A WALK IN THE SNOW

BROOKS RANGE, ALLAKAKET AND FAIRBANKS, ALASKA · 1968–1975

On Grizzly Bears, Caribou Hearts and Such

The old-timer had been very serious in laying down the law that no man must travel alone in the Klondike after fifty below.

JACK LONDON, TO BUILD A FIRE

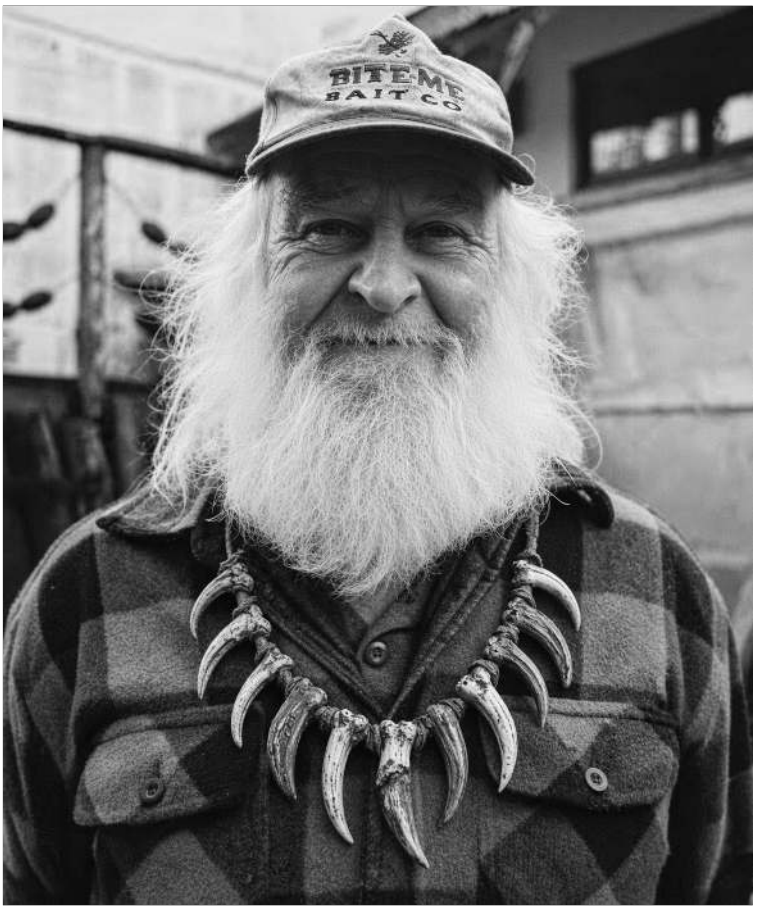
In the late 1960s Alaska was still new at being a state. It had joined the Union on January 3, 1959, and the whole of it held about three hundred thousand people, spread across a territory where most places could be reached only by air, by river, or on foot. North of Livengood, which was about where the road out of Fairbanks gave up, there was no road at all. Then, in March 1968, a well at Prudhoe Bay on the Arctic coast struck oil, and the rest of the country started paying attention. How to get that oil out of the Arctic, and who the land belonged to in the first place, would shape the next decade of Alaskan life.

Up in the Brooks Range, well beyond the end of the road, lived a family who had no need of it. Fred and his wife, the Meters, lived by hunting, dressed in caribou skins, and made their living from the country too. Fred guided big-game hunters, doctors from Florida who came up with their wives and went deep into the range after Dall sheep, for the heads. The family were also wildlife photographers, shooting sixteen-millimeter footage for a feature film about the herds, an hour-long movie called *Year of the Caribou*. Fred wore a necklace of claws from grizzly bears he had killed, which is the sort of thing that tends to hold an audience, and it was in that outfit that Daniel first met them, when they came to give a presentation at Berkeley High School.

They took in teenagers, too. The YMCA, where Daniel was working, had a program for boys and girls who had got themselves into trouble: their parents could choose juvenile hall, or a summer in the Brooks Range with Fred's family. The theory, which has been tried on teenagers in one form or another for as long as there have been teenagers, was that a few months of hard country would straighten them out. The family's lake was Wild Lake, a long, narrow enlargement of the Wild River on the south slope of the range, "walled in by mountains," as a Park Service survey put it, about two hundred and thirty miles north-west of Fairbanks by air. It had been a gold camp once. In 1904 a prospector named Jack Lamont found gold on a creek above it, and for a few years men did well: one claim on Spring Creek cleared twenty-two thousand five hundred dollars between 1904 and 1912.

The luck ran out in the usual way. A miner named Frank Smith worked a claim he called the Homebrew and took ten dollars out of it for a whole season's work, which is a better argument for homebrew than for mining. By the late 1950s, the Park Service's historian wrote, the lake had only one year-round household left, at its north end, and it was Fred's: "Fred, his family, and a sequence of young converts had come to Wild Lake as Thoreau had gone to Walden Pond."

In the summer of 1968, Daniel went north for the first time, with that year's teenagers. They arrived, he said, with suitcases full of pot, and whatever the Brooks Range was doing for their characters, they spent the summer "running around in the lake naked and smoking pot and fornicating." It is not recorded whether the parents were told. The household had other visitors that summer, and liked them less. In June 1968 a National Park Service team, sent to look over the central Brooks Range as a possible park, landed a floatplane on Wild Lake, and a bearded young man came after the taxiing plane in a rowboat, "to protest this



FRED METER

noisy disturbance of Eden," as the service's historian later described it. The team's own diary was briefer: he "does make it clear that airplanes are not welcome in this paradise."

The record does not say who was rowing. The same team found grizzly tracks and claw marks along the shores of Wild Lake, and the household, the Park Service noted, "discouraged hunters" at the lake itself, which sits a little oddly beside a summer of guiding Florida doctors after sheep, unless the sheep were somewhere else, which in the Brooks Range is entirely possible. The weather station at the north end of the lake recorded eighty-seven degrees that July, and seven inches of snow in September.

Daniel spent the summer on the hunts. He went up into the range with Fred and the Florida doctors after the Dall sheep. "I thought this was great," he said. He wrote home to his wife, Regina, about it, a whole bundle of letters that the family still has, and took pictures, and by the time he came back at the end of the summer the two of them had decided to go north with Fred's family themselves.

That fall he left his doctoral program at Berkeley and went to work in a can factory in Oakland, going around under the machines with a magnet, picking up the scraps from the making of Coke cans. On January 1, 1969, the family set out for Alaska. Alex was not yet two, and Regina was pregnant.

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In the winter of 1969, from January through April, Daniel and his family lived with the Meters in the Brooks Range, which Daniel put at a hundred and fifty miles north of the Arctic Circle. That far north, in the depths of winter, the sun

does not bother to come up at all for a couple of weeks around the solstice, and for weeks after that it barely clears the mountains.

They were not the only people busy in the range that winter. The state was building a road to the new oil fields in the most Alaskan way imaginable, bulldozing a track of packed snow north from Livengood through Bettles and over Anaktuvuk Pass to the Arctic coast. It was called the Hickel Highway, after the governor, and it worked splendidly until the spring, when it melted into a long ditch of mud and was abandoned. Governor Hickel himself left for Washington that January to become Richard Nixon's Secretary of the Interior. Alaskans, who are hard to impress with ice, gave the road other names: the Hickel Canal, the Hickel Ditch, and the Hickel Canoe Trail. At Anaktuvuk Pass, where the tractors came through the mountains, an observer watched the Nunamiut villagers stand silent as the machines went by, and wrote of them: "Their lives, and their children's lives, never to be the same." The weather that greeted the St. Johns was making its own point. Two days before they set out from California, the thermometer at the north end of Wild Lake read fifty below.

On January 2 it read fifty-one below, and for the first ten days of 1969 it did not once rise above ten below zero. Down at the Bettles airfield, forty miles south and five hundred feet lower, it was sixty-two below.

At the cabin there was no electricity. There was, on the other hand, a tremendous amount of time, and people filled it the way people always have in the dark, with stories. They also slept strangely. "Our dreams were extremely vivid," Daniel said. "Like you would have dreams that would be so hyper real that you would not believe." More than fifty years later he still remembered one about dolphins, which, a hundred and fifty miles north of the Arctic Circle, is quite an achievement.

The grocery store was the caribou herd. When it came through, the family would kill twenty-five or thirty animals and stack the carcasses outside the house, where the weather, which Daniel put at fifty to seventy below zero, turned the whole outdoors into a freezer. They thawed them as needed. On the wood stove a big pot stayed on the boil with every part of the animal in it, until the bones went soft. In the autumn there were always a couple of moose besides, which is a very great deal of meat, and some of it became jerky.

The secret, it turned out, was fat. Daniel had this from a scientist he called Stephenson, who had lived on meat alone among the Eskimos and found that lean meat by itself will make you ill. The man was Vilhjalmur Stefansson, an Arctic explorer who spent years with the Inuit of the Canadian Arctic before the First World War and came home a lifelong enthusiast for the all-meat diet. In 1928, to settle the argument, he and a companion ate nothing but meat for a full year under observation at Bellevue Hospital in New York.

The illness he warned about is real, and northern people have a name for it, "rabbit starvation," which manages to be alarming and faintly ridiculous at the same time. The cure is fat. So the Meters ate cups of tallow with their caribou. "And we were fine," Daniel said. Stefansson had learned it the hard way. In the winter of 1906, short of seal oil on the Mackenzie, his party lived on lean caribou, "and we would boil up huge quantities and stuff ourselves with it," he wrote, and went hungry anyway. "The symptoms that result from a diet of lean meat are practically those of starvation."

He claimed a further benefit for it, as the family explained it to him. Western people, he said, carry a whole ecology of bacteria that lives on sugar and grain and rots their teeth, and there was no money up there for dentists. Two or three months a year of nothing but meat killed the bacteria off. Their teeth did very well. Even cavities, he said, would heal. Modern dentistry may wish to see the data. Stefansson, for one, would have backed him. "I have noticed in my own case," he wrote in 1921, "that tooth decay which had begun before I went North has advanced less rapidly up there than it does in civilization." He had also carried a hundred and six Eskimo skulls back to the American Museum of Natural History and could not find a cavity in them that had not started with a broken tooth. Healing, admittedly, is a further step.

The one person the diet did not suit was Regina, who was pregnant and could not stom-



GRIZZLY BEAR DISCOVERS FRED'S MEAT STASH

ach it. They had brought along some dried fruit, and she used to take it outside to eat, so that nobody would get jealous, which tells you most of what you need to know about four months of caribou.

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The long nights that winter were full of grizzly stories, and the Meters had more reason than most to tell them, because they kept the bears around on purpose: the animals near the cabin were the subject of the film, not a problem so much as the cast. Daniel was careful to say that he never personally had a run-in with one, which in that household may have taken some doing. But that winter he heard the story behind Fred's necklace.

As the family told it, they were in the cabin one night, in total darkness, when the building began to move. They kept moose meat hanging from the log rafters, and a single hind leg of a moose can run to three hundred pounds, so it takes a good deal to shift one. Something outside was pulling at the meat hard enough to move the timbers of the roof. It was a grizzly, and it was hungry. Fred went out with a gun, fired, and could not tell whether he had hit it.

This, it should be understood, was the worst available outcome. A wounded grizzly, Daniel said, will take revenge on people; grizzlies "do not like to be tampered with." In his ranking of the animal kingdom, only one creature was worse: "the wolverine is the most vindictive creature." So the family went back inside and sat in the dark, not knowing whether there was now a wounded, angry and hungry bear on the other side of the wall. Then the roof began to move again. Fred went out and fired again, and again could not tell.

In the morning, in the thin band of twilight that passes for daytime up there, they found two grizzlies. One was an ordinary bear, insofar as a grizzly is ever ordinary. The other was old and wrong: a very large head on a body shriveled with starvation, and a damaged jaw, shot or broken at some point, so that it could not feed itself. That, Daniel said, was "the most dangerous kind of animal," because it was desperate. Fred took the claws off both of them and made himself the necklace.

In April 1969 the family came out of the range, more or less with the snow, which at the lake went from ten inches on the ground on April 10 to none at all by the 29th. Regina was about eight months pregnant, and a daughter was born that year. In September, in Anchorage, the state auctioned leases on the North Slope oil lands and took in about nine hundred million dollars



A MOST DANGEROUS KIND OF ANIMAL

in a single day. Alaska had found out what it was worth.

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They stayed in Alaska fifteen years. In the years after the Brooks Range, Daniel and Regina taught school, three of those years on the Pribilof Islands in the Bering Sea, among the Aleuts. The country changed around them. In December 1971 Congress settled the land claims of Alaska's Native peoples, forty-four million acres and nearly a billion dollars, the largest settlement of its kind in American history. In 1972 and 1973 a Ford Leadership Grant took Daniel and Regina to visit schools in Russia, in Siberia, and in England. The Pribilofs were the other end of Alaska from the Brooks Range: two small treeless islands in the fog of the Bering Sea, where the business of life for a century had been the fur seal. St. Paul, the larger, had four hundred and fifty people in 1970, nearly all of them Aleut, and a school of about a hundred and fifteen children, one of the biggest village schools in the state. The teachers, as a 1973 state booklet put it, found that their pupils needed some things more than others: "Learning that seals shot in the summertime sink, and in the wintertime, float, is much more important to them than learning the meaning of traffic signals."

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In the fall of 1973, Daniel and Regina were teaching together in Allakaket, a Koyukon Athabascan village on the Koyukuk River, sitting more or less exactly on the Arctic Circle. It was not a gentle place to spend a winter. Two winters earlier, in January 1971, the temperature at a pipeline camp called Prospect Creek, just north of the Arctic Circle, had reached eighty below zero, still the coldest reading ever taken in the United States, and at that point a thermometer is really just keeping score. The next day, the high in Allakaket was sixty-six below. That was the high. Hudson Stuck, the Episcopal archdeacon who mushed through in 1909, had been precise about the geography: at Allakaket, he wrote, "we are only two or three miles within the technical Arctic regions." His church had founded the mission there, St. John's-in-the-Wilderness, in 1906, and the village had grown up around it. By 1970 it had a hundred and seventy-four people, a hundred and sixty-eight of them Native, with a median age of about seventeen. The census counted thirty-seven dwellings and found that not one had full plumbing.

The school was a state school, opened in 1957 and run from an office on International Airport Road in Anchorage, and it stopped at the eighth grade. After that the village's teenagers left home for nine months of the year to board somewhere with a high school; Allakaket was one of the villages named in the lawsuit, filed in 1972, that set out to change that. Their first winter there was a cold one even by local standards. In February 1974 the village station recorded fifteen nights at fifty below or colder, and the warmest reading of the whole month was two below zero.

That October the Arab oil embargo put gasoline lines across the lower forty-eight, and America discovered that it was very short of oil at about the moment it remembered that Alaska was full

of it. The next month Nixon signed the act that let the oil companies build a pipeline eight hundred miles from Prudhoe Bay to the sea at Valdez. Construction began in April 1974, and Fairbanks, where the St. Johns had forty acres outside town, became a boomtown.

By November 1974 a construction worker in Alaska averaged thirteen dollars and forty cents an hour, and the chamber of commerce in Fairbanks was advising job seekers to bring two or three thousand dollars with them for food and lodging, since "housing for in-migrants is nonexistent." In September the pipeline's haul road reached the Arctic coast, "the first American highway to cross the Arctic Circle," some sixty miles east of Allakaket.

In the fall of 1974, for the second school year, they split up the work. Daniel had concluded that grade school was not his calling — "I don't think I was suited or patient to be a grade school teacher," he said — and in September he was hired as a Russian interpreter, which paid very well. So Regina took their daughter back to Allakaket to teach in its three-teacher school with friends of theirs, and Daniel and Alex stayed on the forty acres outside Fairbanks. While Daniel was away on the first part of the interpreting work, Nepali friends looked after Alex. The village had a new connection to the outside that year, and it came from space. NASA had launched a satellite, ATS-6, in May 1974, and the state borrowed time on it for an experiment in teaching by television. Allakaket was one of the experiment's sites and the northernmost of them all, more than a thousand miles from the southernmost, at Craig. Its dish looked at the satellite about three degrees above the horizon, so low that the engineers used the village as one of their yardsticks for the edge of the signal. Programmes ran through the school year, with live questions afterwards over a radio link, and the experiment's final report preserved one of those calls as its example: "Juneau this is Allakaket calling."

In December 1974, Daniel went back to Allakaket to stay with Regina and the children. The village station recorded sixty-five below that month, on a day when the high was fifty-seven below, and the sun was up for about two hours at the solstice. By then it was not the cold that worried them. They were weighing whether the village was still safe, because some of the men, Daniel said, would get hopped up and go running through the village on a snow machine, "shooting just randomly around." Of all the dangers of the far north, this is not one that tends to make the brochures.

In March 1975 he left again for the last three weeks of the interpreting, and when he came back there was a decision in front of them. The University of Connecticut had offered him a place as a doctoral student, along with the chance to go to Moscow as interpreter for a famous archaeologist's lecture series — "a full boat," Daniel called it. Regina liked teaching and wanted to keep at it.

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In the middle of April 1975, during a school break, the family left the village, and on the way through Fairbanks they stopped to see the Meters. It was dark, and the Meters had run out of food, which for people who lived by hunting was a problem with an obvious solution and, as it happened, one obvious volunteer. Fred had a bad leg and could not manage the snow. Daniel had an old Army .30-06. "I guess I was feeling kind of macho," he said.

They had spotted caribou, the early ones, south of Wild Lake and up on the cliffs, feeding the way caribou do at the tail end of winter, working down through the snow to get at the moss beneath. Daniel had his own description of the technique. "They're like drills," he said. The animals themselves would probably have described it differently. The word "caribou" comes, by way of French, from the Mi'kmaq *qalipu*, which means "snow shoveler."

He set off alone. "It was black, it was dark," he said, which covers it. He had been duly warned about the grizzlies, and about the wolves, of which there were a lot, and about how far a bear can smell blood, which, according to the state's biologists, is farther than a dog can. He walked maybe five miles down the lake and climbed the hillside, and there, a very long way off, were the caribou, about six of them standing together.

The distance was four or five hundred yards, and he did not think much of his rifle. By his



HE SET OFF ALONE



DAN KILLS AN ELK

own estimate the shot "was not very promising to hit anything." He fired into the group anyway, on the reasonable principle that if you cannot hit one caribou you may at least hit one of six. "And sure enough," he said, "I did, and I got one."

That was the easy part.

And I went up there ... very steep and up in the snow. And there was one, and it was a female. And it was, they're too heavy to carry. But I took out a heart, and I took some haunches ... legs, and I brought those back. But it was in the dark.



THE EASY PART

It was getting darker all the time. An adult female caribou weighs something like two hundred pounds, which is why most of her had stayed on the hill. Behind him was a caribou, or most of one. Ahead of him were five miles of lake. Somewhere out there, or so he had been assured, were the bears.

I was just paranoid carrying this dripping animal meat and heart, I would say five miles to the, and fortunately, I made it, but I just, every little noise attracted my attention.

He made it back to the Meters' house with the heart and the haunches, which, in a household that had run out of food, is the best kind of arrival there is. The Meters' film had opened by then. In October 1974 *Year of the Caribou* was shown in San Francisco, a hundred minutes long in the version *Variety* reviewed, and the paper called it "essentially a record of one year out of the 10" the family had spent living on the edge of the Alaskan wilderness.

In 1975 Allakaket became an incorporated city, and in the autumn of 1976 a court settlement promised a high school in any village with fifteen children of high-school age, so that the teenagers of places like Allakaket would no longer have to leave home to finish school. The family stayed in Alaska nine more years. In June 1977 oil began to flow down the pipeline from Prudhoe Bay, and in 1984, after fifteen years in Alaska, "working in the villages and so forth," as he put it, Daniel and his family went back to Massachusetts. They took with them three copies of *Year of the Caribou*, and the bundle of letters he had written home in the summer of 1968, the first summer he went north.

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