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Three Alaskan Eskimos have set out to prove that reindeer have other uses than pulling Santa's sleigh. They have joined the ever-growing number of Alaskan "reindeer cowboys" who manage the animals as livestock--a project encouraged by the Department of the Interior's Bureau of Indian Affairs to spur the Alaskan economy.

This month, as weather permits, the Bureau will ship some 200 head from its Nunivak Island herd by Air National Guard planes to Togiak--a distance of about 225 miles. From there, the reindeer will be transferred by boat to nearby Hagemeister Island in Bristol Bay.

The reindeer are furnished by BIA as a loan, to be paid back in reindeer as the herd increases. The Eskimos have leased grazing rights on the island from Interior's Bureau of Land Management, who also furnished a model management plan for the three operators to follow. According to the plan, the animals will be culled carefully to build a strong herd, and the range will be protected from overgrazing. Fencing will be necessary on one neck of the island, officials said, because animals could escape to the mainland during certain low-water periods.

The two agencies and specialties from the University of Alaska will follow the project closely and gather data for technical studies. After the herd is stabilized, the meat will be sold in Togiak and other nearby villages. Surplus animals will enter the usual commercial channels.

This is the latest move by BIA it its struggle to rebuild Alaska’s reindeer industry, which until 1952 was heading for its last roundup. Not a native of Alaska, the reindeer was introduced from Siberia in the 1890’s as an extra source of meat for the Eskimos. Commercial ventures outside Alaska had killed most of the whales and walrus, and the Eskimo was in danger of starving to death.

The animals thrived for many years. By 1936 there were 600,000 head, but poor “open range” management of the herds soon took its toll. With no knowledge of husbandry, the natives slaughtered whenever they needed meat and hides, giving no attention to perfecting breeds. Forage diminished from overuse and wolves preyed on unprotected herds, particularly during the walrus season when Eskimos abandoned care of the herds in favor of the traditional walrus hunt. Left untended, reindeer became wild and wandered off with migrating herds of caribou. By 1952, the count was down 19,000.

In that year, encouraged by success of Scandinavian countries in the breeding and raising of reindeer as full-fledged industry, BIA began to promote proper management of the animals in Alaska. Goals are far from sight even today, but the reindeer population has more than doubled in the past 13 years.

The Bureau of Land Management has aided the growing industry by issuing 14 free grazing permits covering 8.5 million acres of tundra range on public domain lands. By law, only Alaska Natives can own the animals and there is no open hunting season on them. They are considered livestock, not big game.

The Hagemeister Island project is very important, BIA points out, for many similar projects are hinging on its success. If the fawning season is productive next year—they’ll know by June--other Eskimos will

be willing to try starting herds for themselves.

"The odds are on our side," says Wallace Craig, area field office representative for BIA. "The range has a good growth of lichens and sedges-- the reindeer’s basic food--one of the operators has had experience managing reindeer, and Hagemeister has no caribou."

In addition to its herd on Nunivak Island, BIA operates a processing plant and is pursuing new markets for the meat, considered by many a gourmet I s delight. The largest existing markets are in Northern Alaska, primarily in the Nome, Kotzebue, and Bethel areas. Potential markets, however, lie on the Seward Peninsula and the coastal strip south to the Bristol Bay area-- and in the lower 48 States.

BIA leaders realize the uphill struggle ahead in attaining full acceptance of "Alaska venison” as a staple item on butcher counters. In the first place, there is the association with Santa Claus, placing reindeer in the same category as the family’s pet rabbit. But there are other obstacles, including high shipping costs to the lower 48 States.

It is hoped, too, that as Eskimos learn husbandry practices they will be able to control the warble problem. This parasite, which eats into the animal's hide, must be controlled before the Eskimo can build any kind of hide industry in Alaska.

If the market problems can be solved, Alaska and her natives stand to profit from a sizeable new industry. Enjoying a present market for some 480,000 pounds of meat, the industry potential is almost three times as great.

Even at 45 cents per pound, this would amount to a $5 million industry--and that isn't lichen and sedge.