4</sup>

Mrs. Porsild discovered they were liberally supplied with food purchased from the Hudson's Bay Company. Such items as canned butter and bacon, eggs preserved in salt, condensed milk, boxes of baker's chocolate, onions, potatoes, sugar, and flour filled the larder.

One of Elly's most disagreeable chores was toting water up the steep bank from the river. This rugged task sometimes took hours, and was accomplished by using a wooden shoulder yoke for the pails. She then dumped the water into a barrel next to the stove. After freeze-up, she obtained water by filling a barrel inside the house with snow and ice which gradually melted. No matter how hard she worked, she reminisced, there never seemed to be enough water to fill the demands.

Elly and Bob often hunted ptarmigan. Bob would range ahead shooting birds, which Elly picked up and placed in a sack. Of this labour, she said: "My steps got slower and slower; the load got heavier and heavier; I didn't even get any offer to carry them home for me. Why do women always carry the heaviest burden, I only ask."<sup>5</sup>

Elly Porsild was in the Arctic less than four weeks

when she found out how dangerous the polar region could be. In mid-October, she and Bob along with Hansen and Oliver and the dog team motored downriver by boat to Kittigazuit, where they put the craft into dry-dock for the winter. Bob stayed behind to winterize the boat while the other three returned to the reindeer camp. Hans was to return for Bob the next day.

Oliver set out in front of the team acting as trail breaker and guide. Hans was behind the sled as musher for the dogs, and Elly rode as passenger. After travelling several miles Hansen and Oliver took a short cut across a patch of newly formed ice. The frozen surface groaned and creaked as the sled sped over it, but the commitment had been made and they kept going. Suddenly, though, the ice broke under Oliver and he disappeared in the black depths of the river.

The rent opened by Oliver's weight spread through the ice for the full length of the team. The dogs, handicapped by the harness, snapped futilely at the ice cakes as they fought to escape. In seconds, they too were gone. Elly and Hans were free of any ties to the sled and floated high because of their reindeer parkas, the hollow hairs of which made them temporarily buoyant. They were able to escape the frigid water by pulling themselves onto solid ice and crawling away from the deadly maw of the river. Thoroughly soaked and shocked by the sudden loss of Donald, they staggered back to Kittigazuit, where Bob built a fire to warm them up and

dry out their clothes. This, then, was Elly Porsild's literal, horrifying baptism into the dangers of the Arctic.

While Bob Porsild struggled to complete the reindeer complex, and Andrew Bahr guided the herd of 3,500 deer to the Kobuk River, the Lomen brothers were having a difficult time keeping their reindeer operation solvent.

Meat prices had begun to slide within a few months of the stock market crash in October of 1929. As the depression widened, the Lomens were forced to sell reindeer meat in the Lower 48 for as little as twelve cents a pound. Ranchers in the United States were so desperate to unload their stock they were selling carloads of cattle and sheep for less money than it cost them to ship the animals to market in the first place!

One of the worst blows struck against the Lomen operation came from the United States government itself. The federal Department of Interior circulated a pamphlet in two hundred cities advertising reindeer meat for nine cents a pound, or three cents under the Lomen price. In light of the many years and the thousands of dollars the Lomen Company had spent on popularizing the sale of reindeer meat, this was a treacherous and near fatal blow. The Lomens simply could not ship meat to the southern market at the same rates as the government-subsidized shipments.

Yet another devastating setback occurred in California when stock growers pushed legislation through the state government which forbade the sale of uninspected meat. Since reindeer was not even included in the meat inspection act, this effectively shut down the ten-year-old Lomen operation in California, and along with it, their offices in Los Angeles and San Francisco.

The scramble for markets in competition with beef interests, while also fighting the government, was not an ideal situation in which to keep a business afloat. There is little doubt that the Canadian contract, with its first and second payments, pulled the Lomens back from the brink of a financial abyss. However, the seeds of doubt had been planted as to whether the Lomens could keep the drive afloat if it ran into serious difficulty.

## CHAPTER 6

## Interval on the Kobuk

The Kobuk, one of the magnificent rivers of the North in the balmy days of summer, was still smothered in snow and ice when the reindeer herd led by Andy Bahr and his ornery crew descended into its valley at the end of February, 1930. This waterway is the ninth-largest river in Alaska. Flowing 347 miles, it drains 12,000 square miles of terrain, including the rugged towers of the Baird Range and the areas of its source among the declivitous spires of the Schwatkas. Farther down it sidles past the enigmatic Great Kobuk sand dunes to filter into Hotham Inlet via a large delta.

The drovers guided the herd across the Kobuk to reach the cache Bahr had placed on the Hunt River. Shortly after they arrived, Bahr's scouts found a valley eight miles above the cache where there was plenty of edible moss available, and led the deer

there. This sanctuary was surrounded by high hills and was an ideal place for fawning. An out-camp was established here.

Once the main camp was set up on the Hunt, Bahr used the respite to make his way to a trading post owned by Warren and Archie Ferguson at Shungnak, fifty miles upriver from the mouth of the Hunt. Bahr posted a letter to the Lomens, informing them of the grumbling by the dissatisfied members of the crew. Since the reindeer were safely across the Kobuk and could be held quite handily, he felt that if some of the herders resigned it would not be nearly as crucial as if they were still on the trail. Now he could hire replacements if he needed them. There was little attempt to solve the root causes of the discontent.

Fierce storms along the Kobuk in March and part of April sealed the decision of the disgruntled drovers. Three Inuits, August Ome, Shelby David, and David Henry quit and returned to their homes at Golovin on April 10. Bahr could not convince the herders to stay, even with a promise that he would attempt to negotiate an increase in their wages. Mike Nilluka, however, had returned, coming up the Hunt with a mail delivery, having recovered from his stomach ailment.

Spring emerges suddenly in the Arctic — like a ptarmigan chick bursting from an egg. The foremost harbinger of warmth in the polar regions is the tinkling sound of water dropping — whether from a rock, or plunking from a tent guy rope, a

cabin eave, or from the tip of an icicle, this event rings like a bell to one who has been enmeshed in the long Arctic winter. An unseasonal chinook occasionally gives the same results, but at the right time in the right month, the veteran Arctic dweller recognizes the unmistakable instance when the cold truly unbends.

Bahr's mundane tone in a letter disguises the intensity of feeling: "The weather is getting mild now and the snow, and, ice on the snow, will be softer, that means better feeding; anyhow spring is coming."<sup>1</sup>

The average gestation period for reindeer is seven months and seven days, so that the first fawns generally appear around the second week of April. Since does should be placed on good pasture in an area of little potential disturbance for at least a month before the fawns are born, the Hunt River tributary proved to be an excellent refuge for them. When the sun shone, it was refracted in the valley, and caused the ice and snow to give way to patches of green earlier than in other locations. This growth consisted of flowering stalks of cotton sedge that were rich in food values needed by does to furnish milk for their fawns.

The calves dropped throughout April and into the month of May. Approximately two thousand were born, according to Bahr's estimates. Andrew wrote to the Lomens and asked them if they wanted the animals branded, at the same time advising against it. He estimated it would cost at least two

thousand dollars to accomplish this task because corrals would have to be built and extra men hired. The Lomens concurred with his judgement in this case, as the route to Canada was intentionally planned to avoid any other reindeer herds in the Arctic, negating the need for such marking.

The first days of a reindeer fawn's life are the most hazardous, as predators centred their attention on the young ones. Herders had to be alert to attacks by wolves, lynx, wolverines, grizzly bears, and eagles. Under the sharp eyes of the remaining herders, the newborn came through the most dangerous period — the first hours of their lives — with a minimum of losses.

Bahr was still vexed with the nagging question of what route to take to reach the north side of the Brooks Range, and of what method to employ to transport their supplies. After Bahr made a second trip to telegraph Alfred Lomen for assistance, Dan Crowley flew from Nome with Victor Ross in his ski-equipped plane. Having preplanned the drive to cross the Baird Mountains by way of the Hunt River, Bahr and Crowley decided to make an aerial reconnaissance of that river. If the weather held on the trip, they would fly farther north across the Noatak and continue over the DeLong peaks to the headwaters of the Colville River, surveying the second leg of the journey as well.

The plane arrived none too soon. Dr. L. E. Benson, an elderly physician, had begged the Lomens the year before to be allowed to accompany the

drive. He hoped he might be of some value inoculating natives in various villages they passed near, and, of course, in tending the ills that might befall the drovers. Benson also wanted to take notes on the plant life and geology of the region through which the drive was expected to go.

The Lomens were reluctant to give permission to the doctor because they realized he was not used to such arduous living as could be expected on the drive. However, he was so persistent in his appeals — and could, in an emergency, be invaluable to an injured drover — that the Lomens consented. They sent him to the Hunt River cache to await the arrival of the herd, assuming, correctly, that the first leg of the drive would be too tough for him. Indeed, merely waiting for the herd to arrive proved to be Benson's undoing.

Tent living had resulted in the doctor becoming deeply chilled, and his health had deteriorated so badly that by the time Crowley arrived he was coughing up blood. Every time he tried to recline, phlegm accumulated in his throat, choking him, and making rest impossible.

Dan had him flown to a nearby settlement for better care, and advised the sick man he would take him back to Nome in Ross's plane when the air reconnaissance was completed. The doctor would not recover from his ordeal for many years.

Heavy clouds prevailed for nine days before the skies finally cleared enough to take off one day at noon. Ross flew straight north, following the Hunt

River. He levelled off at four thousand feet, yet the highest of the Baird peaks still loomed above the aircraft by another thousand. The mountains closed in on them as they approached the headwaters of the Hunt, narrowing their flight path down to nothing more than a canyon with abrupt banks. This was definitely not what Bahr and Crowley wanted to see. No herd could be driven through such an unforgiving gulch, proving that hearsay had been dead wrong about the Hunt. The airborne reconnaissance had saved the drive from an endless delay or possible disaster. Thereupon Crowley told Ross to look for another route.

The weather ahead of them cleared as the plane growled its way over the headwall of the Hunt to the Noatak. Ross followed the swale of the Aniuk, a tributary of the larger Noatak, to go through deceptively gentle Howard Pass and emerge on the north slope of the Brooks Range. He took the plane fifteen miles down the Etivluk River, a tributary of the Colville, from which the outline of the latter could be seen in the distance. As far as Ross could figure, they were the first humans in history to view that precise area from the air. They discerned, by the formation of the Colville valley, that it flowed east at this point, rather than west as shown on some government maps. After clearing the northern foothills, the vast, flat, white Arctic prairie lay before them. This expanse of alabaster was broken only by opaque outlines of alder-and-willow-encased creeks that tumbled north to the Arctic Ocean.



The men spotted caribou along the Etivluk River. This was a good sign, as it meant there would be forage for the reindeer. Three barren-ground grizzlies, newly up and around after their winter's sleep, were seen prowling about and from the altitude of the plane over the untimbered land, looked like a trio of ground squirrels.

Finally, the limits of fuel dictated the need for turning the aircraft around. Pilot Ross steered the plane back over the abutment of the Brooks Range to search for a route across the Baird Mountains as an alternative to the precipitous upper canyon of the Hunt River. They flew down the Redstone River and found it satisfactory for driving a herd.

The men had been in the air for three and a half hours when the plane touched down on the ice in front of the camp on the Hunt, their trip an unqualified success. There was no doubt as to the route the drive would follow, at least across the Brooks Range; nor were there any reservations that a plane could successfully carry supplies across the mountain barrier.

Once back in Nome, Crowley weighed prices he had obtained from the Ferguson brothers for shipping supplies by dog team, against the costs of the plane. It was four cents per pound cheaper by air than the dog team rate of twenty cents a pound. This was a small saving, but in view of the fact the aircraft was also faster, he was inclined to favour the plane.

With the approach of summer, Bahr decided to

split the herd into two groups. The deer would be easier to manage, he speculated, and less likely to stampede. Retaining half the herd at the main camp on the Hunt, he shifted the other half to a location thirty miles down the Kobuk. When the ice finally went out on the Kobuk River, the herders patrolled its shores in boats they had built and fitted with outboard motors. In this way the men could discourage the reindeer from swimming the river in a bid to return south to their home range.

The labour of the drovers was relatively uneventful until the sun reached its zenith, when it never set for several months each summer. Then the green grass came in, the muskeg warmed, and swarms of mosquitoes, one of the great nuisances of the north country emerged. Both men and beasts were forced to alter their habits. The herders' choice was to either find a breezy place to camp, or build a smudge fire — always primed — to fend off the voracious insects. In travelling across country, it was necessary for the herders to remain perpetually in motion or the pests would settle on them like some sort of nightmarish, animated blanket.

There are several varieties of the pest. The first to appear were *Culiseta alaskaensis* Ludlow and *Culiseta impatiens* Walker, which were so eager to get at man and beast they poked their way right up through snow patches and were nicknamed "snow mosquitoes". They were often described by Alaskans, half in jest, as wearing fur coats. Another, even more bloodthirsty species called *Aedes punctodes* Dyar that

hatched in late June, could attack in such large swarms that it could kill an animal from loss of blood.

Shepherds in 1930 had no effective repellent against the insidious attacks of the minuscule predators. The men draped nets over their heads, and though effective, the screen was uncomfortable on hot days. The insects were especially annoying during meals. The men wore their headnets while they ate, which made the entire procedure quite awkward. Even frying pans were not immune to the raids. The persistent mosquitoes swarmed onto the hot griddle and sizzled, forming a crust on the food.

In addition to mosquitoes, the deer were susceptible to the warble fly. The flies deposited their eggs on the hair of the deer, usually when the animals were lying down. When the eggs hatched the larvae bored their way through the skin, and worked their way around to come back out the next summer and fall to the ground as pupa. Sores up to six inches across could develop when the deer bit the affected area. Fawns and yearlings were more susceptible to warble flies than older animals, which seemed to acquire an immunity to the fly as they aged.

Yet another insect bothered the deer even more. This was the nostril fly. Shaped like a beetle, the *boaro* as the Lapps called it, hovered level with the snouts of the animals, then attacked them to deposit wiggling larvae in the nasal opening. This sent the animals into shock, and induced muscular

convulsions. Usually these contractions passed quickly; but the larvae commenced working their way to the entrance of the throat, where they germinated until the next summer. The grubs became active as they matured, causing the deer to cough and sneeze as they tried to dislodge them. When the larvae ultimately fell to the ground they were often glazed with blood. Reindeer could lose up to a quart of blood a day to insects in a bad year.

The restlessness of the tortured reindeer, coupled with the yearning to return to the home range, was accentuated by their addiction to mushrooms. If a whiff of the spore came to their sensitive noses, they would stampede pell-mell in the direction of the source. The fungi were simply irresistible to the animals.

As bad as conditions were on the Kobuk, the drovers were forced by circumstances to stay where they were for the entire summer. The herd could not be driven toward its ultimate destination on the Mackenzie because there had to be snow over which the supply sleds could be drawn. Also, until the ground was frozen, the men could not travel afoot across the vast swamps of the tundra.

Not all of the hours and days of herding reindeer were wrapped in misery. There was a certain dignity to being a herdsman that set him apart from the average man. A shepherd had to be able to withstand long periods of time alone. In adjusting

to this solitary existence, he either achieved a certain level of adaptability and self-reliance that instilled in him the peace of mind to keep going, or he left; it was as simple as that.

There were compensating lures for those who enjoyed the solitary pursuit. A cool wind in summer could present the herder with an opportunity to relax at some pleasant camping place to brew tea or soup while, at the same time, enjoying the spectacular panorama of the nearby mountains. Anyone who toted some sort of a rod could catch fish like Arctic grayling, which were lively fighters, beautiful to look at with their purple sheen, and good to eat. Or by looking skywards, one could derive pleasure from a soaring eagle, the efficient glide of a hawk, and the amusing acrobatics of a raven.

The Lomen reindeer were pastured in one of the most archaeologically-rich regions of North America. This was near Portage, a trail across a neck of the Kobuk. Antler- and stone-tipped spears, stone knives, and cleavers were occasionally kicked up at campfire sites. These signalled a level of culture never observed or even heard of by the men who found them. Cuttings were often seen that could only have been made with stone axes, piquing the curiosity of the lonely herder as he tended the deer.

Nor was life in camp complete drudgery. There, after a long shift spent with the deer, the men converged for steaming hot coffee, and talk, and whittled figurines out of wood and antlers. A herder was his own boss when he was in the field. The logistics

of his occupation made it impossible for someone to look over his shoulder every minute in order to tell him what to do. The decisions of the moment were his to make, for better or for worse.

Ivar West was a man who enjoyed being alone. He, too, had come from Norway as had Bahr and Nilluka. He had been chosen for the drive because of his extensive experience, judgement, and ability to apply innovative solutions to unexpected problems that arose. West was alone one day eyeing the fractious, mosquito-crazed segment of the herd he had been assigned to watch along the north bank of the Kobuk, when his charges suddenly bolted into the river and swam across, heading toward their home range. Ivar reacted immediately. He shoved a log into the water and using a piece of driftwood for a paddle, launched the makeshift craft into the swift current. He paddled downstream, angling the log with the flow of the river, and finally reached the opposite shore.

West emerged dripping wet and commenced to run after the deer, but a man on foot was no match for the reindeer. West finally gave up and recrossed the Kobuk. He figured he had lost between three hundred and five hundred deer. However, this was not a devastating setback in view of the fact that with the large fawn crop, the herd had increased in size to five thousand deer.

The disappearance of Ivar's group underlined the problem of watching the deer. One minute a man could be comfortably watching a herd worth

one hundred thousand dollars and the next, vainly striving to find its remnants.

Several new crew members were gradually assimilated as the summer wore on. Tom and Peter Wood, two Inuit brothers, had been hired about the time of Crowley's visit. Edwin Allen, an Inuit lad from Kobuk, was the last to join. Inuit and Lapps switched back and forth from one tongue to the other as they swapped stories or traded tips. The Inuit deferred to the "working language" of the Lappers when they discussed subjects that concerned the drive. When outsiders were present, all of the herders conversed in English.

But when it came to disputes, even the same ethnic background did not guarantee there would be no arguments. At times, Bahr's fellow Lapp, Mike Nilluka, who had been in the reindeer industry for almost as long as his boss, was prone to question Bahr's way of doing things and to usurp Andrew's authority. It would take a rare combination of diplomacy and blunt authoritarianism to solve the many inter-personal problems before the drive was over. Carl Lomen, visiting Nome from his usual base in Seattle, heard about the ruckus between Bahr and Nilluka and wrote to Nilluka:

"An expedition like this," Lomen said, "can only have one head, and that head is Andrew. Take your orders from Andrew and pass on to the others only such orders as Andrew gives."<sup>2</sup> Lomen added that he had complete confidence in Nilluka and stated

when Andrew Bahr put him in charge of a job he would be the boss of that particular work.

Mike responded immediately with a letter of his own that explained his worries:

"I heard your people were talking to fire me. I did not know why, but I thought folks' reports, so I felt downhearted and sorry. Look like to me that time that our friendship ceases."<sup>3</sup>

Nilluka admitted he and Andrew sometimes had their differences but that they got along all right otherwise. He appreciated Lomen's letter and figured it settled the problem.

As summer waned and the day was fast approaching when the trail drive would resume, Dan Crowley was asked by the Lomens to visit Bahr to make sure all of his plans were in place. This time Crowley travelled to Bahr's camp by boat from Kotzebue via the Kobuk. He was impressed by the beauty of the river as it unwound before him like an exotic, indigo snake.

The banks are lined with willows and alders and underbrush and . . . the foliage was taking on those lovely autumn shades and presented a gorgeous appearance. The river is quite crooked . . . but every bend unfolds a beautiful picture different from the last . . . We passed many Indian [Inuit] fishing camps along the river, and they surely are

picturesque. The white tents setting back among the willows and trees. The racks of hanging fish, the nets hung up to dry, and the boats moored to the bank created a pretty scene.<sup>4</sup>

Dan Crowley reached Bahr's camp the third week of September. Ice was already forming on the river, and the distant hills glistened under newly fallen snow. Freeze-up was near.

Crowley observed that Bahr had things well in hand, despite the many personnel troubles of the summer. The Lapp told Crowley he had assembled five thousand pounds of supplies and equipment for the expedition at the junction of the Ambler and Redstone rivers. And Crowley advised Bahr that they still intended to ferry supplies across the Brooks Range by plane.

## *The Second Year*

### CHAPTER 7

## Across the Mountains

Crowley returned to Elephant Point while Bahr confronted the details of bringing the reindeer together prior to crossing the Brooks Range. Herders were bivouacked by now in four camps, tending three different bands scattered for sixty miles along the Kobuk River, and a supply camp farther north. By mid-October, the ground had frozen, and the insect hordes had long since disappeared. Rut was still in progress. The bulls over two years old fought for their harems, then serviced up to fifteen females, and sometimes more. Consequently, Bahr held the drive until November, when the mating season was over, and then issued orders to round up the herd.

Only two more steps were required before the drive was resumed. The fawn crop had raised the number of deer to five thousand, but because the

contract called for delivery of only three thousand head, the Lomens saw no need to drive the whole herd to Canada. Therefore, two thousand animals were culled and sent back to Naboktoolik. The other step was to fly the supplies to the north slope of the Brooks Range.

When the herd was ready, Bahr sent a wireless message by way of the Fergusons in Shungnak, informing Alfred Lomen in Nome. Lomen hired pilot Sanis E. Robbins for the job of hauling the supplies. Robbins flew north in a Fairchild, picking up Crowley at his headquarters at Elephant Point, then flying on to the Hunt River where they landed on November 19. The destination of the supply flight was the Etivluk River, which Crowley and Bahr had scouted on the earlier excursion.

Bahr hopped aboard the plane and they flew to the cache at the junction of the Ambler and Redstone rivers. Here, they loaded up the plane with a half ton of supplies and headed north. The weather on the Kobuk side of the first range of mountains was clear but changed for the worse after they crossed the spires separating the Kobuk and the Noatak. In spite of this, Robbins managed to spot the Aniuk and flew up the valley in hopes of crossing Howard Pass to the Etivluk. A blizzard farther up the river forced the pilot to retreat the way he had come. Rather than tote the burden of supplies all of the way back to the point of take-off, Crowley told the pilot to land on a lake they discerned near the confluence of the Aniuk and the Noatak. The

supplies were unloaded here, but Crowley was reminded again of how easily the weather could sock in a plane. The cost of flying back and forth would be prohibitive, so Crowley decided to haul the remaining two tons of provisions and gear by dog team after all; it appeared to be the only practical way of guaranteeing the shipments would reach the Etivluk River. He hired the Ferguson brothers to begin the tremendous task of sledding the loads across the two mountain ranges. The five five-dog teams employed by Warren and Archie Ferguson were made up of big, tough Malemutes. The animals were not speedsters, but they were capable of performing well in an era which saw the airplane and dog team vying for supremacy of the long-range freight haul. The distance to the Etivluk was 125 miles by air, but considerably longer on the ground. The Fergusons took the job at twenty cents a pound, the price they had quoted earlier.

Oddly enough, *good* weather stymied the drive on the west side of the Hunt. No snow had fallen in the valleys, which meant the Hunt River, though frozen, was a wide expanse of glare ice. To the deer, it looked like newly frozen ice, and they would not venture onto it. Instinctively, the animals knew if they lost their footing they were vulnerable to predators. The men and deer waited for snow.

The herdsmen anxiously scanned the skies while they kept a close watch on the nervous reindeer. They could not afford to let the deer take off in a stampede at this time when the drive was about to

resume. Finally, enough snow fell to coat the glare ice, giving sufficient traction for the deer. The blessing of this turn of events brought its own hex in that it did not *stop* snowing as the herd crossed the Hunt and wound its way up the north side of the Kobuk. The drive traversed Jade Creek (the site of one of the largest jade deposits in North America) and reached the banks of the Redstone River.

The mantle of snow became so deep the fawns could not paw their way through it to feed. Even worse, when they did scrape away the snow cover, there was no forage. Bahr wrote: “. . . this country is very poor feeding for deer. Very little reindeer moss. Nothing but brown moss [house moss].”<sup>1</sup>

The snow continued to fall, and the combination of deep snow and poor feed was so calamitous many fawns collapsed and died; upwards of 100 newborn were lost as the herd plodded up the Redstone.

Bahr had not expected to enjoy ideal conditions when afoot or on skis in the Arctic, but it seemed as though his luck was on a permanent holiday. When the storm finally let up, the temperature plummeted to fifty below zero Fahrenheit, and produced eerie results. Heat from the bodies of the bunched animals at this temperature created a fog so thick it blotted out the sight of the herd from the men trying to drive it. A poetic observer might have imagined the scene as a mile-long, rusty-brown dragon breathing out smoke as it slithered by in the snow. The men, deer, and dogs were so glazed with

snow crystals they took on the appearance of grim caricatures of a Christmas card.

Peter Wood, because of his astute knowledge of the region, was selected by Bahr to be the guide and replaced Nilluka. Subsequent gripes by Mike indicated that he may not have been happy with this change. Wood forged ahead, testing the ground for lichens and doing his best to point the herd into areas he judged to be sufficient for forage. However, he had mixed success.

Peter and his brother, Tommy, were dependable men, making their way through life by hard work, abstemiousness, and thrift. Peter's history was representative of both — he was born at Shungnak in 1885. His first encounter with reindeer was fifteen years later, when a herd under supervision of the United States Bureau of Education passed by southeast of his home on the way to pasture land on the Koyukuk River.

A year later a government school was built at Shungnak. Peter attended it for two years, then undertook other pursuits. His first job with reindeer came at Kotzebue when he was employed by missionaries in 1907, under Alfred Nilima's supervision. After working one year under a bonus arrangement, Peter was given three deer. By 1911, he had built up his herd to forty-five reindeer.

Peter hired relatives to look after his tiny herd as he sought additional funds working for others. In

1915, he signed on with the Lomen brothers for fifty dollars a month.

Always a frugal man, Peter saved his money. He quit his job with the Lomens in 1918 and purchased a riverboat which he used to operate a freight business out of Selawik, where his parents lived. In winter, he trapped. His herd grew until it numbered several hundred by 1929. That year Bahr and Crowley approached Peter and his brother, Tommy, seeking their services for the drive to Canada, but they had already committed themselves to a prospecting contract. After completing that job, they joined Bahr on the Kobuk.

The success of the Wood brothers in adjusting to another culture, their ability to bend with it and to weave in the threads of their own lifestyle and to do this in a positive, progressive manner was due, in part, to a gifted seer named Maniilaq.

This man was a visionary. He was born on the upper reaches of the Kobuk around the beginning of the 19th century. He foresaw the coming of a new race to the area and that amazing changes would be imparted as a result. He predicted that men would fly on iron sleds and speak through the air over long distances. He prophesied that men would write on thin birch bark. In his own way, Maniilaq, travelling throughout the region, attempted to prepare his people for the huge changes he predicted would come, and in so doing he challenged old taboos that he felt were impediments in his people's way of life. One fear, then widely held, was that if a

person processed a caribou skin during fishing season, he would die. The visionary deliberately broke this rule and survived. He also ate beluga meat along with berries, thus defying yet another taboo, and lived through that desecration — the mixture of sea and land foods.

Maniilaq predicted that the arrival of the white man would change these old taboos, and in this way prepared the people for the eventuality. Therefore, when it finally did happen, his thoughts were remembered by some and the cultural shock lessened to that extent. Men like the Wood brothers were able to do individually what cultures as a whole have always done: to borrow from each other, adapt, and combine elements of two different societies.

The drive was plagued with difficulties while ascending the Redstone. Deer fell, spread-eagled on the slippery surface of tiny, wind-whipped glaciers that built up along the creek. The herders quickly propped them back up and led them to a firm surface. Fawns became so deeply buried in the snow they had to be plucked aloft and deposited on sleds. The men suffered also. They slipped on overflows that oozed out of hidden springs to make the ice slick as if greased. They fell into slush ice. Hypothermia, cramps, croup, frostbite, and lack of sleep sapped their strength as they pushed the herd across the divide to enter the valley of the Noatak



River. The debilitating journey had taken a month, twice as long as Bahr had estimated. There was some griping because of it. Bahr wrote in his January report to Lomen: "Some of the boys been very cranky."

Because of the delays, there was no time for tarrying at the Noatak. Bahr was bound and determined to get to the coast of the Arctic Ocean by summer, and already he was behind schedule. The Lapp and his crew pushed the deer twenty miles to the Aniuk River, the artery they would follow across the mountains to the north slope. They crept up this tributary of the Noatak in an almost timid approach to the wind-hammered Howard Pass, the gap through the second mountain range. Trappers who had traversed this route in winter were not encouraging on the prospects of driving a reindeer herd through it. Though comparatively low and wide, the pass was a natural funnel for devastating zephyrs that howled down from the Arctic Ocean, and were sucked through the niche in the Brooks Range by variations of air pressure.

As if on cue, a blizzard ripped through the herd as it approached the pass. The wind swirled among the ranks of men and beasts alike for three long days, threatening to break up the drive. Bahr and his men fanned out on either side of the reindeer herd to make doubly sure it did not reverse directions under the onslaught of the polar blasts. The entourage tended to close up as the deer bucked the fury of the wind. It was an odd way to spend

Christmas, 1930, with Bahr, sometimes known as "The Arctic Moses", leading animals symbolic of the celebration that observed the birth of Christ.

Peter Wood, on skis, led the way into Howard Pass, with Bahr behind him coaxing a double team of sled deer as an enticement to the herd that trailed behind. On the flanks of the line walked Sam Segeok and Theodore Kingeak, who had rejoined the drive after spending most of the summer at their homes. (They had apparently settled their salary problems.) Edwin Allen, proving very dependable, was farther back, as was Tommy Wood, Peter's younger brother, trailwise and tough. Bringing up the drag and escorting the sled deer were Nilluka and West. Assisting them was another Lapp, Tom Nakkala, who was wracked with coughing spells brought on by an attack of pleurisy. The Fergusons' five dog teams and their mushers brought up the rear — the dogs hauling heavy loads characteristic of the Malemute strain. Andrew Bango, and another Lapp, Johnny Rouna, who had pitched in temporarily, decided to leave the drive before reaching the mountains.

As the storm raged, the drivers were lucky if they could proceed for four hours out of every day. Whipped by driven snow, the sled deer's eyes had to be cleared of frozen rime repeatedly before they could go on. Men vigorously rubbed their faces to prevent frostbite. Battered by the wind that spilled over Howard Pass in an unceasing assault, the herdsmen finally reached the north end of the

notch. They needed no orders to push the reindeer herd quickly down the treeless far slope to the meagre sanctuary of the valley of the Etivluk.

Bahr and his men made camp, putting up a single tent as a refuge from the wind. The trail boss rotated reliefs, keeping most of the men posted around the herd. He could not afford to lose the deer if, by some surge of adrenalin, the animals suddenly mustered a hidden reserve of strength to bolt back from this unfamiliar territory.

That night Bahr completed a four-page letter he had begun writing in the pass while waiting for the dog teams to catch up with the herd. He gave an account of the ordeal of the pass, and finished the letter in time to post it with the dog mushers dead-heading back to the Kobuk. Bahr's link with the outside world was now cut. The trail boss and his men were perched on a brink of the planet that was unmapped, and virtually untravelled by humans. Once he plunged into this trackless waste, Bahr could expect no supplies until he reached the shores of the Arctic Ocean. There would be no turning back for the members of the crew unless they chose to risk crossing the Brooks Range alone in the dead of the winter.

Bahr faced the same problems that had plagued him the first winter. Inevitably, every time a positive factor entered the picture, it was followed by a negative one. In this case, as the drive threaded its way down from the mountains, there was little forage, and no trees to supply firewood. Without forage,

the reindeer were increasingly restive and vulnerable to stampeding; and without wood to build fires, the men suffered much from the cold.

The temperature plunged to sixty-five below, making it impossible to move the herd more than a few miles a day, and as the drovers battled the cold, its omnipotence ordained Bahr's every thought. Travails of leadership, accentuated by problems of bitter conditions, began to tug at Bahr from all sides. His countrymen continued to chaff over his strategy to push the reindeer rather than to coax them along with sleds as forerunners. In addition, West, Nilluka, and Nakkala were disturbed because Bahr would not give the herd a mid-day break. They claimed Bahr's failure to order such a rest period weakened the deer.

Peter and Tommy Wood were turning out to be superlative workers as far as Bahr was concerned, yet Tommy irritated Andrew because he kept pestering the trail boss to have his family join him. Bahr wrote: "Thom Wood is mighty good man, but he don't want to stay if family is not along, but he got big family that will be too much bother for us."

Much of Bahr's judgement was now predicated on fear: fear of the unknown, and fear of obstacles that could be flung at him from unexpected sources. These, in turn, invoked the need for either lightning-quick decisions, or those requiring solemn judgement and long-range planning.

The trail boss and his men had to almost literally feel their way along the Etivluk, broaching the ever-

present pall of fog created by the body heat of the herd. The cold settled on the men like an invisible strait-jacket, crimping their efficiency until every chore took ten times the normal effort.

The bitter cold was all-pervasive in its influence. It dictated the clothes a man wore. It decreed what he would carry with him. It commanded where and how far he would go. It prescribed how long he would be gone. It directed the use and care of his equipment. Deadening cold was exactly that: it numbed exposed flesh, it stopped the flow of water, it petrified wood, it encumbered the movement of animals.

The more prolonged the cold, the more depressing it was. Bahr was as much subjected to its effects as anyone else, but still was forced to render decisions. He set up the work schedule whereby he dispatched men to keep watch on the herd during the nights when the mercury hit rock bottom and gelid conditions were at their worst. Bahr's most constant fear, day-in and day-out, was that a caribou herd would trek past his animals and draw them off into the snow-shrouded hills.

The herd dogs at such times were indispensable for staving off inroads of caribou. The dogs were the eyes, ears, and nose of the herders in the long darkness of the winter's night, and they were the drovers' legs during the short twilight of the Arctic day. Without canines to make the men aware, bands of caribou that numbered up to twenty thousand could quickly envelop and absorb the reindeer

herd as they passed by. Even with his knowledge of the dogs' capabilities, it was difficult for Bahr to shake this worry that plagued him day and night. One pass, and all would be lost.

Bahr strived to conserve rations as the expedition progressed down the Etivluk. The colder the weather, the more food the men needed. This was a natural result of the basic requirements needed to sustain life itself. Low temperatures meant the body demanded that much more fuel to maintain its basic ninety-eight degrees of warmth. Since Bahr had absolutely no indication of when he would again receive supplies, he was forced to ration food in anticipation that he might not be able to restock the larder until he reached the Arctic Ocean. And in so doing he further aggravated the drovers.

A trail drive, like an army, travels "on its stomach", and a leader such as Bahr felt the pressure when his men were not getting what they considered to be proper food. Not only was there not enough of the staples, but Bahr had taken it upon himself to be the chef. With the limited fuel along the Etivluk, most of the food was only half-cooked, and definitely not conducive either to good digestion or high morale.

Bahr was accustomed to rough fare, as were the drovers. However, they were not as stoic about it as he was. The gripes of the men had just started to peak in intensity when relief was accorded by improved conditions. The herdsmen began to spot and cut alder, willow, and cottonwood as they

worked their way down from the lofty highlands of the Brooks Range. It took them a month to reach the Colville River from the pass. They proceeded along the larger river, which flowed directly east parallel to the Brooks Range. Here pieces of driftwood were seen poking up through the snow. The men sequestered these scraps and sticks in their packs during the day and brought them to camp at night. Consequently, along with wood cut for the purpose, they could build a fire intense enough to cook *hot* meals and produce enough heat to dry out their clothes.

February 1931 arrived with Bahr's ice-encrusted group toiling resolutely along the Colville. Their slow progress caused Bahr to fret over yet another problem: the female deer were pregnant and he could foresee that his goal of reaching the Arctic Coast by fawning time was fast slipping away.

The expedition bucked the elements along the river for the entire month of February before a break came. An airplane, seemingly coming in from nowhere, landed almost at Bahr's feet on March 9. Pilot Joe Crosson had been on a mercy flight carrying diphtheria anti-toxin north to Barrow when he spotted the herd. When he reached Barrow, he wired Alfred Lomen and asked him if he could be of any assistance while he was in the area. Lomen wired back that he would pay \$300 for a letter from Bahr.

Crosson would have done the favour for free, but when he stopped to consider the risk of landing his

plane where the dangers of ice hummocks or overflow might go unnoticed until it was too late, he accepted Lomen's generous offer. The pilot found the trail of the herd on his return flight. He followed it for forty miles in a northeasterly direction along the Colville before he sighted Bahr's camp in a draw opposite the mouth of the Killik, a tributary of the larger river, and landed.

The first words of the herders who approached him were to ask for more food. Tommy Wood said: "We are out of everything except coffee and fruit. We must have grub soon."

Bahr soon snowshoed up to join the others and Crosson explained his mission. He told the foreman the Lomens wanted a personal note from him as to what his needs were, if any. The pilot waited for about ten minutes while Bahr shuffled the pencil and paper back and forth in his hands, but did not write a word. Since the temperature was forty below zero, the motor of the plane had to be left running, which in turn, was burning up the aviator's precious fuel supply. Crosson told Bahr he had to write something, and walked away from the old-timer, figuring his presence may have been intimidating the Lapp. Bahr fumbled around and at last scribbled a short note and handed it to Crosson, unfinished. It read:

Dear Alfred I am in a hurry We are here now at the Burning coal mine our herd are all play out has been not much feed no mos[s] but I don't know farther down. We would like

mak[e] Kubarok [Kuparuk] on the coast this spring if can We would need grub to be landet to mouth of Colville or to Kobaruk on the coast but we get not cha[n]ce to get our selves. You have to see where and how you get us groub for whole summer and landit to East side of Colville mouth Kubaruk we had

[A. Bahr]<sup>2</sup>

The pilot snatched the note from Bahr's hands on the run and took off with barely enough gas to return to his company's fuel cache at Bettles on the way to Fairbanks.

During the month following Crosson's visit, the drive maintained its slogging pace to reach the junction of the Anaktuvuk and Colville rivers on April 1. Bahr ordered a halt and decided to make camp for a much needed rest while he pondered the future. He was seventy-five miles from the mouth of the Colville River where it drained into the Arctic Ocean. Fawning season was only a few weeks away. The trail boss knew that once that occurred the drive would be stalled for almost two months until the young ones were strong enough to travel. Bahr calculated he would rest briefly before pushing the heavily laden females as far as he dared before the fawns came.

The Fairbanks manager of the company that employed Crosson, Pacific Alaska Airlines, wired

Alfred Lomen who at that time was in Juneau serving as a legislator in the Alaskan territorial government. He advised Alfred about the pilot's visit to Bahr, and quoted the Lapp's needs, which were unspecific other than that he wanted "grub".

Alfred Lomen's expertise was being sought more and more by Bahr as the drive continued. The reason for this was that Alfred, for all intents and purposes, was now running the Alaskan part of the reindeer operation. He, like his brothers, was born in Minnesota where he had been a remarkable athlete in both baseball and basketball. He moved to Nome with his parents, where he became manager of the Nome *Gold Digger* newspaper. He also attended photography school for a year, and then joined up with Ralph and Harry in a combined drug store and photographic studio they opened in Nome.

Alfred was involved in the Lomen reindeer operation from its outset. He thoroughly learned all aspects of the business, from herding to butchering the animals. And though his election to the territorial house took him away from the firm for a part of the year, he retained his supervisory ties.

On receiving the wire from Fairbanks, Alfred relayed the request to Dan Crowley in Nome and asked him to take care of Bahr's wants. Being familiar with the drive's original manifest of supplies, Crowley made mental evaluations of what the men might need, and acted accordingly. He journeyed to Fairbanks where he arranged for a plane

and the same pilot to fly back to the drive. Dan assembled the usual staples such as flour, canned milk, coffee, tea, baking powder and soda, sugar, salt, and canned vegetables and fruit, which, to save weight, he removed from boxes and repacked in sacks. Even then the total added up to one thousand pounds.

Crowley and Crosson took off from Fairbanks on April 9. The pilot had last visited the herd a month earlier, so he realized that a considerable amount of guesswork would be required to figure out its location now. Crosson put the plane down at Bettles after a two-hour flight and topped up the fuel tanks. He took off again and followed the John River to its headwaters.

The John issued forth from the Endicott Mountains, a rugged barrier that made up a part of the Brooks Range. A heavy layer of clouds embraced the mountain tops and held Crosson below four thousand feet. Undeterred by this difficulty, the pilot navigated through a maze of canyons and peaks, and passed over a low divide to the headwaters of the Anaktuvuk River. The low ceiling continued to inhibit the flight as they flew north toward the Colville. Finally, the clouds dissipated over the northern plain. Bright sunshine smiled down and the land beneath sparkled under its rays. Soon they spotted caribou tracks, and then caribou, but no reindeer. Crowley was able to distinguish between the two animals from the air by the tracks they made. Caribou were free-wheeling

and were widely spread out, whereas the reindeer herd was bunched up and would often as not show ski tracks next to it.

Based on the number of days since Crosson had visited the drive and the average miles-per-day a herd that size could travel, Crowley estimated that they would find the reindeer about forty miles down the Colville from where Crosson had last seen them. Crosson used Crowley's rough calculations as a guide and cut straight across to the Colville from the Anaktuvuk. He gambled on saving a few miles, and precious fuel. The attempt was a worthy one, but as is often the case with a gamble, it was unsuccessful. There was no camp, or reindeer, in sight. The frustrating question that now faced them was which way to turn: up or down the Colville? Crosson left the decision up to Crowley; as far as Crosson was concerned, he could burn just so much fuel and no more. When the gas gauge reached a certain level, he would have to turn back, no matter what his client wanted. There was no room for a miscalculation.

Dan did some quick figuring and told the pilot to follow the Colville upstream to the point where he had landed a month earlier. They proceeded as slowly as the plane could fly in order to save fuel and found the campsite vacated.

Crowley was now faced with yet another decision. Should they retrace their flight down the Colville or turn around and fly northeast, cutting off an elbow of the river in hopes they would pick up the

herd farther down? Dan decided to stay with the river. Crosson would let him know the limits of the fuel.

Crowley fretted, wondering if he had missed the reindeer. From the air they looked like caribou, but their tracks would not lie. Scanning the valley floor, Crowley told the pilot to fly down the Colville as far as he dared. Crowley later wrote: "Having gone seventy-five miles downriver, we picked up the trail. It resembled a white ribbon winding along the river. Now down on the river and then up on the bank, as the deer left the river to feed on the moss which grows along the banks."<sup>3</sup>

A few minutes after spotting the tracks, they saw the herd on a small creek about a mile from the Colville. Next, three tents pitched at the mouth of the Anaktuvuk came into view. Three reindeer sleds left no doubt about whom the tents belonged to. The pilot made a perfect landing on the Colville, coming to a stop right in front of the camp. It was ten o'clock in the morning, or five hours and forty-five minutes out of Fairbanks.

Six hours of daylight were required for the return flight. Since the days were already quite long, this afforded Crowley enough time to learn from Bahr his plans with regards to the coming summer. There was no telling when contact with the drive would next be made, although the Lomens had agreed to supply the men by plane if it had to be done that way. The expense for this was high, and the drive could not incur costs unen-

dingly if the project was to remain profitable. Canada had made good on its second payment of eighty-two thousand dollars but the longer the herd was in the field, the heavier was the drain on the company's coffers.

While the crew unloaded the supplies from the plane, Crowley and Bahr adjourned to a tent for tea. The Lapp gave his visitor a rundown on the progress of the drive. He said the herd could cover only a few miles a day at best, and on some days did not gain an inch. He reassured Crowley that he would reach the Arctic coast within three or four months, even if he had to push the deer in the summer to do it. Once there, he intended to purchase enough supplies from local traders to hold over the expedition until the ice went out and trading vessels appeared.

Crowley discovered the crew was not so short of grub as he had been led to believe from the tone of the earlier airplane message. Bahr told him he had carefully rationed the food, particularly the staples. This meant there was enough left to last another month without Crowley's additions. Also, three moose had been killed only the day before his arrival, so the drive was well stocked with meat.

However, even the moose meat and the food brought in by Crowley did nothing to assuage the declining morale of the herdsman, who continued to gripe about their situation. In his report to Alfred Lomen, Crowley said: "... Andrew confided to me that he was much dissatisfied with Nil-

luka and West and would discharge them if he could get men to take their places.”

Dan Crowley did not hear any complaints directly from the men, but Bahr was with him most of the time, making it difficult for them to speak freely. When it came time for him to leave, just as Crowley was about to step onto the plane, Tom Nakkala, one of the Lapp herders, stepped forward. Citing ill health, he asked to go back with the plane. This was all right with Bahr and Crowley, and since the aircraft had been lightened by one thousand pounds, the pilot had no objections. Once Nakkala was aboard and the plane had taken off, he spoke his mind about Bahr's handling of the herd. His complaints reflected the thinking of the other Lapps, West and Nilluka, with a few more gripes added to the original ones. Crowley wrote:

Tom thinks in driving this past winter the deer were pushed too hard at the start. He says as a rule they would commence the drive long before daylight and keep the herd moving until dark, never stopping at noon to allow them to eat. Also the path followed by the deer was not nearly as straight as it would have been if lead deer were used.

Nakkala also complained that the sleds made in Seattle were fifty pounds heavier than those usually crafted by the Lapps, which, he felt, put an abnormal burden on the draft animals.

These factors were partially ascribed by Crowley

as the reasons the drive was behind schedule. The venture was originally estimated to take from eighteen months to two years. It was now April 1931; the drive had been en route for fifteen months and had covered a distance, as a crow flies, of only two hundred and fifty miles. This left Bahr and his men still five hundred air miles short of their destination on the Mackenzie River.

After Dan returned to Fairbanks, he sent his report to Alfred Lomen with an estimate of how much longer the expedition would take. “It is doubtful if the drive can be completed *next* winter,” he wrote. The herd he estimated to be at about three thousand deer.

Lomen stoically accepted the fact that the herd would not reach the Mackenzie before the winter of 1932–1933, and forwarded Crowley's sobering observation to Finnie in Canada.