# NUNIVAK

NUNIVAK ISLAND, MEKORYUK AND BETHEL, ALASKA · AMHERST, MASSACHUSETTS · 1974–1985

*On Muskoxen, Marlin Perkins and the Long Way Home*

*The beach was well tracked by polar bears, but none of the party could discover any sign of reindeer or musk oxen, though the country seems to abound in the kind of food they require.*

JOHN MUIR, THE CRUISE OF THE CORWIN

In the middle of the 1970s Nunivak Island was one of the more out-of-the-way places in a state made almost entirely of out-of-the-way places. It lies in the Bering Sea about thirty miles off the delta of the Yukon and Kuskokwim rivers, a volcanic island of 1,632 square miles, roughly forty-eight miles by sixty-six, with some sixty cinder cones on it and no tree taller than a dwarf willow. Its people are the Cup'ig, who speak their own dialect of Yup'ik. Edward Nelson, who surveyed the Bering Sea coast for the Smithsonian in the 1870s, recorded them simply: "The Nunivagmut are the people of Nunivak island and the main land at Cape Vancouver." In 1880 a census taker counted 702 people in nine villages on the island. An epidemic in 1900 left one of those villages with four surviving families, and by 1970 everyone lived in a single village, Mekoryuk, on the north shore: 249 people, an airstrip built in 1957, and a mission church. Wien Air Alaska flew in from Bethel twice a week.

The island had been a federal wildlife refuge since 1929, and in the 1970s it was famous, in the small circles where such things are famous, for its muskoxen. Alaska's own muskoxen had been hunted out in the 1800s. Nelson heard a story on the Bering Sea coast about a dark, horned animal with fine thick fur that sank into the ground when it was killed, and concluded, "This undoubtedly refers to the muskox, which has been extinct for ages in the region where these people live." In 1930 the government shipped thirty-four muskoxen from Greenland to a farm at the agricultural college outside Fairbanks, and in 1935 and 1936 it turned the thirty-one survivors loose on Nunivak, chosen because it had grass and no bears or wolves. Nobody asked the Cup'ig. Every muskox in Alaska today is descended from those thirty-one.

The island had already run one experiment of the kind. Its wild caribou had been killed off after firearms reached it in the late nineteenth century, and in 1920 a trading company brought in domestic reindeer, which the government bought in the years around 1940 and handed to the islanders in 1970. The reindeer herd had peaked near thirty thousand in the early 1940s; in 1975 there were about three thousand, on what the refuge called "badly overgrazed" range. The muskoxen, on the other hand, had prospered.

There were more than five hundred by 1965. The state counted 534 in the winter of 1973, took no census at all in 1974, and reckoned that "at least 549 muskoxen were present on Nunivak Island in 1974." The refuge's own handout put the situation in a sentence: "The problem is they have done too well."

The animal itself has never been well served by its name. It is not an ox, being closer to the sheep and goats, and it does not smell of musk. The explorer Vilhjalmur Stefansson, who knew it well, complained that "the name is in a sense libelous of him, as it is in a sense deceptive to the reader," and tried, without much success, to get people to call it the polar ox.

What a muskox does have is a coat of fine underwool, which the Yup'ik call qiviut, and a single famous tactic: when the herd is threatened, the adults stand in a ring facing outward with the calves in the middle. Against wolves this works

beautifully. Against a man with a rifle it is the worst idea in the animal kingdom.

Far to the west, on the other side of the Bering Strait, there had been no muskoxen at all within human memory, and a Moscow biologist named Savva Mikhailovich Uspensky meant to change that. Uspensky, born in 1920, was an Arctic ornithologist and polar bear man, the author of some three hundred and fifty papers and the first chairman of the international working group on polar bears. In 1964 he had led the field work that showed Wrangel Island, off the coast of Chukotka, could support muskoxen. The opening came with détente.

On May 23, 1972, in Moscow, Richard Nixon and the Soviet leadership signed an Agreement on Cooperation in the Field of Environmental Protection, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service later wrote that it was this agreement that made an introduction of Alaskan muskoxen to Russia possible. The Soviets, the Service noted reassuringly, had "no plans to domesticate or hunt the animals."

The Canadians went first. Pierre Trudeau promised the Soviets some muskoxen during a visit in 1971, and in August 1974 Canadian crews caught seventeen yearlings on Banks Island. Three died, and on the night before the handover four more, according to the Soviet account, "mysteriously disappeared" in the middle of a protest by émigrés who did not want the Soviets to have any. Ten reached the Taymyr Peninsula after seven days in their cages, by way of Iceland, Moscow, Norilsk, Khatanga and finally a helicopter.

It was a start, but it was not a herd. The Americans were to send the next batch, from Nunivak, and the people who would arrange it included Uspensky and his colleague Vadim Tarkov; Peter Lent of the cooperative wildlife research unit at the University of Alaska; the refuge men Calvin Lensink and Jerry Hout; and two interpreters.

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In the fall of 1974, Daniel was living with Alex on the family's forty acres outside Fairbanks. Regina had taken their daughter back to Allakaket to teach for a second year, and Daniel had been taken on, as he put it, for "that Russian interpreting in September." He had been studying Russian since he was nineteen, when he made it his major, and had gone on, in his words, "to a doctorate in Berkeley in Russian." "They needed a field interpreter," he said, "and I was handy because I had studied a lot of Russian." It paid. "They paid me very well," he said. While he was away, Nepali friends of the family looked after Alex.

This is how Daniel explained the whole business, years later. "Okay," he began, "the musk oxen happened this way."

> *President Nixon, 1974, signed some environmental agreements with the Russians. and they were having to do with the Arctic areas since so much of Russia was in the Arctic and Arctic animals and what he agreed to with the Russians was that in exchange for a certain number of Blackfoot ferrets, which they could be used because the American ferret was on the endangered list and they didn't dare experiment with them, so they had gotten from the Russians these close cousins of the ferret.*

The record agrees with him about the animals, if not the calendar. The agreement was signed in 1972. Nixon went back to Moscow in the summer of 1974 and reaffirmed it, adding a promise of reserves for "protecting valuable plant and animal genetic strains," and on August 8 he went on television and resigned. By the time the survey began in September, the muskox diplomacy of the United States was in the hands of Gerald Ford, who had other things on his mind. The ferrets were real too.

America's black-footed ferret was so rare that only nine were ever available to the government's breeding program at Patuxent, in Maryland, and the program had a hard lesson in what experimenting on them could do: a distemper vaccine that was safe in domestic ferrets killed four of the six black-footed ferrets it was given to. So the Service bred stand-ins, first domestic ferrets and then the Siberian, or steppe, polecat, the black-footed ferret's nearest relative, which it greatly resembles.

Then he told the Russian side of it. In Daniel's telling the muskoxen had been gone from Siberia for two hundred years, and the reason was guns. "When the whalers went to the Chukchi area, the Beaufort Sea," he said, "they traded firearms and

of course the Chukchi proceeded to eliminate all the muskoxen who were easy because they formed circles around their young." The theory was Uspensky's, as Daniel told it, and so was the remedy.

> *He concluded that getting rid of the muskoxen left an ecological niche in Siberia because these muskoxen were feeding on moss and so forth and they were part of the ecology and then they were eliminated. He made it his life mission to fill in this ecological niche by taking Alaskan muskox.*

Two hundred years was the official figure of the day. The Fish and Wildlife Service's own report of 1975 said that, "Adapted to all predators except man, muskox had vanished from Siberia almost 200 years ago." Science has since moved the date back a good deal, to about two thousand years for the last of them on the Taymyr. The whalers and their rifles were real enough.

John Muir, sailing those waters on a revenue cutter in 1881, noted that the trading schooners and the whalers alike carried whiskey and rifles to trade for ivory, whalebone and furs, and on the Siberian side the Chukchi's old trade fairs declined once American whalers began landing goods on the coast. The rifles fit Alaska's lost muskoxen, gone by the 1860s, rather better than Siberia's, though Stefansson saw the same thing happen on Banks Island in Canada, where he found bleaching skeletons and blamed hunters newly supplied with rifles.

Uspensky himself, Daniel said, came of a distinguished family, the grandson of a famous Russian writer. The Russian biographies make his father an artist at the State Historical Museum and his grandfather a professor of medicine who founded Moscow's first ear, nose and throat clinic, which is distinguished in a different way.

In September 1974, Daniel was in the field with the Soviet visitors. For a month they went to look at Alaska's herds, "all over Alaska in helicopters and other kinds of planes," he said, "like this kind of plane that was a sea plane. It would land in the sea." There were four or five places in Alaska with muskoxen by then.

One was on the North Slope, in what he called the Arctic Wildlife Reserve and the maps then called the Arctic National Wildlife Range, where fifty-one Nunivak animals had been let go near Barter Island in the spring of 1969 and more the next year; thirty-eight of the first batch survived their first weeks, and by 1976 the Service could find thirty-five. Another was Nelson Island, just across the strait from Nunivak, which had forty-four in 1973. But the heart of it was Nunivak, "which is off the coast of Bethel in the Bering Sea," as he described it, "a volcanic island about 75 miles long with a village of Yupik Eskimos."

The interpreter's job was not only Russian. The visitors were going to have to keep these animals alive at the far end of the world, so they talked with every veterinarian they could find, and Daniel had to have the vocabulary. "I had to study up on like parasitology," he said, "all the terms in Russian," down to which worms infected the animals' nostrils, and what feed they should get. Parasitology is not, as a rule, where the study of a language begins.

On Nunivak he went out with Uspensky to see where the animals lived in winter, and that trip is in the record. The Service's photo report of the transplant says that in the fall of 1974 Uspensky and Tarkov visited the island "to observe Alaskan muskox on their ranges and firm up details of the spring transplant," and under a photograph by the refuge manager, Calvin Lensink, it says: "Uspensky and interpreter Dan St. John checked sand dune areas for signs of muskox use."

Daniel's own explanation of why the dunes mattered could have come out of the same report. The island was "perfect for muskoxen," he said, "because it's volcanic and it has these cliffs where the wind, usually the snow covers everything for muskoxen to eat so they can only find the certain moss that they eat where the sandbanks have been blown by the wind." The report put it this way: "Deep and crusted snow confines muskox to limited areas along cliffs, sand dune areas, or mountain tops where winds sweep the vegetation free of snow."

The state biologist did the arithmetic. Of the 4,500 acres of dunes that made up the herd's favorite winter range, he wrote, "less than one-half may be available," and the whole of the island's usable winter habitat might not exceed four thousand acres, for five hundred and fifty

animals. The report added, in the manner of government reports everywhere, that the dunes were vulnerable to erosion. On that point the muskoxen were not consulted either.

In the winter of 1974, Daniel was waiting for the second half of the job. On November 12 a great storm "created havoc along the Bering Sea coast," in the words of the refuge staff at Bethel, from Nome south to Nunivak, and the spring that followed was colder than usual, with more snow on the ground. Eleven days later Gerald Ford met Leonid Brezhnev at Vladivostok, on the Soviet Pacific coast.

According to the Soviet ambassador, Ford had proposed the place partly because of a documentary he had watched at the Soviet embassy about tigers in the Ussuri taiga, which suggests that détente owed something to wildlife films. In December, Daniel went back to Allakaket to stay with Regina, taking Alex. "And then I had to leave in March," he said, "to do that last three weeks, which was the pickup of the muskox."

In the spring of 1975, Daniel was on Nunivak Island for the pickup. The Fish and Wildlife Service's operation began on March 21, and its personnel list, typed up afterwards by Jerry Hout, includes him by name: "Dan St. John — Interpreter — On contract to United States Fish and Wildlife Service." The photo report calls him "Daniel St. John, interpreter from the University of Alaska." The list has a second interpreter, from the Department of the Interior; Daniel remembered an assistant interpreter he called Raya.

The two Soviet biologists flew in by way of Washington on March 25, and in Mekoryuk Uspensky learned to drive the snowmachine he would use in the roundup. Snowmachines had come to that part of Alaska only in the 1960s, and by the seventies they had largely replaced the dog team. Twenty-two men of the island were hired for the work.

Television came too. The whole operation was filmed for *Wild Kingdom*, the nature program that Don Meier produced for the Mutual of Omaha insurance company, and its host, Marlin Perkins, came along in person, at the age of seventy. Perkins had run the Lincoln Park Zoo in Chicago and then the St. Louis Zoo, and had been on American television with animals since 1949. The crew was two cameramen and a snowmachine mechanic.

There was also a German television cameraman, a freelance photographer, a cameraman from KYUK, Bethel's Native-owned station, and Lael Morgan of *Alaska* magazine, who over that decade visited more than two hundred Native villages. For a village of about two hundred and fifty people it was a great many cameras. "It was all filmed by Wild Kingdom," Daniel said, "...so it exists on film." The refuge's annual report has a photograph of the Soviet delegation discussing the transplant with Perkins, and the caption names the man on the left: "Dan St. John (Interpreter)."

Mekoryuk in March was mostly snow. "The island was covered with snow," Daniel said, "so it was like all the houses just looked like pyramids of snow. And then you could see some of the windows and doors sticking out." The men of the village, by his account, were glad of the work. "Well, they demanded it," he said, "because ... in the winter they don't do too much. So they were hopped up to do something. And of course they were probably getting money."

He thought some of the first money went on drink. The money, at least, is in the record. The island part of the operation cost $12,000, about $223 for each animal caught, which was a hundred hours' pay at the federal minimum wage of the day, and more than $10,000 of it went on wages: about seventy thousand dollars in today's money. Hout counted it as "one beneficial effect," and his verdict on the crews was unreserved: "The men hired on the island did an outstanding job and required very little supervision."

In the last week of March 1975, Daniel was out on the island with the capture crews. He told it in one long breath:

> *And we would go 70 miles by snow machine sled to the southern end of the island. where the dunes were. And then we would, with a helicopter and a net, we would capture these, you*



DAN ST. JOHN, PETER LENT, SAVVA USPENSKY, VADIM TARKOV AND MARLIN PERKINS

*know, the yearling male and female muskoxen. And, you know, very rough journey. Slamming, you know, it was very volcanic, full of craters, you know, and then very rough riding.*

The Service's report fills in the method. There were two capture crews of six men each, one working the south side of the island out of the Service cabin at Duchikthluk and the other the west side out of Nash Harbor. The yearlings, "weighing about 150 pounds and having horns less than six inches long, were wrestled to the ground, hobbled, and lifted onto sleds." It was a job for everybody: "Dr. Tarkov did not stand at the sideline."

The two-year-olds weighed at least 250 pounds and carried proper horns, so they were netted, with a net the Cup'ig men made of nylon cord in the fashion of their seal nets. "This was safer," the report says, "for both the animal and the man." A grown bull, by the refuge's reckoning, stood five feet at the shoulder and weighed around six hundred pounds, and nobody proposed wrestling one of those. At the camps the animals waited in corrals that were nothing more than pits dug in the snow, the one at Duchikthluk about ten feet by sixteen, with walls six or seven feet high.

Between March 25 and April 5, the crews caught fifty-four muskoxen. Three days were lost to weather, and the actual catching, Hout wrote, took only seven. The residents of Mekoryuk, in the photo report's phrase, "were experts in muskox roundup techniques and quickly accomplished the mission." One animal died, a two-year-old female carrying a nearly full-term calf, probably of ketosis, and her hide, skull and fetus were given to the Russians for science. It was cold even by local standards. At Bethel, on the mainland, the thermometer stood at thirty-one below on March 22, and early April brought a storm with two inches and more of new snow a day.

Then the animals had to be hauled back to the village on sleds behind the snowmachines, which Daniel put at seventy miles and the record at "up to 50," and either way it was a long way to ride lashed to a sled. Each hauler carried burlap bags filled with hay "to be used as pillows to protect the fragile horns of the yearlings," and later foam rubber, and the best cushion turned out to be a folded reindeer hide. It did not entirely work.



THE NETTING CREW AT WORK

"The only unfortunate circumstance," Hout wrote, "was the number of yearlings with horns damaged either during the sled haul from the field to Mekoryuk or in the pen," and he gave the reason in a sentence that stands beside Daniel's "very rough riding" without any help: "The snow was exceedingly rough this year."

Raya, as Daniel remembered it, wanted to be out in the thick of it. "We weren't letting her go along on some of the rough spots," he said, "so she was anxious to go and photograph anyway."



LASHED TO A SLED FOR THE HAUL TO MEKORYUK

The film crew, meanwhile, was getting its footage, and not everyone was delighted with how. Hout noted that the operation would have cost less without "so many people involved" and the extra effort spent "on the TV documentary," and then he said what he really thought: "Far worse was the unnecessary handling and harassment of the animals in order that the desired footage be obtained by the TV camera crew." He did allow that the show, "to be shown on national TV next fall," would "hopefully further the USFWS image to the public," which is as close as a government report comes to rolling its eyes.

In early April 1975, Daniel was in Mekoryuk, waiting on the weather. The animals were in a pen at the village, eating about four bales a day of timothy hay bought in Anchorage. Forty were picked to go, thirty-one yearlings and nine two-year-olds, most of them female. Each got an ear tag with colored streamers, pink for the young males, yellow for the young females, blue and orange for the two-year-olds. Then they were put in crates, and that was as far as the plan got.

"They were supposed to be flown over to Bethel," Daniel said. "But the weather was very



THE WILD KINGDOM CAMERAS AT MEKORYUK

bad and the airport was like totally iced up and snowed on. So we were waiting, waiting, waiting and trying to clear that and finally we had a breakthrough and we could do it."

The record says the same thing at slightly greater length. Drifting snow kept shortening the runway at Mekoryuk until the Russian plane could not hope to land there, and the animals had also to wait, the photo report adds, for "the final diplomatic clearance." So the crates went over to Bethel in a Wien Air Alaska Skyvan, a boxy little freighter known to pilots as the Flying Shoebox, which could carry six yearlings or four two-year-olds at a time. It took eight trips, from April 8 to April 11.

In April 1975, Daniel was in Bethel, spending his nights with the muskoxen. Bethel sits on the Kuskokwim River about fifty miles from the sea, a Moravian mission town since 1885 and by far the largest place in western Alaska, with about twenty-four hundred people in 1970. The animals were turned loose in a freight warehouse to wait for the Russian plane, with their crates for fences, hay to eat, and blocks of snow to drink. Daniel remembered it as a metal Quonset building.

The town came to look. The photo report counted "more than 500 persons, many of them school children," who came "to peer into the darkened warehouse"; the refuge's annual report made it about a thousand, most of whom had never seen a muskox. The people of Bethel, Daniel said, "were very curious about seeing them," and so somebody had to stay with the animals.

> *... so we had to sleep with them to keep you know people from bothering them so we got to spend the night 20 below zero with these bleeding Muskoxen ... sleeping on bales of hay there among the muskoxen, smelling them, right? Smelling them. They lost their mother and they were not happy. Their little horn buds had been all bloody from the rough ride on the sled and so forth.*

The Bethel airport, for the record, logged lows of between one and nine below zero on the nights the animals were in town, which is the kind of distinction that matters mainly to people who are not sleeping on hay in a warehouse. In the daytime the warehouse turned, in the photo report's words, into "a Far North rodeo scene," as



A NIGHT AMONG THE MUSKOXEN (ILLUSTRATION)

Lensink, Lent and a local man, Joe David, wrestled the yearlings into their crates.

On April 12, about noon, the Russian plane came in. It was an Antonov An-12, a four-engined turboprop freighter of which the Soviets built more than twelve hundred, their answer to the American Hercules, and Daniel's memory of it is borne out to a surprising degree. "American servicemen had to accompany this Russian freighter airplane," he said, "from Nadir on the other side in the Siberian side of the Bering Sea. And these American pilots would fly with the Russians over the Bering Sea."

The report says the plane "had flown east from Moscow with its own crew and three U.S. Air Force crewmen," and adds: "When the plane crossed the International Dateline, the Americans took over navigation and communication with the ground." While they waited, "the seven-man crew of the Antonin 12 was shown the sights of an Alaskan bush town," which, in Bethel in April, need not have taken long.

A blizzard on April 13 kept the plane on the ground. On the morning of April 14, in a strong wind and cold rain, the crates went aboard by flatbed truck and hoist, thirty-eight of them, stacked two high, with "shouts and directions" flying, as the report says, "in Yupik ... English, and Russian." Hay and chunks of snow went into each crate for the journey. "With only inches to spare," the last crate went in, and the Russian crew cabled the cargo down. "Meanwhile, the muskox stood placidly in their darkened cubicles." Uspensky and Tarkov flew with them. Less than three hours later the plane landed at Cape Schmidt, a Soviet Arctic settlement founded in 1931 with an airfield on a spit, and the herd was divided.

Twenty went west to the Taymyr Peninsula, "a peninsula that sticks up almost into the North Pole," as Daniel described it, where the Bikada station lay 350 kilometers north of Khatanga and the ten Canadian animals had already spent a winter. The other twenty, by the Russian count twelve young females, six young males and a pair of two-year-olds, went north to Wrangel Island, where John Muir had looked for muskoxen in 1881 and found only bear tracks. Daniel did not rate their chances.

Wrangel, he said, was "the rookery for like 2,000 mother polar bears which like to eat muskoxen," and on the Taymyr "they have immense wolves that have been used to feeding on the reindeer herders there. And so we weren't very hopeful that these animals would survive there anyway." The photo report, written that spring, was more cheerful: "Soviet biologists re-

port both herds have adjusted well to their new environments."

In the middle of April 1975, Daniel was back in the village with Regina. "Anyway, so then I came back," he said, "and we were going through some decisions about whether I would go back to college." There was an offer from the University of Connecticut, and a school break coming, and on the way out through Fairbanks a walk after caribou for the Meters, which is another story. The transplant was over. The Fish and Wildlife Service summed it up: "The forty animals were delivered to the Russians in nearly the desired age and sex ratio."

Nunivak had quite a year. That fall, under a notice in the Federal Register, the island held what the refuge called Alaska's first muskox hunt "since the animals became extinct": ten bulls, trophy tags at $500 for residents and $1,000 for everyone else, and some hunters paying four or five thousand dollars all told, which brought more than twenty thousand dollars into Mekoryuk. A reviewer of the refuge's annual report, reading that claim, wrote in the margin, "Don't you mean near extinction or thought extinct." And on December 28, 1975, the film went out. It was season fourteen, episode five of *Wild Kingdom*, half an hour long, called "Musk Oxen at Nunivak," and it came between "Elk of the Montana Rockies" and "Baboons of Tanzania."

On the American side, the ferrets came. A Fish and Wildlife Service report of 1976 mentions a trip to the Soviet Union to collect forty-eight Siberian polecats, and the next year the polecats were breeding at Patuxent, as stand-ins for an animal too rare to risk. Whether the government thought of it as a swap, the documents do not say; Daniel did. On the Russian side, Wrangel Island was made a strict nature reserve on March 23, 1976, Uspensky having argued for it for years. The first calf on Wrangel was born in 1977, and in 1978 the first calf on the Taymyr to survive, a female. The biologists named her Pyatnitsa, which means Friday. The next year there were ten.

In the years from 1975 to 1984, Daniel and his family stayed on in Alaska, "working in the villages and so forth," as he summed it up, and the tape says little more about those years than that. The villages did not stand still either. Since 1971, under the Native land claims act Nixon had signed three years before the environmental agreement, they had been shareholders: forty-four million acres and $962.5 million were divided among twelve regional corporations and more than two hundred village ones.

In 1975 Allakaket incorporated as a city. In October 1976 a lawsuit brought by twenty-seven Native teenagers, sent away from home for high school, ended in a consent decree promising a high school in any village with fifteen or more children of high school age, and over the next years they were built; Mekoryuk got its own in 1978.

The state grew rich around them. Oil began to flow down the pipeline in the summer of 1977. Fairbanks grew from about fifteen thousand people to almost twenty-three thousand, and in the boom a new three-bedroom house there went for more than $45,000, a great deal of money in 1974. Alaska as a whole grew by a third, to about four hundred thousand. In 1976 the voters set up the Permanent Fund to bank a share of the oil money, and in 1982 it began paying every resident a dividend, about a thousand dollars the first year.

In 1984, Daniel brought the family back to Massachusetts. "We come from Alaska to Massachusetts in 1984," he said, "after having been 15 years in Alaska, working in the villages and so forth." The two states were headed in different directions that year. In January 1984 one Alaskan worker in ten was out of work, and the Permanent Fund paid the smallest dividend in its history, $331.29. In Massachusetts unemployment was 5.6 percent and falling, to 4.2 by December, on the strength of what the papers were starting to call the Massachusetts Miracle, most of it made of computers. In November Wien Air Alaska, the airline whose Skyvan had carried the muskoxen out of Mekoryuk, stopped flying altogether. [[BRIDGE: The family made its new home in and around Amherst, the college town where Daniel and

Regina had met in a summer Russian class in 1964.]] Amherst had about thirty-three thousand people by then, a good many of them students at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst College and Hampshire College.

Alex was in his last year of high school then, and eighteen, and he was, as his father put it, "very much into computers." He had "the VIC-20s and these different 120s." The VIC-20 was Commodore's home computer, $299.95 when it came out in 1981 and the first computer of any kind to sell a million units, and by the middle of the decade it could be had for under ninety dollars. Alex had a friend, Tundra, who worked for a computer company in Amherst, and between them the two of them had an idea.

> *And he'd gotten this idea with his buddy that that they could take a large number of these computers of that time. That was a state-of-the-art desk computer. I don't know if it was Epson or something. And they just needed about 30 or 40 of these. As I understood, they were going to connect them, and they were going to produce a supercomputer.*

The plan had the great merit of simplicity. They got hold of a van — "I'm not sure if they hijacked it or whatever," Daniel said — and since Tundra had access to the company's building, they went in at night, took the computers and loaded the van. Then they made their getaway, down a street off South East Street in Amherst, and got stuck. A break-in was reported. "So Alex," his father said, "made a run for it."

How he managed the next part, Daniel left to "the culprit himself." But somehow Alex got into the baggage compartment of a Greyhound bus and rode it, by his father's reckoning, "6,000 miles to Fairbanks, Alaska, where he actually had good buddies and he never wanted us to leave Fairbanks anyway." Greyhound was then the giant of American bus travel, with some thirty-eight hundred coaches and about three-fifths of the country's intercity bus traffic, and its Canadian company had been running coaches up the Alaska Highway since the Second World War. By the modern road the distance from Amherst to Fairbanks is about forty-four hundred miles, some eighty-seven hours of driving, none of which is improved by being spent among the suitcases.

In Fairbanks, his father supposed, Alex "must've gotten hungry," and he turned up at a soup kitchen, and stayed to help. The town had had a community food bank since 1982, started by a few local people who organized some churches. At the soup kitchen he met Kelly, who was from Portland, Maine, and was there doing volunteer work with the Methodist Church. He fell in, too, with his old friends, one of them, as Daniel remembered, the son of a well-known archaeologist and professor at the university.

Then his parents got him to come back. "And so anyway," Daniel said, "we got Alex to come back and report himself to the police. And so the police were very kind to him. And they gave him a felony record, but they didn't incarcerate him." He thought there might have been some fines as well. Alex and Kelly were married, later, at Harding Lake, on the Richardson Highway south of Fairbanks.

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The forty muskoxen did better than anyone in the Bethel warehouse had reason to expect. "I found out years later that they're thriving there, apparently," Daniel said, and so they are. The Taymyr herd, which began with ten animals from Canada and twenty from Nunivak, numbered about twelve thousand one hundred in 2017, and Wrangel's twenty had become about a thousand, in spite of the polar bears. The Russians have since used them to stock Yakutia, the Polar Urals and Magadan: "They're being shipped around," as he put it.

On Nunivak the herd goes on, about seven hundred and forty in 2015, and the women of Mekoryuk have knitted its qiviut since 1968, the wool he called "the warmest under hair." The film of the roundup was broadcast four days after Christmas in 1975 and still exists. And in the files of the Fish and Wildlife Service, in a report typed in the spring of 1975, there is a list of the people who caught the forty, with an interpreter's name on it, Dan St. John, on contract, and a photograph of him on the snow at Mekoryuk in a fur-ruffed parka, standing next to Marlin Perkins.

## THE RECORDS


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## THE ORIGINAL PHOTOGRAPHS

*The photographs in this chapter are printed digitally restored: dust and scratches removed, noise reduced, contrast evened, nothing added or changed. These are the raw files, as received.*



LASHED TO A SLED FOR THE HAUL TO MEKORYUK
The unretouched original.



THE NETTING CREW AT WORK
The unretouched original.



DAN ST. JOHN, PETER LENT, SAVVA USPENSKY, VADIM TARKOV AND MARLIN PERKINS
The unretouched original.



THE WILD KINGDOM CAMERAS AT MEKORYUK
The unretouched original.