

Industry / Agriculture

CATTLE RANCHING IN THE SUBARCTIC

By Tricia Brown

Cattle ranching on the Last Frontier reaches back as far as Russian Alaska, when settlers first introduced bovines to Kodiak Island. The animals were easy pickings for the massive bears that inhabited the island, and ranchers lost many head before acquiring aggressive bear dogs in one attempt to protect their herds. Little changed in the next two hundred years, as ranchers continued to experiment with ways to protect their investment.

After transfer of Alaska from Russia to the United States in 1867, the Alaska Commercial Company established a dairy herd at Kodiak and grazed their cows on a small, neighboring island, which afforded the herd some protection. Beef cattle also were established on certain islands in the Aleutian chain, some with success.

Meanwhile, on Kodiak Island, the battle between ranchers and bears waged on. According to the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, historical efforts in the 20th century included shooting bears from airplanes, and a proposal to build a nine-foot-high fence across the island that would cordon off a “bear-free zone.” By 1927, nearly 1,000 beef cattle and dairy cows were grazing on Kodiak and the Aleutian Islands. And by the mid-1960s, when anti-bear measures formally ceased, ranchers had seen only small gains, counting about 1,300 head.

During the 1900s, government and private concerns attempted to build a viable cattle industry in pockets throughout the territory. In 1887, the federal Hatch Act was passed, authorizing the establishment of agricultural experiment stations, and farms were established at Sitka and Kodiak. In later years, the government operated experimental farms at Kenai, Rampart, Copper Center, Fairbanks and Matanuska. Crop production was a mainstay of the work, although animal husbandry also was an important field of study, including work with reindeer, bison, musk oxen, yak, sheep, and swine.

In 1935, a herd of dairy cattle arrived in Southcentral Alaska as part of the Alaska Rural Rehabilitation Corporation's Matanuska Valley Colonization project. The government-owned animals were shipped by seagoing vessel and train, then offloaded in Palmer for further trucking to the new colony. The growing community was comprised of Midwest farmers who had accepted the federal government's offer to relocate in Alaska as one of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's "New Deal" programs. While nearly half of the 202 participating families left within two years, the project did serve as the seed for a budding market in dairy products, as well as potatoes, cabbage, hay, and other crops.

Breeds that seemed naturally suited for Alaska included Holsteins (dairy cow developed in the Netherlands and first imported to America in the mid-1850s), Herefords (an ancient breed from western England, red-bodied with white markings), and Galloways (a Scottish breed that survives on poor forage and a cold, wet climate; white, curly coat with black points; first imported in mid-1850s).

Alaska farmers continue to raise cattle and sheep in areas of the Kenai Peninsula, the Kodiak Peninsula, the Alaska Peninsula, the Tanana Valley, and certain Aleutian Islands. The animals spend three-quarters of the year feeding indoors and only 100 days per year grazing.

The Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation reports that the Tanana Valley produces much of the state's beef, hogs, barley, plus hay, oats, potatoes, milk, greenhouse plants and vegetables. Farmers in the Matanuska Valley produce milk, hogs, beef, potatoes, oats, hay, and greenhouse plants and vegetables.

According to the state's Division of Agriculture, numbers of beef cattle increased between 1998 and 2005 in the Southcentral and Tanana Valley areas. Meanwhile the state noted a decreasing trend in the number of dairy cows. Reports also show 6,100 beef cattle were calved in Alaska in 2006, with the greatest numbers from southwestern Alaska. Of the total 800 dairy cattle calved in 2006, some 520 were in the Matanuska Valley.

Feral cattle, survivors of early ranching efforts in the Aleutians, have remained problematic through the years. In 1985, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service employees were called upon to shoot all of the wild cattle roaming Simeonof Island. The drastic act occurred only after failed attempts to round them up. According to a UPI report published that September, the cattle had “roamed freely on the island since they arrived in the mid-1890s.” The long-horned cattle were described as “too tough to domesticate and a threat to other wildlife.”

The Fairbanks Experiment Farm, established in 1906, and the Matanuska Experiment Farm, established in 1916, continue to operate under the umbrella of the University of Alaska system, offering Alaskan farmers research-backed science, publications, and advice to help them succeed.

LINKS:

Alaska Farm Bureau:

<http://akfb.fb.org>

Department of Natural Resources, Division of Agriculture, State of Alaska:

http://www.dnr.state.ak.us/ag/ag_adhoc.htm

Alaska Agricultural Statistics Bulletin 2006:

www.dnr.state.ak.us/ag/ag_adhoc.htm

USDA research on genetic origins of cattle on Chirikof Island:

http://www.ars.usda.gov/research/publications/publications.htm?seq_no_115=195776

ADF&G, Division of Wildlife Conservation:

<http://www.wc.adfg.state.ak.us/index.cfm?adfg=bears.trivia>

Oklahoma State University info on Polled Herefords:

<http://www.ansi.okstate.edu/breeds/cattle/polledhereford/index.htm>

VISIT THE LIBRARY FOR MORE INFORMATION:

Alaska’s libraries hold audio, visual, and written material about the history of cattle ranching in Alaska. Visit your local library or go online to see what’s available in holdings all over the state. Take these simple steps:

1. Access **SLED** (State Library Electronic Doorway) at <http://sled.alaska.edu/library.html>.

2. Click on the listing for **ALNCat** (the Alaska Library Network Catalog) to view the Basic Search window. Go to the Keyword field, and type in **CATTLE ALASKA**.

MORE READING:

Agroborealis Vol. 30, No. 1. "100 Years of Alaska Agriculture." Marking the centennial of experiment station work in Alaska, this review begins with Alaska's first experiment station in Sitka, covers development of the other experiment station sites, and includes stories on Charles Christian Georgeson and George T. Gasser, the development of strawberry cultivars in Alaska, Alaska's reindeer industry, and more.

Bear-Salmon and Cattle Controversy. Kodiak, Alaska: Kodiak National Wildlife Refuge, 1950-1951.

Compton, Thomas Lee. *Cattle Grazing Behavior in Relation to Management of a Subarctic Range*. College, Alaska, 1969.

Eide, Sterling. *The Nature of Brown Bear Predation on Cattle, Kodiak Island, Alaska*. Anchorage, Alaska: Alaska Department of Fish and Game, 1965.

Georgeson, C. C. and W. T. White. *Eradication of Tuberculosis in Cattle at the Kodiak Experiment Station*. Sitka, Alaska: Alaska Agricultural Experiment Stations, 1924.

Georgeson, C. C. *Brief History of Cattle Breeding in Alaska*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1929.

Shipka, Milan P. and Janice E. Rowell. *Reproductive Management of Alaska Livestock*. Fairbanks, Alaska: Agricultural and Forestry Experiment Station, University of Alaska Fairbanks, 2007. Discusses general reproductive management of bison, cattle, elk, goat, horse, musk ox, reindeer, sheep, swine, and yak.

Some Potentials and Problems of Cattle Ranching on Kodiak Island, Alaska. Corvallis, Oregon: C.W. Vrooman and Associates, University of Alaska Fairbanks, 1956.

Sweetman, William J., Wallace R. Middleton, Fred Swingle. *Raising Dairy Calves and Heifers in Alaska*. Palmer, Alaska: Alaska Agricultural Experiment Station, 1951.

ARCHIVAL MATERIAL:

H.D. Catron Photograph Collection, 1943-1949. Alaska State Library. Nine black-and-white photographs depict Mr. and Mrs. Catron's sheep ranch operation at Chernofski Harbor, Unalaska, in the Aleutian Islands in the 1940s. Collection includes views of the ranch operation, the Catron home, Mr. and Mrs. Catron, Aleut employees, cattle, and a panorama of Chernofski Harbor.

John Kill Photograph Collection, 1898. Alaska State Library. Twenty-three black-and-white studio-mounted photographs were taken during a cattle-drive from Skagway to Nome in 1898. Some of the views are by Skagway photographers Case & Draper and E.A. Hegg. *Bio/History:* John Kill and Jack McCarty drove a herd of cattle and sheep from Skagway to Nome in 1898. The meat and other supplies were sold at John Kill's Meat Market in Nome.