Reindeer Drive

George W. Scotter

How quickly would you agree to drive 3,000 reluctant reindeer along the rim of the arctic from western Alaska to the eastern shore of the Mackenzie River Delta, a distance of 2,600 km? (1625 mi.) How quickly would you agree if you were told the gamble would be entirely yours and that you would be paid only for the animals that were delivered safely? In 1929, Carl Lomen, "The Reindeer King of Alaska", made just an agreement with Canadian government officials.

Why was such a trek even thought of? The government of Canada was anxious to establish a herd of reindeer in the north. Its main objectives were to supplement the dwindling wildlife resources and to lay the foundation for an industry intended to improve the economic conditions of the Eskimos on the Mackenzie Delta.

Before 1929, the influx of traders and the introduction of firearms to the Arctic had seriously reduced the great herds of Barren Ground caribou which formed the principal basis of the Eskimos' subsistence. The scarcity of caribou forced them to depend on trapping in order to buy food and other necessities. The Eskimos' welfare varied greatly depending on the fluctuating supply of fur-bearing animals and the price of pelts.

The government of Canada placed Erling Porsild, a young Dane, in charge of reindeer grazing investigations in Alaska and northern Canada. Accompanied by his brother Robert, he surveyed winter grazing conditions for reindeer along the west and north coasts of Alaska and Canada, from Nome in Alaska to Aklavik in the Mackenzie Delta. Travelling by canoe, dogteam, and foot, they completed the survey during 1927 and 1928.

As a result of this survey and other recommendations (such as those by the 1919 Royal Commission on the Reindeer and Musk-ox) reindeer, which were important in the economies of various parts of northern Europe, Asia, and Alaska, were to be introduced to the Mackenzie Delta to improve the Eskimos' welfare. Lomen, called the "Reindeer King of Alaska" because of the large herds of animals owned by the Lomen Company, agreed to drive the reindeer from the Kotzebue Sound region, in western Alaska, to northwestern Canada; he undertook this drive even though it was specified that he would be paid $65 per head only for animals delivered safely into corrals near Kittigazuit, on the east side of the Mackenzie Delta. The reindeer he sold to Canada were descended from a few Siberian animals brought to Alaska in the late 1800s.

Andrew Bahr, a Laplander past 60, was hired from retirement in Seattle to lead the expedition through unmapped and unsettled country. He had gained a lifetime of knowledge about reindeer in his native Lapland and as an employee of Lomen in Alaska after the latter acquired his first herd in 1914. The entire drive was to be north of the Arctic Circle. Skeptics made the gloomiest forecasts.

In October, 1929, Andrew Bahr, at left, was preparing for the reindeer drive toward the Mackenzie Delta. With him in this picture are Frank Dorbandt, a noted Alaska pilot; Mrs. A.E. Porsild, wife of the Canadian representative in the purchase; Alfred Lomen, "Reindeer King of Alaska", and Dan Crowley.

Preparations for the great drive started in the summer of 1929. Fur clothing, mukluks,[1] sleds, harnesses, and other equipment were acquired. Then, during November and December, a herd of about 3,450 reindeer—2,900 cows, 300 bulls, and 250 steers for draught purposes— were carefully chosen. Erling Porsild represented the Canadian government and supervised the selection to ensure that only the best stock were included.

With the herd selected, it remained to establish a route before the drive could be initiated. Erling Porsild urged that a coastal route be followed because he knew from experience gained in 1927 that it was feasible. He was convinced that a short-cut through the Brooks Mountain Range would be impractical during both the summer and winter because of deep snow, forested river valleys, insect pests, and difficult communciations.

Andrew Bahr had no personal experience of the wood country along the upper Kobuk River, the mountainous terrain in the Brooks Range or the north shore of Alaska; nor had he ever visited the west coast of Alaska, Porsild's preferred route.

Bahr, however, insisted that the route through the Brooks Mountains was much shorter, that it provided better grazing conditions, and that it posed no danger from other herds of "domesticated reindeer"; he also pointed out that if the coastal route were followed it would be necessary to bypass several native herds which, if encountered, would attract stock from the imported herd.

Porsild's opinion was that this danger of attrition was real but not insurmountable; he felt that the better travelling conditions, the locations of trading posts and native villages,

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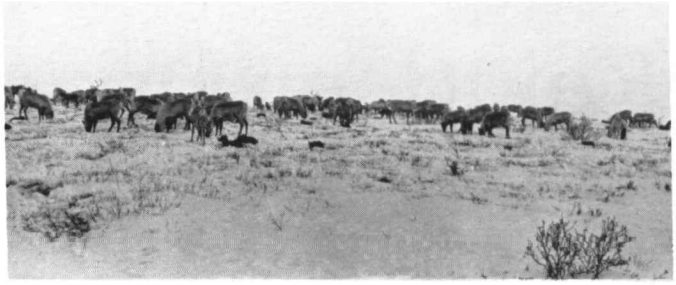
[1] *Mukluk* is an Eskimo word for a kind of boot made of seal, caribou or reindeer skin, usually lined with fur, and worn by Eskimos.

A.E. Porsild, left center, who recommended the establishment of an experimental reindeer herd in Canada, and Andrew Bahr, right center, at the end of the journey in March 1935.



Part of the reindeer herd at Kittigazuit in May, 1935, during the fawning season. Fawns are lying down in the snow. Although fewer than 3,000 reindeer were delivered at Kittigazuit in March, the fawn crop bolstered the herd to more than that number.

better communications and the greater ease with which provisions could be obtained along the coast more than offset the disadvantage posed by the longer distance to be travelled.

On December 26, 1929, 12 men, led by Andy Bahr, left the settlement of Napaktolik and started to drive the herd northeast to the mountains, which was the route preferred by Bahr. Even before the drive was well underway, it appeared that the skeptics might be correct. Reindeer possess a strong homing instinct, and hundreds escaped to return to their home range. It was necessary to drive the main herd back along the trail to encourage the strays to rejoin. Shortly after the herd was reassembled, a roaring blizzard struck. With temperatures as low as -45° C, along with wind and snow, the herders and their dogs did what little they could to restrain the deer from breaking into small groups and drifting into the wind.

Faced with these conditions, Bahr's crew dwindled. Nevertheless, by spring they had reached the confluence of the Kobuk and Hunt rivers, approximately 175 km from the point of departure. At this point, they found summer travel impossible because supplies could not be transported over the wet, boggy tundra. Both the herd and herders were subjected most of the summer to the torments of myriads of mosquitoes, blackflies, and other insects. Hundreds of reindeer stampeded from the insects and were lost from the herd. Fortunately, the calf crop was sufficiently large to balance the loss.

The first chill of winter ended the insect plague but brought new problems. Extreme cold persisted for weeks and impeded progress to no more than a few kilometers a day. The slow pace of the drive offered ample opportunity for wild caribou to entice reindeer away from the herd. It was not an easy job for the herders and their dogs to keep the two groups apart. Moreover, a continuous vigil had to be kept to protect the herd from marauding wolves.

As the party led the herd over high passes of the Brooks Range, violent winds prevailed. Winter forage, especially lichens preferred by the reindeer, was often in short supply. After enduring much hardship, Bahr and his men finally negotiated the herd through the Brooks Range and started toward the Arctic coast. They felt a new surge of hope. Many of the difficulties and hardships of the past months were temporarily forgotten, and morale, which had deteriorated during the winter, was good.

Because the reindeer were in poor condition, they were allowed to rest between the Colville and Kuparuk rivers. Although approximately 300 reindeer had died from lack of food, the herd still numbered close to 3,000.

With no more mountain ranges to cross, Bahr thought his party could drive the herd another 640 km to the mouth of the Mackenzie by March, but that the deer would be too weak to cross until the following year. Then, however, misfortune struck again. During the calving season in the spring of 1931,

These reindeer, in the vicinity of Shingle Point on the Arctic Coast in 1933, were a part of the big herd making its way slowly eastward.

These children, wearing their native costume, were Laplanders whose fathers were employed to herd the reindeer after their arrival at Kittigazuit.

snow, sleet, rain, fog, and intense cold combined with poor forage to result in a very small calf crop. Many fawns were stillborn, others died from the cold, and some starved.

The herd was further reduced later that summer, while the drive was moving along the coast, near Foggy Island; at this time, a blizzard howled across the Arctic Ocean and hundreds of deer vanished. Because the men had little food, and because their mukluks were worn through, little attempt was made to recover the lost animals.

The rest of the summer was cold; vegetation growth was meagre, and the deer were so thin that they could not be eaten. By the end of the summer, the herd had shrunk to fewer than 2,000 reindeer.

This type of shelter was used by the reindeer herders on the winter range. This one was on the Upper East Branch. In the picture are Louis Brockhaye, Mrs. A.E. Porsild, and Mathis Hatta.

During the winter of 1931-32, Bahr, realizing that he could not execute the contract that year, took 800 reindeer and backtracked to recover the deer lost during the previous summer. Five months later, having collected 400 strays, he rejoined his men and the main herd only to find that almost the same number had been lost to marauding wolves and to starvation. His time and effort had been wasted.

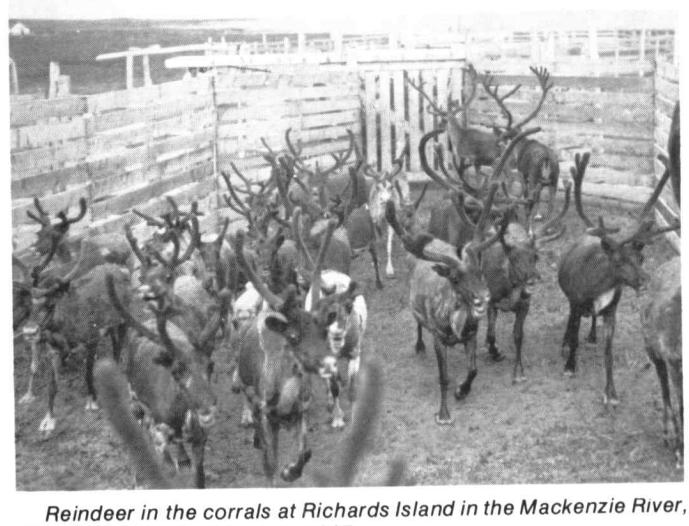
Not much help came from the coastal Eskimos. They mistrusted and were suspicious of the herders and their herd. But there were unselfish acts on the part of the Eskimos. Robert Porsild told of one such instance, when he was given a seal to feed his dogs although the Eskimo donors were almost without food.

By the summer of 1933, reports reached Lomen that Bahr was failing in mind and body and suggesting he should be replaced. Bahr, however, though he had been sick and near death during the previous winter, would not quit. He had not accepted the job for the money but rather to make a reality of his vision of what the reindeer would mean to the people of the Canadian Arctic. If delivery could be accomplished, a reindeer industry could be established to provide meat for food, skins for clothing, and year-long employment for the natives. For Bahr, it was a mission of mercy, an attempt to make the life of the native people a little bit easier. He wouldn't quit. He insisted that he would have to be fired before he would surrender the enterprise. Lomen stood by Bahr, voicing unlimited confidence in him and his judgment.

The greatest obstacle of all now lay ahead of the herd, the Mackenzie River Delta, a tangle of islands and river branches. It would be necessary to drive the herd from island to island for a distance of more than 80 km.

By early December 1933, the river was frozen and covered with enough snow to provide footing for the deer. The herdsmen waited anxiously near the west bank for a full moon to guide them to the conclusion of what now was a four-year trek. Then, the night before the herd was to cross, a howling Arctic gale whipped the snow from the ice surface. The full moon, for which Bahr had waited impatiently, now shone on glare ice. The reindeer could not be moved.

Two weeks later, snow again covered the ice. On January 3, 1934, the herd was started across the river toward Richards Island. Lomen received a report that implied that the long trek was over except for collection of the cheque. The herders travelled all day, all night, and all the next day only to



Reindeer in the corrals at Richards Island in the Mackenzie River, Northwest Territories, July, 1937.

find that their local guide was lost and was leading them in circles.

Because the men were tired and hungry, Bahr ordered a halt to brew tea. After this pause, he sent two men to find the herd; however, they found nothing but a trampled path in the snow. The herd had stampeded back to where they had last found food. The herders set out on skis and with dogs to overtake the herd, but after six hours gave up and returned to camp.

Next day, with the temperature at about -40° C, the herders began gathering the small bands of reindeer into one herd. Twenty-four hours later, their faces, hands, and feet frostbitten, they completed the roundup.

Bahr asked the local guide how far they were from Kendall Island, where he hoped to get supplies and a dog team to help haul equipment back to the mainland, and was told it was only three or four hours of travel. Twenty-four hours after they had started, exhausted from exposure and hunger, and with the dogs ready to quit, they reached Kendall Island.

While the drive was in progress, Erling Porsild continued to participate in the experiment. He conducted more grazing surveys which ranged to the central Keewatin District. Finally, an area east of the Mackenzie Delta was set aside as a grazing reservation for the experimental herd. This reserve, known as the Kittigazuit Reindeer Grazing Preserve, originally covered about 17,000 sq km and was later expanded to 46,000 sq km. Porsild selected three Laplanders, and they were brought to Canada to help with the herd and to erect buildings and corrals to accommodate the herders and reindeer.

The spring of 1934 found the herd still on the west bank of the Mackenzie River. The reindeer had been too weak to attempt a second crossing of the delta that winter.

Bahr, however, was still undaunted. The Eskimos across the river needed the deer as desperately as before, and with iron determination he was set upon delivering them.

The summer of 1934 was spent preventing the restless reindeer from returning to their home range, enduring hanging clouds of insects, and preparing for the next attempt to cross the delta. Government officials were becoming restless with the many delays, and Bahr realized that the drive could not fail again. Accordingly, a trail was staked, and camp was set up at the halfway mark. This time, a relief crew and hot meals for the herders would be ready when the herd arrived at the camp.

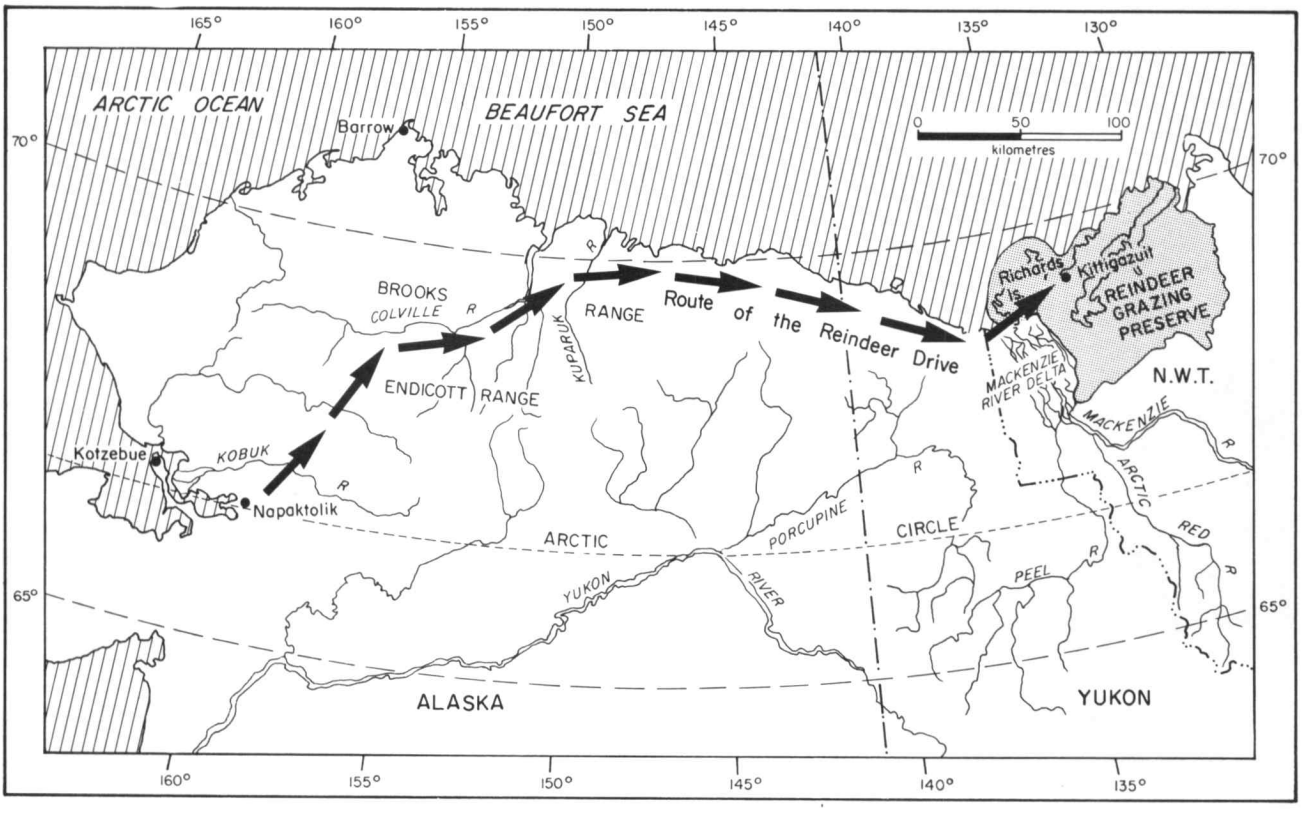
In December, 1934, five years after having left Alaska, the herd was again ready to attempt the delta crossing. The ice was covered by sufficient snow, and the full moon would supply the light required for travel. As Bahr prepared to order the drive underway, a freakish chinook wind moved across the north country. The warm air currents melted the snow cover, and once again glare ice delayed the drive.

Days passed, then weeks, then a month—all with no snow. If the crossing could not be made in February, another year would be lost, Bahr's doubts that he would live through another year in this harsh land stiffened his resolve to complete the drive at the first opportunity.

Suddenly, in mid-February, 1935, a heavy blizzard hit the delta. With snow cover on the ice, Bahr decided to move the herd onto the delta. Men and deer stamped through the white wilderness, moving forward hour after hour with little food and no rest.

After nearly 60 hours on the ice, the herd was nearing Richards Island, the first stopping place with suitable forage. The reindeer halted and collapsed in the snow from exhaustion. The shouting, prodding herders were unable to get them back to their feet.

Was the herd now to perish on the delta, so close to their



The approximate route of the great reindeer drive from Napaktolik Alaska, to Kittigazuit, Northwest Territories, 1929 to 1935.

destination? Then, with a sense of motivation seemingly as indomitable as Bahr's own, a few deer rose and moved toward the island; more followed. Soon the herd was eating for the first time in nearly three days. The smell of lichen had urged them on! Next day, many weak deer had to be carried on to the island on sleds.

After allowing the reindeer two weeks to eat and to regain their strength, the final leg of the journey was started. On March 6, 1935, 63 months after the start of the incredible journey, Andy Bahr led the herd into the corral at Kittigazuit. Bahr had delivered the reindeer to the promised land; he had proved the skeptics wrong.

Few people living in more temperate climates could appreciate the hardships Bahr and his herders endured. Winters were long, the cold intense, blizzards frequent, and for a few weeks they lived in complete darkness. During severe storms, the men were forced to allow the reindeer to wander unattended. They depended on their knowledge of the deer and the direction and duration of a storm to judge where the reindeer could be found.

In summer, travel was curtailed because the wet, boggy ground hampered movement of supplies. Swarms of insects plagued the herders and the animals. Unprotected by the effective repellents since developed the men had no escape from the tormentors. Food either was monotonously the same or scarce. Contact with any other people and communication with family and friends were infrequent.

It is virtually impossible to realize fully the physical and mental strain on Bahr himself, then in his late sixties. Most men a decade or two younger would not even consider such a journey across the top of the world.

It cannot be determined whether Bahr would have completed the drive in two winters and one summer had he followed Porsild's coastal route. We do know that in 1898 a smaller herd of reindeer had been driven from Teller, Alaska, to Point Barrow in one winter without loss of animals; the distance travelled was more than half that covered by Bahr and his men. However, it was the Mackenzie Delta that caused the delay and not the Brooks Mountains as predicted by Porsild.

While government officials tallied the reindeer, the jubliant herders pounded Andy Bahr on the back, and the Eskimos cheered and shook his hand. The final tally, including a few left on Richards Island, was 2,382 reindeer; 1,498 cows, 611 bucks, and 273 steers. Only 20% of the animals were marked, indicating that they had been among the original herd; the others had been born on the trail. Though the total herd was 618 short of the 3,000 animals Lomen had promised, the birth of approximately 800 fawns within a few weeks more than restored the deficit.

The long-awaited news of the completion of the drive was flashed to the outside world. Several newspapers carried featured stories on the difficult five-year, 2,600 km trek. The worn-out Lapp returned to Seattle, where an "Andrew Bahr Day" was declared and banquets were held in his honour.

After his return from the north, Erling Porsild became in 1936 the chief botanist in the National Museum of Canada, a position he held until 1967. His work on the taxonomy of northern plants was widely acclaimed, and he received many awards and honours, including a doctorate from the University of Copenhagen for his book entitled "The Vascular Plants of the Western Canadian Archipelago". An illustrated flora of the continental Northwest Territories which he co-authored was published in 1979. He died while visiting Vienna in 1977.

The reindeer herd now numbers approximately 9,000 animals; during the past 40 years, local residents have used thousands of other reindeer for meat and hides. The foresight of Erling Porsild and the dedication and endurance of Andrew Bahr made all this possible. ●

Brush Management Symposium Planned For Albuquerque

A symposium on brush management for Western rangelands will be held February 16, 1983, at the Hilton Hotel in Albuquerque, N. Mex., during the Society for Range Management's Annual Meeting.

Sponsored by New Mexico State University's College of Agriculture and Home Economics and the Society for Range Management, the symposium will bring together federal and state land management agency personnel, professional range managers, cattle producers, and industry representatives who will discuss the pro and cons and principles of brush management systems. The invited symposium speakers will contribute an original paper on selected brush management topics to be included in a proceedings of the symposium.

The Proceedings will be available at a later date for purchase from the SRM. For more information contact *Kir k McDaniel, NMSU, Box 31, phone 505-646-1191, Las Cruces, NM 88003.*

Range Improvements—Today and Tomorrow Special MAB-3 Session, Tuesday Afternoon, February 15 1983 SRM Meeting—Albuquerque

Session moderator Dean Thad Box will be joined by four speakers covering economic, social and cultural influences on the use of range improvement technology.

This special session is sponsored by the U.S. Man and the Biosphere Grazing Land Committee (U.S. MAB-3) as a part of their effort to encourage the exchange of expertise and technology found among natural, social and physical scientiests.—Jim Clawson, U.S. MAB-3 Secretary.

The Vegetative Rehabilitation Equipment Workshop (VREW) will be held in the Mediterranean Room of the Hilton Hotel, February 13-14, 1983. By identifying yourself with either VREW or the Society for Range Management, you can obtain convention rates. For reservations phone (505) 884-2500 Hilton Inn; 800-238-8000 Holiday Inn.

Security Clearance

February convention goers who plan to visit the Environmental and Animal Science Laboratories at Los Alamos must register for the trip by January 15. The early registration is needed to provide time for security clearances. The bus tour from Albuquerque will cost $15.