

A NEW GAME IN THE NORTH: ALASKA NATIVE REINDEER HERDING, 1890–1940

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In the early 1890s, the missionary Sheldon Jackson brought domesticated reindeer to Alaska for the ostensible benefit of northern Native communities. What started as a small government program to feed and civilize the Natives, however, soon became a large industry controlled by the Lomens, a powerful gold rush family who sought to make reindeer herding the answer to Alaska's undeveloped economy.

ON 4 JULY 1892, the United States Revenue Cutter *Bear* landed on the shores of Port Clarence, Alaska. Amidst vigorous flag-waving and patriotic cheering, the captain of the *Bear*, Michael Healy, delivered 171 reindeer to the newly-minted Teller Reindeer Station. The following year Healy returned to find that three Natives had murdered Harrison Thornton, a teacher and missionary at a nearby village, partially over his enthusiasm for the presence of the reindeer. Fortunately for the government workers at the reindeer station, the conflict never spread, in part because the Inupiat Eskimo community took it upon themselves to execute the three murderers. With this execution, the Natives demonstrated to the government that they had decided to accept the presence of the reindeer rather than fight it. While their enthusiasm for these animals would never be profound, in a few decades, the Eskimos of northern Alaska would be fighting to keep reindeer part of the Native way of life.

Alaskan reindeer herding—conceived by the Presbyterian missionary Sheldon Jackson—started in the early 1890s as a modest plan to import small herds of reindeer from Siberia to feed the Eskimos of western Alaska, whom Jackson mistakenly believed were facing starvation. The idea soon grew far beyond its original scale, however, as Jackson and his sympathizers began imagining a vast reindeer industry in which whites and Eskimos would work together to make Alaska's northern land profitable. In addition, Jackson believed that the herding program would gently, but thoroughly, “civilize” the Natives, changing hunters into capitalist entrepreneurs. Jackson modeled his vision

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Figure 1: Eskimo apprentices with their reindeer. John G. Brady Papers, Yale Collection of Western Americana. Image courtesy of Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

on the reindeer industry of Scandinavian Lapland. He was mistaken, however, in assuming that the industry of one northern climate could be seamlessly transferred to another—too many natural factors were different in Alaska. In addition, the Natives, on which the success of reindeer herding depended, transformed the program in entirely unexpected ways. By the late 1930s, the Eskimos of Alaska had taken both legal and cultural control of what was originally designed to be a project of assimilation.

In recent years, scholars have begun to recognize the importance of Native Americans in the economic development of the American West, particularly in the twentieth century. In labor scarce regions, developers often relied heavily on Native participation in local projects to foster economic growth. In addition, policy makers believed participation in the capitalist system would educate and assimilate the Natives—a sure way, in the famous words of Richard Pratt, “to kill the Indian and save the man.” As with many Native policies, however, the consequences of schemes to assimilate Indians through economic development were far from straightforward. Rather than placing Native involvement with the capitalist economy at the end of a tragic narrative of cultural loss, some historians have begun to recognize that Native involvement with economic development was often part of a larger strategy of adaptation and cultural endurance, particularly in the twentieth century.¹ Participation in

¹ See, for example, Eric V. Meeks, “The Tohono O’Odham, Wage Labor, and Resistant Adaptation, 1900–1930,” *Western Historical Quarterly* 34 (Winter 2003): 468–89; Brian C. Hosmer, *American Indians in the Marketplace: Persistence and Innovation Among the Menominees and Metlakatlans, 1870–1920* (Lawrence, KS, 1999); Robert B. Campbell, “Newlands, Old Lands:

the capitalist system did not signal an end to traditional cultures, but instead often became a means of both individual and cultural survival for Native people in a rapidly changing world. Reindeer herding in Alaska is an early and understudied example of an economic development scheme with unintended consequences—rather than “assimilating” Natives into the capitalist market, reindeer became another resource that Alaska Natives would use in varying ways for subsistence and for profit.

Reindeer, unlike caribou, are not native to North America. The differences between the two groups of animals are largely those of history rather than biology. Most scientists believe that reindeer and caribou are members of the same species, *Rangifer tarandus*, and have similar genetic and behavioral makeups. The distinction between the two types of animals began with their evolutionary origins. Many scholars speculate that the species evolved in Europe and Asia and moved into North America during the time of the Beringian land bridge, around fifteen thousand years ago. The species was divided in two when the land bridge closed, and the distinction between the two groups was eventually codified in language, with the animals in Europe and Asia coming to be called “reindeer,” and those inhabiting North America becoming known as “caribou.”

The separate histories of reindeer and caribou collided at a very particular time and place: 21 September 1891, in western Alaska, when two men, Reverend Sheldon Jackson and Captain Michael Healy, used the United States Revenue Cutter *Bear* to close the Beringian divide, sailing reindeer from Siberia and placing them squarely in Alaskan caribou country. Healy, the son of an Irish immigrant and his African slave, had run away from his home in Georgia at a young age and began “passing” for white. After jumping a British ship to Calcutta as a teenager, he began a successful seafaring career that would eventually take him to Alaska as an officer in the United States Revenue Cutter Service (precursor to the Coast Guard) in 1874. By the early 1890s, the beginning of the reindeer project, Healy was well known among government officials for his far-reaching relationships with Alaska Natives, many of whom referred to him (ironically) as “the most famous white man in Alaska.”²

These connections to Alaska Native communities were what made Healy an indispensable component of Sheldon Jackson’s reindeer crusade. In all other ways, the

Native American Labor, Agrarian Ideology, and the Progressive-Era State in the Making of the Newlands Reclamation Project, 1902–1926,” *Pacific Historical Review* 71 (May 2002): 203–38; Brian Hosmer and Colleen O’Neill, eds., *Native Pathways: American Indian Culture and Economic Development in the Twentieth Century*, (Boulder, 2004); Colin Calloway, *First Peoples: A Documentary Survey of American Indian History* (Boston, 1999), 350.

² In my writing, and in accordance with standard convention, the terms “Alaska Native” or “Native” (with the “N” capitalized) refer to the Indian, Eskimo, and Aleut inhabitants of Alaska. *The Odyssey of Captain Healy* (videocassette, directed by Maria Brooks, Waterfront Soundings Production, 2000).

unruly captain was an unlikely ally for someone like Jackson to embrace. Born in 1834 in upstate New York, Jackson was the son of a small shop owner and his young wife. Shortly after Jackson's birth, his parents made a public confession of their Christian faith and joined a local Presbyterian church. After the family's conversion, there was no question that young Jackson would eventually enter the ministry. Once he graduated from the Princeton Theological Seminary, he began his career as a missionary among the Choctaw in Indian Country. Years of successful advancement in the church culminated in 1869, when he was appointed the new Rocky Mountain superintendent of missions.

It was during these years as superintendent that Jackson first became interested in Alaska. Once he had risen to the top of his profession in the West, the vast challenge of the North, largely devoid of missionaries since the departure of many Russian Orthodox priests after 1867, appealed to him. After setting up a few Presbyterian schools in the more populated areas of the territory, Jackson decided that he needed the support of the government to continue his missions in the more remote areas of the territory. To get this support, Jackson lobbied successfully for the passage of the Organic Act of 1884, which established a civil government for Alaska and provided federal funding to develop a public school system there.³ Jackson used the opportunity presented by the passage of the Organic Act to nominate himself to be the new general agent for education in Alaska. Having no serious contenders for the position, he was soon confirmed by the necessary government officials.⁴

Despite Jackson's initial success in the planning stages of his educational program for Alaska, he quickly discovered that even he could not overcome the vast challenges of Alaskan geography. Consequently, five years after his appointment as general agent of education, Jackson was still in the initial stages of exploring many of the coastal communities. As part of this ongoing exploration, in the summer of 1890, Jackson joined Captain Healy aboard the *Bear*, and the two men visited the Eskimo villages of western Alaska, while also taking a side trip to Siberia to visit and trade among the Chukchi people there.

During his time in the Arctic that summer, Jackson made two powerful observations. First, he concluded that, due to white men's avarice, the Eskimos of western Alaska were starving.⁵ In Jackson's words, "from time immemorial [the Eskimos] have

³ The Organic Act of 1884 provided Alaska with a governor and a United States district court, staffed by a judge appointed by the president, who was to enforce the laws of the state of Oregon in the district "so far as the same may be applicable." Claus-M. Naske and Herman E. Slotnick, eds., *Alaska: A History of the 49th State* (Norman, 1987), 73.

⁴ Elizabeth A. Tower, *Reading, Religion, Reindeer: Sheldon Jackson's Legacy to Alaska* (Anchorage, 1988), 25–6.

⁵ In 1977, participants in the Inuit Circumpolar Conference officially rejected the term "Eskimo" as having pejorative connotations and adopted the term "Inuit" as the preferred designation for Eskimo peoples. Unlike their Canadian and Greenlandic brethren, however, most

lived upon the whale, the walrus . . . and the caribou . . . of their vast inland plains. But fifty years ago American whalers . . . commenced for that section the slaughter and destruction of whales that went steadily forward . . . With the advent of improved breech-loading firearms the [caribou] are . . . being killed off and frightened away to the remote and more inaccessible regions of the interior and another source of food supply is diminishing.”⁶

Second, Jackson observed that, in comparison to the Eskimos, the Siberians were “fat.” He found them to be “good-sized, robust, fleshy, well-fed, pagan, half-civilized, nomad people, living largely on their herds of reindeer.”⁷ Conversations between Jackson and Healy aboard the *Bear* that summer led both men to the conviction that the Eskimos were starving because they lacked a consistent food source, which, at such extreme northern latitudes, only herds of reindeer could provide.

While there is no doubt that Healy—and especially Jackson—believed deeply in the crisis they had identified, there are several reasons to believe that the problem of “Eskimo starvation” was not as acute as the two perceived. While it is true that the late-nineteenth century saw a decline in some of the traditional food sources of western Alaska, it is probable that, especially in the case of the caribou, these declines were the result of natural cyclical variations in population and not a permanent decrease as a result of overhunting.⁸ Also, Eskimos were used to temporary food shortages and would most likely not have perceived this particular one as a crisis.⁹

Eskimos had depended upon Alaska’s air, sea, and land resources for thousands of years. They ate fish, caribou, seal, rabbit, berries, and occasionally bear, and usually food was plentiful enough for groups to live in semi-permanent villages. When food supplies dropped, the Eskimos became nomadic, traveling long distances and increasing their trade with Siberian Natives and Indians from the Alaska interior. Since the 1850s, the Eskimos had also engaged in extensive trade with American whalers. At that time, desperate whalers had begun to chase their prey as far as the Arctic Ocean. Hunting in the North was difficult, however, and crews would spend up to eight months of the year locked in the ice offshore. The sailors would pass the long winters trading

Alaska Natives continue to refer to themselves as “Eskimo” rather than “Inuit” in both speech and writing, which is why I use the term here. Among the Alaskan Eskimo, the Iñupiaq people traditionally inhabit the northwestern part of Alaska, while the Yupik inhabit the southwestern part of the state and St. Lawrence Island.

⁶ United States Bureau of Education, *Report of the Commissioner of Education for the Year 1889–90* (Washington, DC, 1893), 1291.

⁷ Senate Committee on Appropriations, *Mr. Teller Presented the Following Newspaper Communication of Sheldon Jackson, Urging the Importation by the Government of the Siberian Reindeer into Alaskan Territory*, 51st Cong., 2d Sess., Mis. Doc. No. 39 (Washington, DC, 1891), 4.

⁸ Richard O. Stern et al., *Eskimos, Reindeer, and Land*, (Fairbanks, 1980), 21–3.

⁹ Dean F. Olson, *Alaska Reindeer Herdsmen: A Study of Native Management in Transition* (Fairbanks, 1969), 20–1.

tools, flour, coffee, and liquor (which later became illegal) for Eskimo artwork, meat, and hides.¹⁰

So, by 1890, the Eskimos were still largely dependent on traditional foodstuffs, but they also had supplemental resources when times were lean. Nevertheless, in Jackson's eyes, the starvation problem was so severe that he believed that he could not carry out any of his educational plans in the North until the Eskimos were sufficiently fattened up on reindeer. When his attempts to secure federal appropriations failed, Jackson redirected his efforts to canvassing for private donations. Over the course of the following year, Jackson placed stories about his reindeer plan in all the major Eastern newspapers, and he secured over two thousand dollars in donations to begin transporting reindeer from Siberia to Alaska.¹¹

While Jackson was generating publicity and funding for the project, his vision for Alaskan reindeer herding began to expand. While he initially saw the project as simply a way to save destitute Eskimos from starvation, he now began to think of it more broadly as a means of bringing Alaska Natives into the modern world. During his years of working with Indian communities in the West, Jackson had come to believe, like so many of his colleagues, that the only way to help Native peoples was to get them to abandon their traditional cultures in favor of white, modern ways. In other respects, however, Jackson's experience in the North had convinced him that the situation of Alaska Natives was unique, as it certainly was—after all, Alaska Natives had not been militarily defeated, and with the notable exception of a few Native groups on the southeastern panhandle and in the Aleutians, few whites had yet to encroach on traditional Alaska Native lands. Because of these circumstances, Jackson could not imagine implementing the policies of contemporary Indian reformers like Henry Dawes, who sought to break up groups of Indians living on reservations through the allotment of privately owned land, or Richard Henry Pratt, founder of the famous Carlisle Indian School, who argued that young Natives should be separated from their communities and forced to learn the ways of white society. Instead, Jackson felt that Natives could—and should—be taught the ways of the modern world while remaining part of their communities and living on their traditional, communal homelands.¹²

¹⁰ John R. Bockstoce, *Whales, Ice, and Men: The History of Whaling in the Western Arctic* (Seattle, 1986) and J. R. Bockstoce, *Eskimos of Northwest Alaska in the Early Nineteenth Century* (Oxford, UK, 1977).

¹¹ For examples of the positive and negative media coverage the reindeer project received, see Jackson's collection of scrapbooks, particularly vols. 2, 3, and 4, Sheldon Jackson Papers, Presbyterian Historical Society, Philadelphia and Sheldon Jackson, *(Third Annual) Report on the Introduction of Reindeer into Alaska*, [hereafter RIRA] 52d Cong., 2d Sess., Mis. Doc. No. 22 (Washington, DC, 1893).

¹² Analyses of Sheldon Jackson's work in Alaska almost universally ignore any connection to Indian policy in the continental United States. One short exception is Stephen W. Haycox, "Sheldon Jackson in Historical Perspective: Alaska Native Schools and Mission Contracts, 1885–1894," *The Pacific Historian* 26, no. 1 (1984): 18–28.

Jackson was able to generate a surprising amount of support for his plan. There were several reasons for his success. First, his seemingly philanthropic reindeer scheme appealed to a generation of Christian Indian advocates whose views of the West were largely typified by Helen Hunt Jackson's recently published polemic, *A Century of Dishonor*, which detailed some of the horrific consequences of the United States government's Indian policies on the frontier.¹³ Second, Jackson's plan appealed to a broader group of easterners who were not Indian advocates per se, but whose developing progressive political views made them sympathetic to starving Alaskans whose food supply had reportedly been destroyed by white capitalist greed. Jackson's cause was furthered even still by the fact that his victims were Eskimos. The 1890s saw something of a minor "Eskimo fever" in the East, as national events such as the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, Robert Peary's highly-publicized trips to Greenland in his quest for the North Pole, and Franz Boas's 1897 Eskimo display at the American Museum of Natural History all brought this exotic new ethnic group to the public's attention.

So, in the late summer of 1891, armed with the spoils of his solicitation campaign, Jackson joined Healy on another trip to Siberia, where the two men successfully traded guns, ammunition, cloth, and tobacco for sixteen head of reindeer. The deer finally arrived in Alaska on 21 September 1891, in Jackson's words, "trembling, hobbled and bruised" at the harbor of Unalaska, in the Aleutians, where they were left on the islands to see how well they would survive the winter.¹⁴ The next summer, Jackson and Healy discovered that their small herd had actually increased by two, and they took this as evidence of their plan's success. The two men dedicated their summer to making five roundtrips to Siberia to purchase additional deer. This time, however, their destination was not the Aleutians. After much reconnaissance, they had selected Port Clarence on the Seward Peninsula as the location for the first reindeer herd. Jackson christened this new herding area the "Teller Reindeer Station," after his good friend and political ally in the Senate, Henry Teller. By the end of the summer, Healy and Jackson had brought a total of 171 reindeer to the station, along with four Chukchi men who had been hired to stay in Alaska to teach the Eskimos how to care for the deer.¹⁵

In the fall of 1892, Jackson returned to Washington in another attempt to secure government funding for the reindeer scheme. This time he was moderately successful, and in the spring of 1893, Congress allocated six thousand dollars for the project.¹⁶ Meanwhile, Jackson appointed Miner Bruce, a journalist who had traveled extensively

¹³ Helen Hunt Jackson, *A Century of Dishonor: A Sketch of the United States Government's Dealings with Some of the Indian Tribes* (New York, 1881).

¹⁴ Quoted in Robert Laird Stewart, *Sheldon Jackson: Pathfinder and Prospector of the Missionary Vanguard in the Rocky Mountains and Alaska* (New York, 1908), 391.

¹⁵ Jackson, (*Third Annual*) RIRA, 10.

¹⁶ Sheldon Jackson, (*Fifth Annual*) RIRA, 54th Cong., 1st Sess., Sen. Exec. Doc. No. 111 (Washington, DC, 1896), 11–3.

in Alaska, to be the superintendent of Teller Reindeer Station. During this first season, the deer did not change much about Inupiat life around Port Clarence, although Bruce reported that Natives traveled from hundreds of miles away to determine if—and why—white men had brought reindeer to Alaska. Ironically, because the government wanted to grow the herd as quickly as possible, the Inupiat were not allowed to kill any of the animals for food, a situation they understandably found maddening, especially during the long, lean winter months.¹⁷

The biggest problem arising during the first year of the Teller Reindeer Station involved Miner Bruce's relationship with the four Siberian Chukchi herders. Bruce and his fellow government workers seemed to dislike the Chukchi men from the start, calling them foolishly superstitious and accusing them of exhibiting poor reindeer handling techniques.¹⁸ The Siberians had several ways of handling the reindeer that particularly horrified Bruce and the other government workers at Teller. First, when the men were thirsty, they would lasso a reindeer doe to the ground and drink directly from her bag of milk, "quaffing it with as much enjoyment as if it had been pure nectar."¹⁹ The Chukchi also enjoyed feasting on the lice that would burrow themselves deep into the reindeers' fur.

Perhaps most disturbing to the Teller workers, however, was the Siberians' practice of herding reindeer using urine. The reindeer loved to drink human urine, and the Chukchi could effectively guide the herds in certain directions using urine streams as their beacons.²⁰ This seemingly "savage" herding practice likely sealed the Chukchi's fate as teachers of the Eskimos. By the spring of the first year, Bruce recommended that the Chukchi's contracts not be renewed, citing their inability to instruct the Inupiat effectively.²¹ Bruce, Jackson, and the other champions of the project had claimed that reindeer herding would be an opportunity to civilize the Natives, and clearly the handling techniques taught by the Chukchi did not fit the white men's image of civilized, pastoral herding. By the end of the first winter at Teller, the government workers all agreed that the Siberians had to go.

For the reindeer program to survive, however, new teachers had to be identified quickly, and finding expert reindeer herders willing and able to move to Alaska was no easy task. After carefully considering what few options he had, Jackson set his sights on hiring experienced herders from Lapland. Lapland had a vast reindeer herding industry, and according to Jackson, "a moderate computation, based upon the statistics of Lapland, where similar climatic and other conditions exist, shows northern and

¹⁷ Stern et al., *Eskimos, Reindeer, and Land*, 25.

¹⁸ Sheldon Jackson, (*Fourth Annual*) RIRA, 53d Cong., 2d Sess., Sen. Exec. Doc. No. 70 (Washington, DC, 1894), 59–61.

¹⁹ Jackson, (*Fourth Annual*) RIRA, 42.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 46–63.

²¹ Stern et al., *Eskimos, Reindeer, and Land*, 25.

central Alaska capable of supporting over nine million head of reindeer."²² This was the beginning of Jackson's imagining the reindeer project on a new, larger scale. He sincerely believed that if reindeer herding worked so well in Scandinavia, it would surely be equally successful in Alaska.

After placing ads for Lapp herders in U. S. Scandinavian newspapers, Jackson received over 250 responses to his request, almost entirely from Scandinavians without any claim to Lapp (or Saami) heritage.²³ Most of these letters applauded Jackson's efforts to recruit Saami herders, but they also stated that there were few, if any, full-blooded Saami in the United States. It soon became clear to Jackson that he would most likely have to travel to Lapland to recruit the herders he needed.

After raising over one thousand dollars in donations for the expensive trip to Europe, Jackson was able to send William Kjellmann, a Norwegian from Wisconsin, whom he had hired to work on the project, to Finnmark, where he found it more difficult than he expected to recruit participants. Kjellmann found that "Lapps, like the reindeer, cannot be crowded or forced in any way, and least of all in business matters."²⁴ Eventually, however, he managed to recruit sixteen Saami to sign three-year contracts to teach reindeer herding to Alaska Natives.²⁵ Part of the contract had them swear that they were upstanding members of the Christian church. While the Saami from Finnmark had been converted to Christianity by Lutheran missionaries in the sixteenth century, some of the Scandinavians who had written to Jackson warned that their conversion had been "incomplete" and that many Saami still practiced parts of their traditional religion. Therefore, Jackson inserted the Christianity clause in the contracts to guarantee that they would not only teach their apprentices the art of reindeer herding, but also act as behavioral role models for the Alaska Natives in a way that the Chukchi had not.

Luckily for Jackson, the Saami proved to be the kind of "civilized" Natives that Indian advocates of the day admired. Kjellmann and the group of Saami herders arrived in New York by ship on 12 May 1894, and spent the next few months traveling by rail to Seattle. The group created a media sensation during the course of their cross-country train trip, and the Saami were esteemed as talented, educated, and kind-hearted people who had selflessly come from far away to save the Alaska Natives from starvation and

²² Jackson, (*Fifth Annual*) RIRA, 10.

²³ Lapps, or Laplanders, inhabit the area traditionally known as Lapland, extending from the Kola Peninsula in Northwestern Russia through the Northern part of Finland to the Arctic coast of Norway. The term "Lapp" has been used by Europeans to describe this group of people for over seven hundred years. The people to whom this term refers, however, regard it as pejorative. They call themselves "Saami," the name by which I will refer to them, while retaining the terms "Lapps" and "Laplanders" in cited historical quotations.

²⁴ Jackson, (*Fifth Annual*) RIRA, 45.

²⁵ *Evening (Washington, DC) Star*, 4 September 1894.

teach them how proper “civilized Natives” should act.²⁶ One reporter described the Saami as being “at the top . . . of the Esquimau group . . . in intelligence and morals.”²⁷ Reporters noted that they could read and write, often in more than one language. Physically, the Saami were described as “better looking than the natives of Labrador or Alaska; they have light complexions, faded-looking hair, and are all blue-eyed.”²⁸ The fact that the Saami were Christians was stressed, and according to one report, “in Lapland the churches are three hundred miles apart, and [the Saami] frequently hitch[ed] up their reindeer on Friday, [drove] to church for the Sunday service, and return[ed] home on Tuesday.”²⁹ Overall, the Saami were given an overwhelming stamp of approval from the media, which helped to generate more positive sentiment among the public for the Alaskan reindeer project.

On 29 July 1894, the Saami herders arrived at Teller Reindeer Station. Unlike the Chukchi, with whom the Inupiat had a long-standing trade relationship, the Saami were complete strangers, and communication between the two groups was difficult. According to the reports of the white government workers, the Alaska Natives were initially hostile to the Saami, as they refused to take on subordinate student roles to the Saami and instead tried to assert dominance over their own homeland. Despite these initial conflicts, however, it was not long before the Alaska Natives were inviting some of the Saami along on their hunting and fishing expeditions. Soon, the Inupiat community tentatively embraced the newcomers, calling them the “Card People” because the Saami’s traditional “Four Winds” hats reminded them of hats they had seen on playing cards.³⁰

While the Inupiat may have eventually warmed to the presence of the Card People, they remained resistant to the nomadic way of life that these people represented. Reindeer herding required Eskimo men to leave their villages and families for up to four months at a time, traveling continuously with the animals as they foraged for food. The apprentices found the work monotonous at best—far less exciting than hunting and fishing and with far fewer tangible benefits. While part of the Saami’s contracts stated that they could use the animals in any way that they desired, the Alaska Natives were still prohibited from slaughtering any deer, and they often ran off to see their families or visit a nearby village for the latest news and some companionship.³¹

Despite the discouraging reports he was receiving from the government workers at Teller, Jackson was eager to expand the reindeer program. In fact, studying the

²⁶ *The (Chicago) Record*, 11 September 1894.

²⁷ *Commercial (Pittsburgh) Gazette*, 7 September 1894.

²⁸ *(San Francisco) Chronicle*, 10 June 1894.

²⁹ *Evening (San Francisco) Bulletin*, 9 June 1894.

³⁰ Jackson, *(Fifth Annual) RIRA*, 65 and n.a., “The Reindeer Project Families: Kjellmann Expedition 1894, Manitoba Expedition 1898,” *Baiki: The North American Sami Journal*, 19 (Spring 1999): 1–28.

³¹ Jackson, *(Fifth Annual) RIRA*, 67–8.



Figure 2: Saami Reindeer Herders at the Teller Reindeer Station. John G. Brady Papers. Yale Collection of Western Americana. Image courtesy of Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

market for reindeer products in Scandinavia had convinced Jackson that more than the civilization of the Eskimos could be at stake with this project. Where he had once envisioned small subsistence herds living in and around Native villages, Jackson now began to imagine a “vast commercial industry” of reindeer in Alaska. Using comparisons with the reindeer economy of Lapland, Jackson argued that “Alaska, with its capacity for nine million two hundred thousand head of reindeer, [could] supply the markets of America with five hundred thousand carcasses of venison annually, together with tons of delicious hams and tongues, and the finest of leather.”³² With this newfound economic extrapolation, Jackson’s vision for reindeer herding in Alaska expanded once again, and he began to believe that he could do even *more* than just feed the Eskimos, or teach them to be civilized Christians—in fact, he could teach them to be successful *capitalists*—and develop Alaska’s sluggish economy along the way.

Jackson soon convinced himself and some of his closest supporters that, given the right training and support, Alaska Natives could eventually control a vast economic empire in reindeer products. To grow the program, Captain Healy and his associates continued to barter with the Siberian Natives, importing a total of 1,280 reindeer to Alaska over the next few years.³³ In addition, the government workers decided to divide the Teller reindeer and distribute them among some of the other missionary outposts of

³² *Ibid.*, 17.

³³ This trading relationship ceased in 1902 when the Czar forbade all further reindeer exports from Russia.

western Alaska. Thus, in August of 1894, reindeer were relocated to five stations along the coast of the Seward Peninsula and to one on the Yukon Delta. In addition, to try to convince the Eskimos of the tangible benefits of reindeer herding, in January 1895, the government loaned one Inupiat man, Charlie Antisarlook, one hundred reindeer and promised him ownership of these animals and all calves born to them after an apprenticeship period of five years. During the next few years, more such deals would be made with individual Eskimo apprentices, and herds would be divided even further.

Of all the Native-controlled reindeer herds, however, Charlie Antisarlook's would become the most successful. In 1900, Antisarlook fell victim to the measles epidemic, and his wife, Mary Makrikoff Antisarlook, inherited her husband's herd of 272 reindeer. Because she lived in the Sinrock settlement near Cape Nome, she was often called "Sinrock Mary." Mary was the daughter of an Eskimo mother and a Russian father, and her ability to speak Russian, Inupiaq, and English made her a powerful figure in the North. She had served as an interpreter on government-sponsored explorations of Alaska and Siberia, and she often accompanied Sheldon Jackson on his travels. Mary had learned the techniques of reindeer herding alongside her husband, and after his death she fought hard to maintain legal control of their animals. Several times she moved the herd to avoid the negative influences of white gold seekers, and after remarriage, she adopted ten children whom she taught to care for her deer and secure her legacy. At its peak, Sinrock Mary's herd totaled over 1,500 animals, and she was given a new nickname: "the Reindeer Queen of Alaska."³⁴

Before Mary could become the Reindeer Queen, however, Jackson needed to increase the support for his great Alaskan venture. Despite Jackson's media savvy and his strong network of connections in Washington, it is doubtful that he could have persuaded enough people of the need to expand the reindeer program much beyond its current state had it not been for one major—and, for Jackson, very well-timed—event: the discovery of gold in the Klondike. Jackson happened to be traveling on a Yukon steamer with Kjellmann when he first got news of the gold rush, and the two men decided to make a trip to Dawson to check out the situation firsthand. According to Jackson's estimates, there were already between four and five thousand miners in Dawson and Circle City, and he speculated that the group would be starving before the end of the winter, as it would be all but impossible to bring in supplies after the Yukon River froze. Other government officials, including the secretary of the interior and the secretary of war, shared Jackson's concerns, and soon news of an impending disaster had reached the media.³⁵

³⁴ For a portrait of Sinrock Mary's life, see *The Reindeer Queen: Once the Richest Woman in Alaska—The True Story of Sinrock Mary* (videocassette, directed by Maria Brooks, Waterfront Soundings Production, 2000). Some Inupiat Eskimos claim that Sinrock Mary's reindeer can still be heard running across the tundra.

³⁵ Keith A. Murray, *Reindeer and Gold* (Bellingham, WA, 1988), 11. For an example of the media coverage of the "crisis," see *New York Times* 18 October 1897.



Figure 3: Sinrock Mary with government workers and family members. Lomen Family Collection, Accession number 72-71-2278N, Archives and Manuscripts. Image courtesy of Alaska & Polar Regions Department, University of Alaska Fairbanks.

Fortunately—in his own eyes at least—Jackson had the perfect solution to the problem of the starving miners, and not surprisingly, it involved using reindeer to transport food and other supplies to the Klondike region.³⁶ Seeing no other obvious solution to the potential starvation crisis, Congress appropriated \$200,000 for what soon became known as the “Yukon Relief Expedition.” An atmosphere of impending doom developed in Washington, and Jackson was ordered to leave immediately for Scandinavia to buy reindeer and hire herders.

Coincidentally, Kjellmann was already in Lapland, looking to replace four of the original Saami families who had chosen to return home after their three-year contracts expired. Once Jackson arrived, the two men worked quickly to purchase 539 draft reindeer, sleds, and enough lichen to feed the animals on the long trip back to the United States. Jackson and Kjellmann also worked with the three Saami families who had just returned from Alaska to recruit 113 men, women, and children to sign two-year contracts to live and work in the United States. The two men included a

³⁶ Sheldon Jackson to John G. Brady, 1 September 1897, p. 3–4, box 2, John G. Brady Papers, Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven.

provision in the contract stipulating that, after the relief expedition was completed, they were obligated to stay in Alaska and teach the Eskimos to herd for the remainder of their two years of service. Jackson told the Saami about his vision for a vast reindeer industry in Alaska, and he promised them that they could profit from this new industry along with the Eskimos. Jackson also promised the Saami that they would be given the utmost respect in the United States and be treated as white people.³⁷

After settling the contracts and securing the reindeer and supplies, Jackson and Kjellmann set out on the long journey home. Upon arriving in the United States, Jackson made an immediate trip to Washington, DC, where government officials informed him that the Yukon Relief Expedition was no longer necessary, as the anticipated starvation crisis among the Klondike miners had never occurred.³⁸ Despite this development, Jackson recommended that the Saami and the reindeer continue on their journey to Alaska. The group made the long cross-country train trip to Seattle, where they stopped to await the arrival of the ship that would take them to Alaska. During this layover, a serious problem developed. After two false alarms with starvation over the past decade—first with the Eskimos, then with Klondike miners, there was finally an immediate and obvious hunger situation to worry about: the animals had run out of lichen. The animals were completely dependent upon arctic plant life, and attempting to feed them grasses from the local parks in Seattle only made their health deteriorate faster.³⁹ One by one, the reindeer began to starve. By the time the animals reached Alaska, only one-fifth of the original herd remained. Despite this embarrassing development, Jackson declared the expedition a success and pressed on with plans for his project.

Over the next ten years, reindeer were distributed throughout northwestern Alaska through government loans to mission stations, loans to independent Saami who had served out their contracts, and loans to individual Alaska Natives who were deemed “fit” to own their own herds.⁴⁰ The landscape became a moving patchwork of animals, ownership, and control. While the Saami could do pretty much as they pleased, the government and the missions kept close watch over the Eskimo herders. Despite this formal difference in policy, some Eskimos and Saami worked closely together, and there were many marriages between the two groups, blurring the formal distinction between different herds. As the Eskimo herders improved their skills, the Saami treated them with increasing respect. For example, Tautook, a successful deer man from the village of

³⁷ Of the 113, the majority were Saami, but a few were also Finnish and Norwegian. On the herders being treated as white people, see David C. Plaskett, “A Lapp Reindeer Herding Colony in Northwest Alaska,” (master’s thesis, Brown University, 1984), 3–21.

³⁸ Sheldon Jackson, (*Eighth Annual*) RIRA, 55th Cong., 3d Sess., Sen. Exec. Doc. No. 34 (Washington, DC, 1898), 145–6.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 40–1.

⁴⁰ Stern et al., *Eskimos, Reindeer, and Land*, 28.

Golofnin, was exalted by the Saami: "He is like a Laplander," they said.⁴¹ Despite these examples of intercultural alliances, many Alaska Natives still felt increasing hostility toward the Saami, as they were given preference in reindeer ownership and much more freedom to sell and slaughter their animals.

The sharp differences between Saami and Eskimo interests were brought further to light in 1898, when three Swedish men struck gold at Anvil Creek near Nome. The ensuing gold rush brought tens of thousands of white men to the reindeer pastures of the Seward Peninsula.⁴² The Saami used the opportunity presented by this influx of whites to establish a mail delivery system (dubbed the "Reindeer Express"), to sell their reindeer for food and freight, and even occasionally to join forces with the white men panning for gold. Meanwhile, the majority of the Eskimos focused their energy on protecting their homes and hunting grounds. In addition, as if the threat of white encroachment was not bad enough, influenza and measles soon spread through the villages, and over half of the Alaska Native population in northwestern Alaska died by the end of 1900.

By 1905, there were an estimated ten thousand reindeer in Alaska. Many of the Eskimos who had been successfully "converted" to herding had died during the measles and influenza outbreaks, and the government, the mission schools, and the Saami still owned the majority of the herds. William Lopp, a mission teacher who had been involved with the reindeer scheme since its earliest stages, began to question whether the project had lost sight of its original goal: to improve life for the Eskimo communities of western Alaska. With Lopp's encouragement, the Department of the Interior began an independent investigation of reindeer affairs in Alaska, and Frank Churchill, an Indian agent and experienced investigator, traveled to several reindeer stations during the summer of 1905 to write a report on the subject. Churchill's findings singled out Jackson as the problem, arguing that his double role as United States general agent for education in Alaska and as field agent for the Presbyterian Board of Home Missions presented a conflict of interest.

At the close of his report, Churchill recommended that the government reconfigure its policies so that the reindeer would benefit the Alaska Natives more directly. To this end, he encouraged that the reindeer become a resource "for the natives only" and that visions of a reindeer *industry* be abolished, given that "the complete failure of the deer business as a lasting benefit to the natives will begin with deer getting into the hands of white men wishing to build up a business for profits."⁴³ Jackson had hoped that the Eskimos would benefit from the development of a reindeer industry in Alaska, even

⁴¹ Sheldon Jackson, (*Fifteenth Annual*) RIRA, 59th Cong., 1st Sess., Doc. No. 499 (Washington, DC, 1905), 34.

⁴² Olson, *Alaska Reindeer Herdsmen*, 10.

⁴³ Frank C. Churchill, *Reports on the Condition of Educational and School Service and the Management of Reindeer Service in the District of Alaska*, 59th Cong., 1st Sess., Sen. Exec. Doc. No. 483 (Washington, DC, 1906), 26, 40.

imagining them as industry owners in charge of a vast economic empire, but Churchill found this belief to be naive. Suddenly finding his ideas under attack from every direction, Jackson officially resigned his position with the Bureau of Education, although he remained active in Alaskan affairs until his death in 1909.

William Lopp, the teacher who had initially brought Jackson's reindeer policy under scrutiny, replaced Jackson as the new general agent of education for Alaska. He began a major overhaul of herding in 1907, with the formation of the United States Reindeer Service, which set out immediately to secularize the reindeer program. The task of reindeer distribution was taken out of the hands of mission schoolteachers and given to school superintendents employed by the Bureau of Education. In order to get more reindeer into the hands of Alaska Natives, government herds were broken up and smaller reindeer stations were created in distant villages, so that more Eskimo men could learn the trade without having to travel so far from their homes.⁴⁴ After the major cultural and geographical disruptions presented by the gold rush, a new sense of vulnerability among Alaska Natives made them more amenable to learning the reindeer herding trade. The government was doing everything in its power to make it easier for them to do so. For example, instead of having to go through some government or mission sponsored apprenticeship program to acquire a herd, Native Alaskans could now simply purchase reindeer from other herders. Despite the new ease with which Natives could acquire reindeer, there were many ways in which the Bureau of Education continued to control the terms of Native ownership. For example, Natives were not allowed to sell female deer to non-Natives, so that reindeer would necessarily continue to concentrate into Native hands. To this end, the government's new policy was extremely successful, and by 1915, two-thirds of the approximately seventy thousand reindeer living in Alaska were owned by Eskimo herders.⁴⁵

While the government had succeeded in getting reindeer into the hands of Alaska Natives, individual Eskimo herds remained small, disparate, and disorganized. In order to remedy this situation, the Bureau of Education, led by the vision of one of its school superintendents, Walter Shields, developed the concept of "Eskimo Reindeer Fairs." The fairs began in 1915 and were held in centrally located villages in northern Alaska. All the reindeer herders and their families were invited to attend. Activities ranged from lassoing, sled pulling, and butchering contests to reindeer parades, singing, and storytelling.⁴⁶ The fairs' activities were carefully designed by the bureau to convince the Eskimo herders that reindeer herding was an integral part of their culture and their future.

⁴⁴ Olson, *Alaska Reindeer Herdsmen*, 38.

⁴⁵ Stern et al., *Eskimos, Reindeer, and Land*, 33–6.

⁴⁶ "Reindeer Conference Journal: Mary's Igloo," 1915, Vertical File, Small Manuscript, Alaska & Polar Regions Collection, Elmer E. Rasmuson Library, University of Alaska, Fairbanks [hereafter APRC].

And, in many ways, the bureau's plan worked. The Natives who came together for these fairs embraced their roles as herders by writing songs, sharing reindeer recipes, and devising better strategies for reindeer management. They also started to form their own village herding associations and pledged to work together to bring reindeer products to local markets. Because of the carefully crafted fair strategy put in place by Walter Shields—as well as the spontaneous creation of an Eskimo reindeer culture that the fairs facilitated—Alaska Natives began embracing reindeer herding as their own. They began to believe that reindeer could uniquely enhance the livelihood of Eskimo peoples; as the herder Cudluck Oquilluk put it, “the deer help us very well. The deer is just like money. We all say to the government, thank you, because he bring us deer in Alaska for the Eskimos.”⁴⁷

In 1914, however, amidst the work and excitement involved with planning the first reindeer fair, a quiet but important transaction had taken place, one that would eventually challenge the strength of the developing Eskimo reindeer culture. Alfred Nilima, a Saami herder from the Kotzebue area, sold his herd of twelve hundred reindeer to Carl Lomen, a white man from Nome. Despite the protests of many Reindeer Service employees, Lomen's transactions were found to be legally sound. Although Bureau of Education regulations prohibited Alaska Natives from selling their female reindeer to white men, no such limitations had ever been placed upon the Saami owners. By exploiting this small but powerful loophole in the bureau's herding policy, Carl Lomen, a white man, was suddenly in the reindeer business.

Carl Lomen had come to Nome in 1900 with his family to take advantage of the gold excitement. Gudbrand Lomen, Carl's father, was a Norwegian-American attorney who brought his family from St. Paul, Minnesota, to Alaska with the hope of making a business for himself sorting out conflicting mining claims. There was more than enough work for him to do, and his five sons, including Carl, quickly found other mining-related activities to invest in, from photography to prospecting to the drug store business. By the time Carl purchased his first herd of reindeer, the Lomens had formed a loose conglomeration of Alaskan business interests that they called “Lomen & Company.”

The family had decided to invest in the reindeer business with the financial backing of a Norwegian miner who had become wealthy during the early Nome gold strikes. From the beginning, it was clear that the Lomens planned on making the industry big, and they immediately invested in the construction of cold storage plants and investigated transportation possibilities to bring reindeer products to national markets. In order to placate the worries of Eskimo herders, who had just begun, with the Bureau's support, to think about selling some of their meat and hides to white Alaskans, the Lomens assured them that there would be no competition between the two groups. The family promised that they would focus on developing national markets and leave

⁴⁷ Cudluk Oquilluk, “Cudlook Oquillok Will Tell You About Reindeer,” *The Eskimo: A Monthly Magazine Published by the Bureau of Education and Devoted to the Interest of Eskimos of Northern Alaska* 1 (November 1916): 1.



Figure 4: Lomen reindeer herd. Lomen Family Collection, Accession number 72-71-2192, Archives and Manuscripts. Image courtesy of Alaska & Polar Regions Department, University of Alaska, Fairbanks.

the local customers to the Natives.⁴⁸ Of course, it would have been no secret to the Lomens that by this point, with the gold rush all but over, most of the potential local customers had already left Alaska.

Nevertheless, the Bureau of Education was cautiously optimistic during the early years of the Lomen reindeer business that white and Native reindeer herders could operate side by side.⁴⁹ Carl Lomen initially endeared himself to both Bureau officials and the Eskimo herders by offering to buy excess steers from the Natives at a generous ten dollars per head. He also hired Eskimo herders to work with his employees in the field.⁵⁰ While small gestures such as these may have initially kept the peace in the pastures of northwestern Alaska, behind the scenes, Lomen was already working to ensure his family's future dominance in all aspects of the reindeer industry. He spent much of his time building networks of support in major eastern cities, styling himself as the "Reindeer King of Alaska."⁵¹ Lomen's success was overwhelming. Within two years,

⁴⁸ G.J. Lomen, "Views on the Development of the Reindeer Industry," *The Eskimo (A Monthly Magazine Concerning the Eskimo of Northwestern Alaska)* 2 (November 1917): 5–6. Note that the *Eskimo* was an informal periodical that often changed its subtitle.

⁴⁹ "Notes-Reindeer Report 1916-Shields," p. 4, box 3, Clarence Leroy Andrews Papers, Special Collections & University Archives, University of Oregon, Eugene.

⁵⁰ George Bird Grinnell to Carl S. Lomen, 5 May 1922, box 8, Lomen Family Papers [hereafter LFP], APRC.

⁵¹ "The Reindeer Industry," n.d., p. 7, box 30, Anthony J. Dimond Papers [hereafter AJDP], APRC.

he had organized the Lomen Reindeer and Trading Corporation, with holdings of forty thousand reindeer and capital stock worth over one and one-half million dollars.

Unfortunately, the Native herders in Western Alaska (with a few notable exceptions, like Sinrock Mary) were not enjoying a similar degree of success with the reindeer enterprise. A terrible outbreak of influenza during the winter of 1918–19 had taken the lives of many of the herders, and much of the cultural momentum put in place by the reindeer fairs was lost. In addition, the decrease in the number of Eskimo herders meant that most of the Native-owned reindeer were wandering freely around western Alaska. The number of animals was growing at an astonishing rate. By the early 1920s, it was no longer possible to tell which reindeer belonged to whose herd. In order to remedy this situation, William Lopp, who remained in charge of the Alaska Division of the Bureau of Education, suggested that Natives consolidate their reindeer into co-operatively-managed, or “company” herds.⁵² In most cases, these herds were organized as joint stock companies or ownership cooperatives, issuing one share of stock per deer to each member-owner.⁵³

This new corporate structure seemed to overturn the philosophy of small, subsistence herds that Lopp and his Reindeer Service colleagues had established fifteen years before. In many ways, however, the new structure was the inevitable outgrowth of the original Reindeer Service plan, which had resulted in too many individually owned herds drifting together on the same open landscape. The developing Lomen enterprise must have been an important factor as well. After all, this new corporate structure—whether intentionally or not—directed the Eskimo herders toward a competitive, capitalist mindset, the exact thing for which Lopp had attacked Sheldon Jackson’s policy fifteen years before. Now that the Lomens were working to create a large-scale reindeer industry, however, the Bureau quickly decided that the Natives should be doing the same.

Not surprisingly, the Lomens were much faster and more effective than the Bureau of Education in attempting to create markets for reindeer products in the United States. They used radio and print ads to convince the American public that Alaskan reindeer meat could provide a readily available and cheaper alternative to beef. And to make this new meal option seem attractive, Carl Lomen did everything in his power to get the meat “taste-tested” by prominent critics, particularly in eastern cities. One positive reviewer proclaimed, “all who have tasted the meat like and become fond of it and pronounce it delicious. The fat is nutty and can be eaten in small cubes with as much relish as we down caramels or marshmallows.”⁵⁴ Unfortunately for the Lomens, however, not everyone took to the northern delicacy with such enthusiasm. One set of New York critics bemoaned, “if any meat is worse than reindeer meat we are at a loss

⁵² Stern et al., *Eskimos, Reindeer, and Land*, 45.

⁵³ Olson, *Alaska Reindeer Herdsmen*, 47.

⁵⁴ John G. Brady, “Reindeer in Alaska,” n.d., p. 2, box 11, John G. Brady Papers, Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Yale University.

to think what it is, unless it would be mule meat. The tenderest steak of a reindeer is tough, coarse, and stringy . . . It is dark and horrible in appearance. Reindeer meat is so bad that there ought to be a law against it."⁵⁵ Despite critical setbacks such as these, the Lomens were successful in getting a number of urban restaurants interested in reindeer as high-end specialty meat.

The Lomen family also explored more creative outlets for their company's products. They spoke with the United States Army about the desirability of reindeer hides for making lightweight, waterproof suits that could be worn by soldiers and pilots. They advertised their product to pet food manufacturers, successfully convincing the White Rover Company to try marketing a dog food made entirely of reindeer meat.⁵⁶ And, perhaps inevitably, the Lomens also worked to capitalize on the mythological and cultural significance of reindeer. They marketed live, harness-broken animals for use in Christmas parades and holiday displays, eventually securing contracts from department stores across the country, including Macy's. To contribute to the authenticity of their product, the Lomens would offer their customers the possibility of having one or more Eskimo herders accompany the animals on their trip South. After caring for the deer, these "authentic Alaskan Eskimos" would then act the part of Santa's helpers for the Christmas spectacle.

The Lomens' efforts were at least moderately successful, as almost six and one-half million pounds of reindeer and reindeer products were sold in the United States by 1929.⁵⁷ The vast majority of the sales benefited the Lomen Corporation, although the Bureau of Education did make some sales on behalf of the Eskimo herders. Still, these sales represented only 5 percent of the estimated 640,000 deer that then existed in western Alaska.⁵⁸ Demand simply could not keep pace with supply, and the supply of reindeer was soaring dangerously out of control.

As their numbers grew, the reindeer were forced into ever more distant arctic landscapes. As one observer astutely noted, "Alaska's food, the reindeer, is eating up Alaska . . . Lack of market and capital make it impossible to ship out the deer and lack of pasturage will make it impossible to keep them there much longer."⁵⁹ Although the Lomens were having some success selling their reindeer products in the continental United States, their operating costs were so high that they were simply not making a profit. Consequently, the company was unable to build more slaughterhouses or cold storage facilities to process more deer. Meanwhile, the Eskimo herders, most of whom

⁵⁵ Untitled Document, 11 October 1929, box 17, Ben Mozee Papers, APRC.

⁵⁶ "From Carl Lomen's Diary," 1935, box 20, LFP, APRC.

⁵⁷ Olson, *Alaska Reindeer Herdsmen*, 14.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁵⁹ This quote is attributed to Judge James Wickersham, then the Alaska Delegate to Congress. "From Carl Lomen's Diary," 1926, LFP, APRC.



Figure 5: Eskimo man with reindeer at a Christmas performance. Image courtesy of University of Washington Libraries, Special Collections, UW 25939z.

had never seen a profit from their reindeer, stepped up their attacks on the Lomen Corporation and asked the federal government to step in on their behalf.⁶⁰

In 1929, the secretary of the interior decided that the reindeer situation was an Alaskan problem, and he officially transferred responsibility for the program from the Bureau of Education to the office of Alaska's governor. In the midst of this governmental transfer, a federal Reindeer Committee was appointed to investigate the current conflicts and problems with reindeer herding in Alaska. The Lomens used this chaotic window of opportunity to lobby for favorable range regulations, marketing privileges, and the dismissal of Native complaints against them.⁶¹ While the Lomens were fairly

⁶⁰ See Affidavits in box 1, Alaska Reindeer Service Records, RG 75.21.1, National Archives and Records Administration, Pacific-Alaska Region, Anchorage. I am using the terms "Lomen Corporation" and "Lomen Company" as shorthand forms for the five major Lomen-owned companies of the time.

⁶¹ House Committee on Ways and Means, *Tariff Readjustment—1929: Statement of Carl J. Lomen, New York City, Representing the Lomen Reindeer Corporation*, 70th Cong., 2d sess., 24 January 1929.

successful in their lobbying efforts, the economic benefits to their company were ultimately minimal, as their export market crashed with the onset of the Great Depression.

While the Lomens were attempting to assess the extent of their company's financial losses, the Reindeer Committee was attempting to assess what was really happening on the reindeer ranges of Alaska. The committee had much to investigate, as accusations of wrongdoing flew from every direction. The Eskimos accused the Lomens of abusing their monopoly on slaughterhouses and transportation facilities, of stealing Native reindeer by deliberately manipulating branding marks, and of only paying Eskimos for reindeer with credit at their trading stores.⁶² The Lomens accused the government of undervaluing their role as an employer of Alaska Natives and of deliberately ruining their company's profit margins by flooding the market with under-priced Native reindeer meat. Both groups accused one another of monopolizing grazing lands, of not taking care of their animals, and of causing the problem of reindeer overpopulation.⁶³

In February and March of 1931, the Reindeer Committee presented the results of their investigation at a series of Reindeer Hearings in Washington, DC. The group concluded that there were too many reindeer wandering unattended around the Alaskan landscape, and there were simply not enough profitable ways for their owners to dispose of them. The committee recommended that a roundup of all Alaskan reindeer take place as soon as possible, so that the ownership of all animals could be determined and carefully marked. It was also suggested that the government work harder to develop secure markets for reindeer products in the continental United States. While, on face value, the committee's recommendations appeared fairly benign, if uninspired, much of the rhetoric of its final report clearly favored the Lomen Company. The group uniformly dismissed many of the complaints of the Natives, and at the close of the hearings, one member of the committee concluded, "I do not believe that the record has established anything in the way of serious criticism of either [the Lomen] company or others connected with the production of reindeer. To me [the investigation] has revealed just the ordinary controversies that arise in connection with such an industry."⁶⁴ The Native herders and their supporters were naturally upset by the results of the investigation.

With no meaningful way to implement the committee's investigations, nothing came of the original report, and complaints against the Lomens continued to mount. The Department of the Interior quickly ordered another investigation, the recommendations of which took on a similar tone to those of the 1931 Reindeer Committee Hearings.⁶⁵ The report maintained the legality of the Lomens' business dealings and

⁶² "Minutes of the Cape Reindeer Company," n.d., box 30, AJDP, APRC.

⁶³ "The Reindeer Industry," n.d., p. 1-5, box 30, AJDP, APRC.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁶⁵ The results of this investigation are often referred to as the "Trowbridge-Gilman Report."

concluded that, although it should make some efforts on behalf of marketing reindeer products, “the government should not purchase existing reindeer marketing facilities or establish competitive agencies.”⁶⁶ Meanwhile, advocates of the Native herders became increasingly aggressive and vocal in their cause, which had expanded to include nothing less than bringing down the Lomen Corporation. The Native herders openly attacked the latest reindeer investigation in the media, and one Native herder was quoted as saying that the government’s recommendations served “as an official White Wash for all things Lomen . . . The three special investigators can truly be styled the three yes men of the Lomen interests.”⁶⁷ The Eskimo herders became increasingly politically active during this period, and they managed to attract a number of prominent Indian advocates to their cause.

The most important of these sympathetic Indian advocates was John Collier, the new commissioner of Indian affairs. Collier came to this position having spent the past decade working for the Indian Defense Association, which opposed the Dawes General Allotment Act of 1887. Inspired by his experiences in the Indian Southwest, Collier worked to reformulate federal Indian policy around the concept of cultural pluralism, and the centerpiece of his new policy was the Indian Reorganization Act, or “Indian New Deal,” of 1934. This legislation encouraged Native peoples to create tribal governments and engage in cooperative economic activities on reservations. While the Indian New Deal did not apply to Alaska Natives—even simple concepts like “tribes” and “reservations” were simply not applicable there—Collier was eager to include Alaska in his vision for federal Indian policy. Thus, he helped promote the passage of the 1936 Alaska Reorganization Act, which encouraged Alaska Natives to form village governments and offered them loans from a federal credit fund to promote the development of Native economic activities.⁶⁸ This act was not nearly as comprehensive as the Indian Reorganization Act, and it did not apply directly to reindeer matters. However, during the course of crafting the legislation, the Office of Indian Affairs conducted its own investigation into the Alaskan reindeer controversy. After studying the subject, Collier concluded that reindeer herding was part of the Eskimo’s heritage and should be promoted for the exclusive betterment of the Alaska Natives.⁶⁹ What Jackson had promoted as a means of Eskimo *assimilation* almost forty years prior, Collier now saw as an important part of Eskimo *culture* that should be preserved for their benefit.

Collier’s investigation into Alaska Native affairs was one important factor changing the tone of the reindeer debates in Washington. Another was the financial status of the

⁶⁶ Stern et al., *Eskimos, Reindeer, and Land*, 63.

⁶⁷ *Alaska (Juneau) Press*, 21 September 1934.

⁶⁸ For more on the Alaska Reorganization Act, see Kenneth R. Philp “The New Deal and Alaskan Natives, 1936–1945,” in *An Alaskan Anthology: Interpreting the Past*, ed. Stephen W. Haycox and Mary Childers Mangusso (Seattle, 1996), 267–86.

⁶⁹ Stern et al., *Eskimos, Reindeer, and Land*, 69–70.

Lomen Corporation. After the economic downturn of 1929, the Lomens were forced to ask for a government loan to keep their business afloat. This loan was approved in 1933, on the basis of the company's importance as an "employer of Eskimos." As a result of this loan, however, the government decided to audit the company. The auditor found that "[t]he condition of the [Lomen Corporation] and subsidiary companies . . . should be of great concern to the officers and stockholders of this enterprise. The companies have experienced heavy losses, resulting in a deficit of over five hundred thousand dollars for the period covered by this report."⁷⁰ By the conclusion of this audit, it had become clear to most everyone, including the Lomens, that the company would probably not survive much longer. The family became amenable to a buy out.

Although it was difficult to convince many members of Congress to purchase private property in Alaska in a time when economic conditions could not be worse, a strong desire to end the whole reindeer mess won over many skeptics. On 1 September 1937, Congress passed the Reindeer Act, which restricted the ownership of domestic reindeer in Alaska to Natives only and transferred control of the program to the Alaska Division of the Office of Indian Affairs. The legislation also set in motion the administrative machinery for the eventual government purchase of all non-Native owned deer and industry-related supplies.⁷¹ Although it took several years to complete the appraisal of the Lomens' assets, the government eventually purchased the entirety of their reindeer business for just under \$500,000. And with the signing of the check, Carl Lomen, a white man, was suddenly out of the reindeer business.

While the Reindeer Act was understood to be a complete victory for Alaska Natives, there was one group for whom it was a complete disaster: the Saami herders. The Saami had largely kept out of the reindeer controversy, managing their private herds and working with both the Lomens and the Eskimos when they felt it was appropriate. Although they never imagined that the political controversy over white ownership had anything to do with them, for the purposes of the Reindeer Act, the Saami were defined as "non-Native," and thus the legislation compelled them to sell their herds back to the government. A throwaway promise made by Sheldon Jackson to their immigrant parents forty years before had suddenly come true: in America, the Saami were indeed treated as white people. But in a strange twist of power dynamics, some of the Saami herders who remained in Alaska ended up working for the Eskimos, the people they had once been hired to teach.

The years immediately following the government buy-out of non-Native deer were mysterious ones, referred to in Yupik oral history as "the great die-out" or "the crash."⁷² In 1930, about 640,000 reindeer were estimated to exist in Alaska. By 1940, the

⁷⁰ As quoted in *ibid.*, 67–8.

⁷¹ *Reindeer Industry Act of 1937*, Public Law 413, 75th Cong., 1st sess., 1 September 1937.

⁷² Interview with Herman Toolie, on "The Executive Council of the Reindeer Herders Association talks with Bill Schneider on September 26, 2002, in Nome, Alaska" (sound recording), Oral History Collection, University of Alaska, Fairbanks.

number had fallen to 250,000, and by 1950, only 25,000 reindeer remained.⁷³ No one knows exactly how this population crash occurred, though there were several probable causes. The first theory was starvation. The reindeer had overgrazed much of northern and western Alaska, and the ecosystem had simply reached its carrying capacity. The second theory was predation. The rise in reindeer population had led to an increase in the wolf population, which then naturally lowered the numbers of reindeer back to manageable levels. The third theory, and the one favored by most of the Eskimo herders at the time, was that the reindeer had “gone caribou.”⁷⁴ The years leading up to the reindeer’s disappearance coincided with the in-migration of hundreds of thousands of caribou to the Seward Peninsula. The Eskimos believed that the reindeer no longer wanted to be herded, so they ran off with the migration, joining their ancient relatives and “passing,” as it were, for caribou.⁷⁵

Regardless of the cause of “the crash,” most of the Eskimo herders did not see the departure of the reindeer as much of a problem. Despite the fact that the Office of Indian Affairs had worked hard to preserve this important aspect of Eskimo “culture,” it had become clear to many Natives that reindeer brought them more work than reward, and most of the herders had never really taken to the nomadic lifestyle that herding required. Now that the Natives had secured the reindeer as their own, they were free to let them go. Many Natives were happy to watch the reindeer run off with the caribou, so they could concentrate on hunting and fishing again.⁷⁶ The reindeer would not disappear forever, though, and years later, Natives would again embrace herding as a part of their culture and livelihood. That, however, is the story of another time.

While the government introduced reindeer herding as a tool of assimilation—a way to move Eskimos away from traditional lifeways and toward an engagement with market culture—the Native experience with the project was far from linear. Rather than wholeheartedly embracing the enterprise—or universally rejecting it in favor of more traditional activities—Natives would continue to consider reindeer herding as one of many economic options available to them at different times throughout the twentieth century. Rather than moving Alaska’s economy along a linear path to development and prosperity, the reindeer’s presence would instead ebb and flow with the needs of Eskimo communities and changes in the natural environment—a reflection of the Native herders whose culture quietly but definitively shaped the project.

⁷³ Olson, *Eskimo Reindeer Herdsmen*, 14–5.

⁷⁴ “To The Eskimo People,” *The Eskimo: A Quarterly Magazine Devoted to the Interest of Eskimos of Alaska* 5 (October 1938): 1.

⁷⁵ Interview with Ted Katcheak, on “The Executive Council of the Reindeer Herders Association talks with Bill Schneider on March 20, 2002, in Nome, Alaska (sound recording), Oral History Collection, University of Alaska, Fairbanks.

⁷⁶ Margaret Lantis, “The Reindeer Industry in Alaska,” *Arctic* 3 (April 1950): 27–44.