

THE ROMANCE OF

The Alaska Fur Seal

PART OF SIBERIA

Fields
and Mountains of Ice

East Cape

Murchison's Straits

S. Pt. of
Wales

Bering Sea

ALASKA

Bering's Bay

Cape Pitt

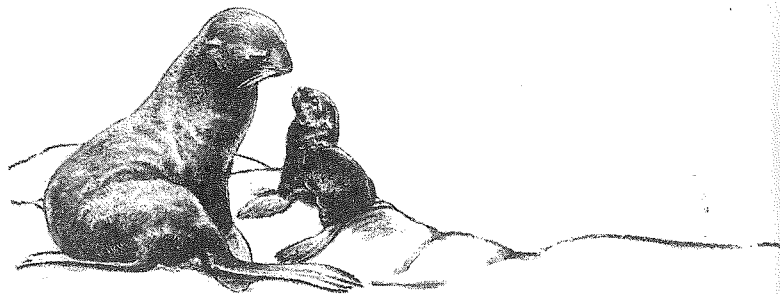
A
Correct Chart
of
NORTH AMERICA
from
Bhering's Straits to Cape Pitt

Prybilof Isles

Kodiyeko
of Capt Cook

Aleutian Isles





INTRODUCTION

The story of the Alaska Fur Seal is compounded of mystery, romance, adventure and history such as surround few other forms of wildlife. It is, as well, a story of success in the conservation of a renewable resource which was once threatened with extinction but today returns a substantial income, both to the fur industry and to our government. We are presenting something of this story in the belief that it will interest those who wear Alaska Fur Seal, those who manufacture and sell it — and the public, as well.

The greatest difference between a renewable resource and one which is non-renewable is that wise use of the former need not necessarily result in depletion. When we burn coal or oil, for example, these non-renewable resources are gone from the earth and can only be replaced in geologic time. But when we feed a corn crop to our cattle, cut a tree for lumber, or harvest some form of wildlife, it is possible to replace the elements we have used. Thus we can grow another crop of corn, another tree or another deer. And because of this, a widely accepted concept has come to be that the conservation of any renewable resource consists in its wise management and use for the benefit of man — and on a basis of sustained or increasing yield.

Certainly this definition has held for the past forty years in the case of the Alaska Fur Seal which provides the world with one of its most valued and beautiful furs. Ever since 1911, when the great Bering Sea herd of Alaska Fur Seals had

been brought dangerously close to extinction, the government of the United States has applied a program of wise management to this valuable resource. As a result of this program the herd has increased steadily until its numbers are today close to the carrying capacity of the breeding grounds on the fog-shrouded Pribilof Islands.

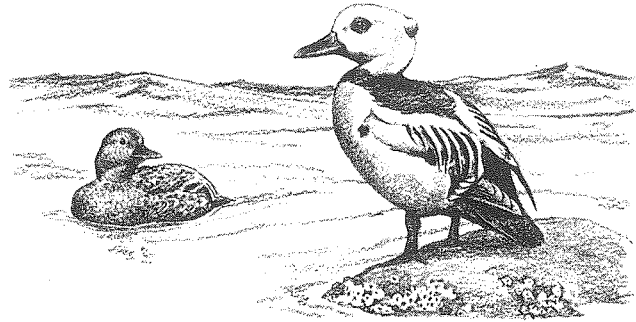
There has been, during all but a few of these years, a steady harvest of surplus animals. The result has been a revenue which in total exceeds by more than ten times the price paid to Russia in 1867 for the entire territory of Alaska. Ever since the beginning of this sound and scientific management program, Fouke Fur Company of St. Louis had the good fortune to play an important part in it. For it is at Fouke Fur Company in St. Louis that the skins of the Alaska Seal go through the long and intricate procedure of processing which turns them into one of the world's most desired furs.



THE ROMANCE OF *The Alaska Fur Seal*

The history of the Alaska Fur Seal has its real beginnings in the barbaric splendor of the court of Peter the Great in far-off St. Petersburg. It was in the year 1725 that the Czar of the Russians sent one of his admirals, Vitus Jonassen Bering, out across Siberia to the Pacific to try to discover whether the continents of Asia and America were joined. Arriving overland in Kamchatka, the noted sailor built ships and spent the year 1728 in exploring the sea which today bears his name.

One of the stories which reached Russia with Bering on his return was of the great herds of fur-bearing animals inhabiting these distant waters. Thus it was in the year 1733 that the Empress Catherine, who had succeeded Peter the Great, sent the admiral eastward again on another exploring expedition. The venture was beset by troubles and quarrels and it was 1741 before Bering was once again afloat on the Pacific. This time he sailed far to the north and made the first discovery of northern America from the east. But Bering died before he could report back to his Empress and lies buried today on an island named for him in the Commander Islands off Siberia. With him, however, had sailed the great naturalist Steller, whose name has been given to many of the bird and animal species of western North America. And it was Steller who can be credited with having founded the Bering Sea fur trade.



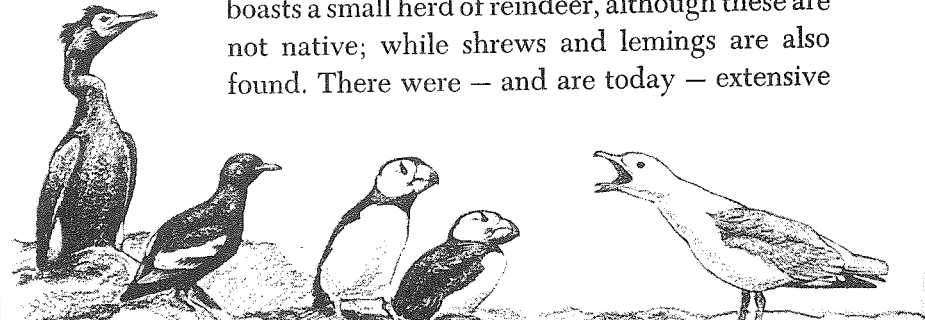
It seems probable that only a limited number of skins of the Fur Seal and sea otter reached St. Petersburg in those early days. Legend has it that fur seal skins were used chiefly to line the inner walls of the homes of the nobility against the winter cold, thus serving as one of the earliest and certainly the most elegant of insulating materials. Actually, many years elapsed before means were discovered for removing the outer guard hair on the skins without at the same time destroying the under fur which gives Alaska Fur Seal its value.

Although the great English sailor Captain Cook visited the Bering Sea in 1778, it was not until 1786 that another Russian navigator and explorer, Gerassim Pribilof, discovered the breeding habitat of the Alaska Fur Seal. This he did by a remarkable piece of navigation, following the annual migration of the herd northward from the open waters of the Pacific to the Islands which now bear his name. Although there are five small land masses in the group, the important ones are St. Paul and St. George which are chiefly used as breeding grounds by the great herd. Pribilof explored these islands and found, in addition to the seals, a considerable wildlife population which included sea lions, sea otters, and both blue and white foxes. St. Paul Island today boasts a small herd of reindeer, although these are not native; while shrews and lemmings are also found. There were — and are today — extensive

rookeries of such nesting birds as sea parrots, auks, cormorants, murre, kittiwakes and gulls.

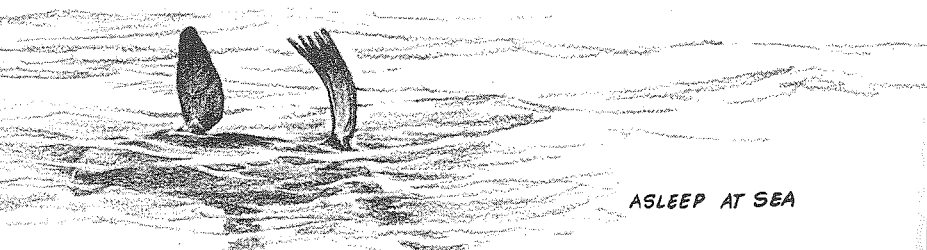
The Pribilof Islands are located well toward the eastern or American side of the Bering Sea, some 250 miles north of the Aleutian Archipelago and 300 miles west of the southern boundary of continental Alaska. Long known to sailors as the "Mist Islands," they are wrapped throughout the summer months especially, in a dripping, almost impenetrable fog. It seems probable this is a chief reason why the Pribilofs have been selected by the Alaska Fur Seals as a breeding ground, since the animals do not like sunlight during the time they must spend on land.

Russia remained in control of Alaska and the islands of the Bering Sea from the period of discovery until their sale as part of the territory of Alaska to the United States in 1867 — that famous transaction known as "Seward's Folly." Prior to this time, under the leadership of

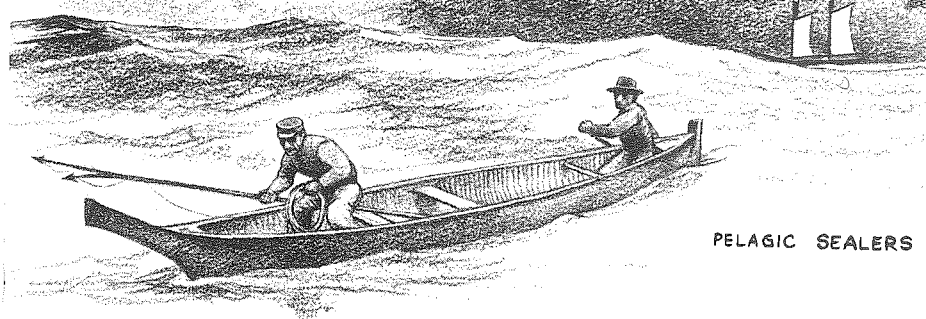


Baranov, a man of great energy and intelligence, there was some colonization and development of resources. A considerable amount of sound conservation thinking seems to have been applied to the exploitation of the Fur Seal herd, for its numbers had not been seriously lessened at the time when the United States took over.

The history of the first fifty years of American possession is a different story and a sad commentary on our early attitude — as well as that of the British — toward all natural resources. This attitude seems to have been that the resource must be turned into cash in the shortest possible order, lest it somehow escape. There were bitter quarrels between America and Great Britain which at times almost broke out into open warfare.



ASLEEP AT SEA



PELAGIC SEALERS

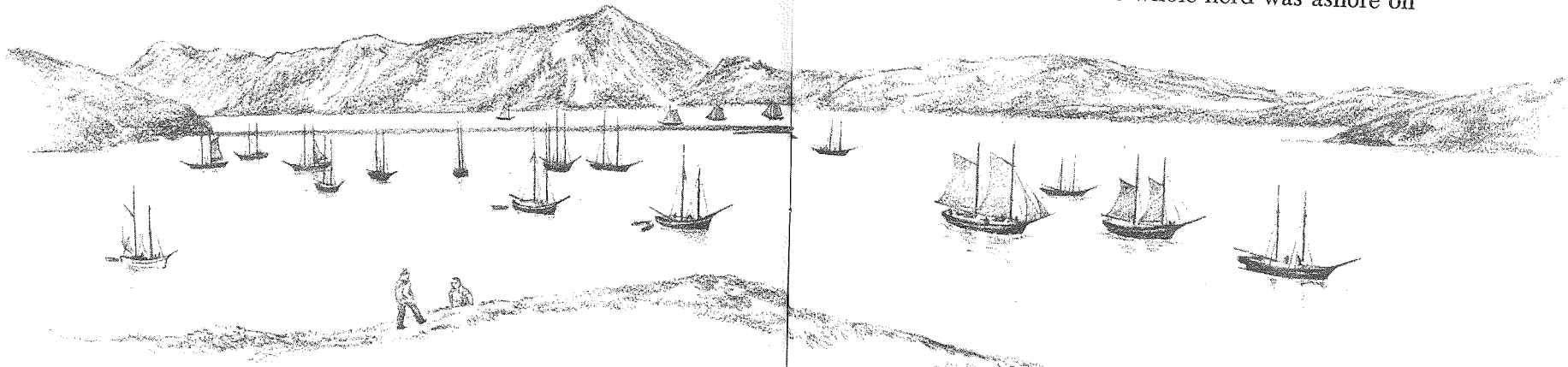
During the period 1870 to 1910 sealing rights were leased to two private companies—the Alaska Commercial Company from 1870 to 1890 and the Northern Commercial Company from 1890 to 1910. It was during this time that killings on the Pribilof Islands in addition to pelagic sealing (killing of seals in the open sea) by nationals of several countries severely depleted the herd.

During this period the United States started a long controversy which sought to outlaw pelagic sealing — even then understood to be terribly wasteful. The basis for the American case was difficult — being built on the concept that since the seals bred on our islands, they belonged to us even during the period of their long months

spent at sea. Because the herd could be, in a sense, managed during its time on land, the Fur Seals were likened to domestic animals. And since indiscriminate killing at sea was obviously destructive, resulting in the loss of countless females and young which could not be used, a decision was even sought on grounds of morality – that pelagic sealing was *contra bonos mores* or against the common good. Anyone who recalls Jack London's stories about sealing will agree with this, yet it is an interesting commentary on the *world* attitude toward resources during those early years, that a highly distinguished international commission, in 1893, decided the whole

case against the United States. They even awarded a half million dollars in damages to British sealing captains whose killing efforts had been handicapped during the years when the case was being discussed.

In the period which followed, realization grew that indiscriminate killing of Fur Seals at sea by sealers of many nationalities could only result in the inevitable extermination of the species. At the same time, a conviction grew that if the Fur Seals could be protected during migration, a planned harvest might be taken during the summer season when the whole herd was ashore on

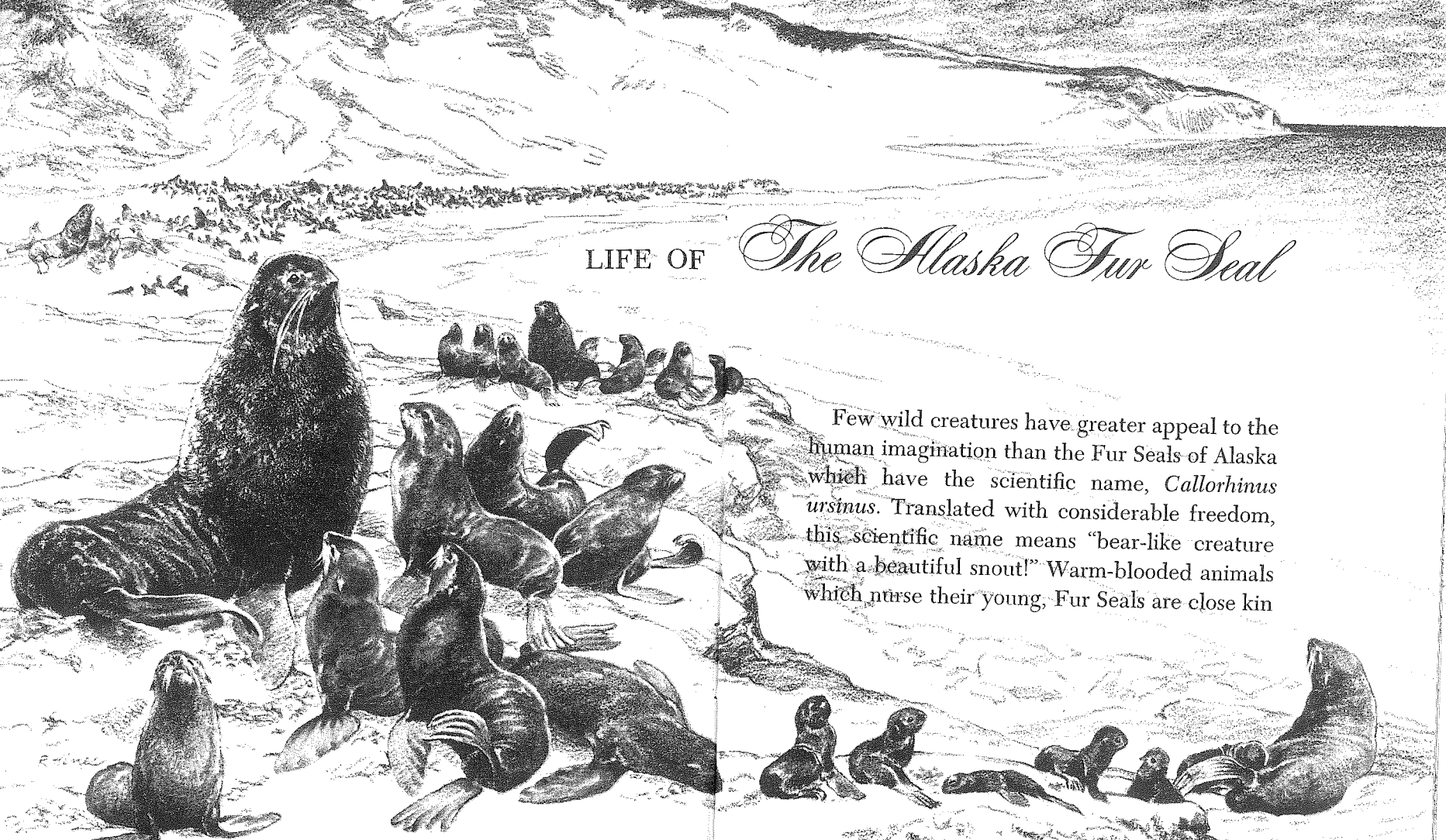


the Pribilofs. If this could be done, there seemed little reason why the Fur Seals might not be preserved for all time, while still yielding a substantial annual revenue. Thus following the 1893 decision, diplomatic negotiations were continued until finally, in 1911, the efforts of the United States to secure international protection for the Pribilof Island herd of Fur Seals were crowned with success. In July of that year a convention was concluded between the United States, Great Britain (including Canada), Japan and Russia which prohibited pelagic sealing in the waters of the North Pacific Ocean. Under terms of the convention, equal protection was given to the Pribilof Island herd for the United States and to smaller herds of Fur Seals breeding in the territorial waters of Russia and Japan. Exceptions were made for the small number of animals speared by Indians and other aborigines dwelling on the coasts of the protected waters.

The Convention of 1911 came none too soon. From an original population of several million,

the Pribilof herd had shrunk to scarcely more than 100,000 animals. Another year or two would probably have seen the end, as it had already almost seen the end of the even rarer sea otter. But the reprieve came in time and in the years since 1911 the number of Fur Seals has increased steadily. For several years now the herd – which totals approximately one and a half million – seems to have been in balance with the natural factors controlling its environment. As always, food is one of the most important of these; in this case the amount of the summer food supply within the swimming range of the mother seals while they are nursing their young on the islands.

So much for the early history of the Alaska Fur Seals; a history which has known its tragedies but which, because of an eventually wise conservation policy, has had a happy outcome.



LIFE OF

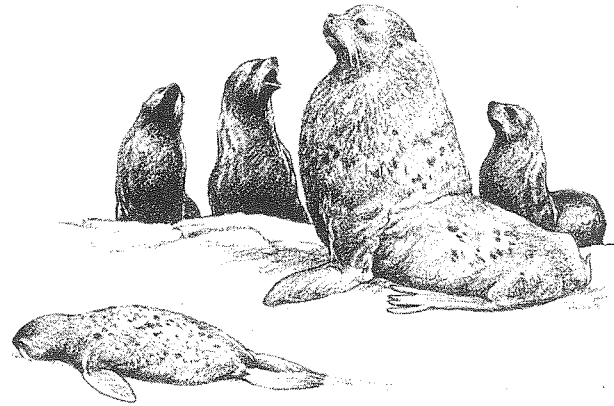
The Alaska Fur Seal

Few wild creatures have greater appeal to the human imagination than the Fur Seals of Alaska which have the scientific name, *Callorhinus ursinus*. Translated with considerable freedom, this scientific name means "bear-like creature with a beautiful snout!" Warm-blooded animals which nurse their young, Fur Seals are close kin

to the sea lions we see performing at the circus or in the zoo, and are also distant cousins of the dog, cat and bear. Although the matter is one for speculation, it seems probable that these beautiful animals may have once lived entirely on the land where they were subjected to such environmental pressures as severe predation or shortage of their food supply—perhaps during an Ice Age. If this supposition is correct, the Fur Seal survived because it was finally successful in producing a race which can spend long months at sea, yet must still come ashore to bear its young and breed.

Fur Seals have in common with sea lions the characteristic that the mature bulls are a great deal larger than the cows. This is not true of the sea otter or of the various species of hair seals. The cows of the Fur Seal family will average about seventy pounds in weight. They are beautifully sleek and are the essence of grace in movement in the water and even on land. The great

breeding bulls, which acquire harems when about nine years of age, will tip the scales at six hundred pounds.

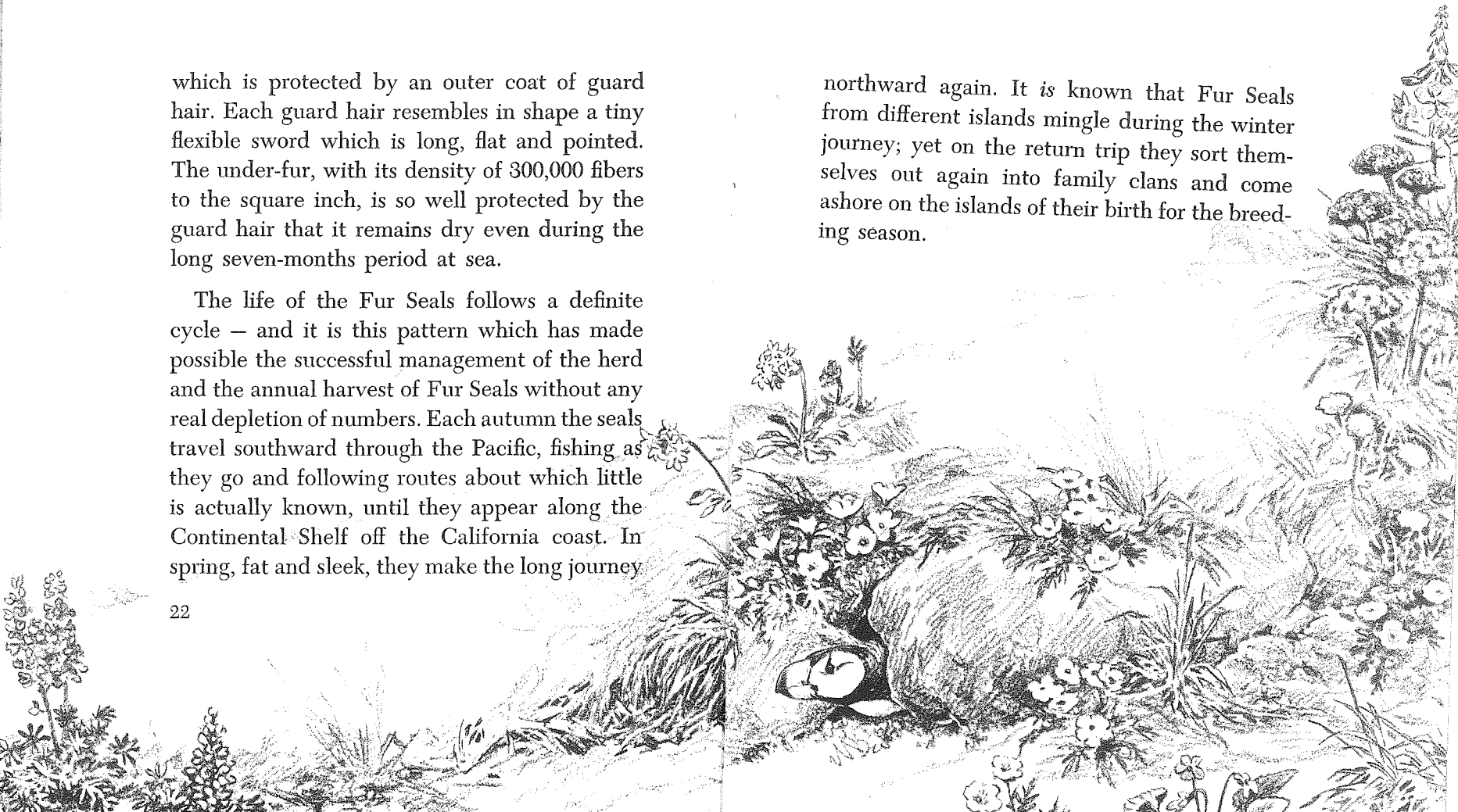


The chief difference between Alaska Fur Seals and the sea lions, as well as the other species of seals, is also the thing which gives them their great value in the fur trade. Sea lions and hair seals both have heavy coats of rather coarse hair with no under-fur. On the other hand, Fur Seals have a tremendously thick coat of fine under-fur

which is protected by an outer coat of guard hair. Each guard hair resembles in shape a tiny flexible sword which is long, flat and pointed. The under-fur, with its density of 300,000 fibers to the square inch, is so well protected by the guard hair that it remains dry even during the long seven-months period at sea.

The life of the Fur Seals follows a definite cycle — and it is this pattern which has made possible the successful management of the herd and the annual harvest of Fur Seals without any real depletion of numbers. Each autumn the seals travel southward through the Pacific, fishing as they go and following routes about which little is actually known, until they appear along the Continental Shelf off the California coast. In spring, fat and sleek, they make the long journey

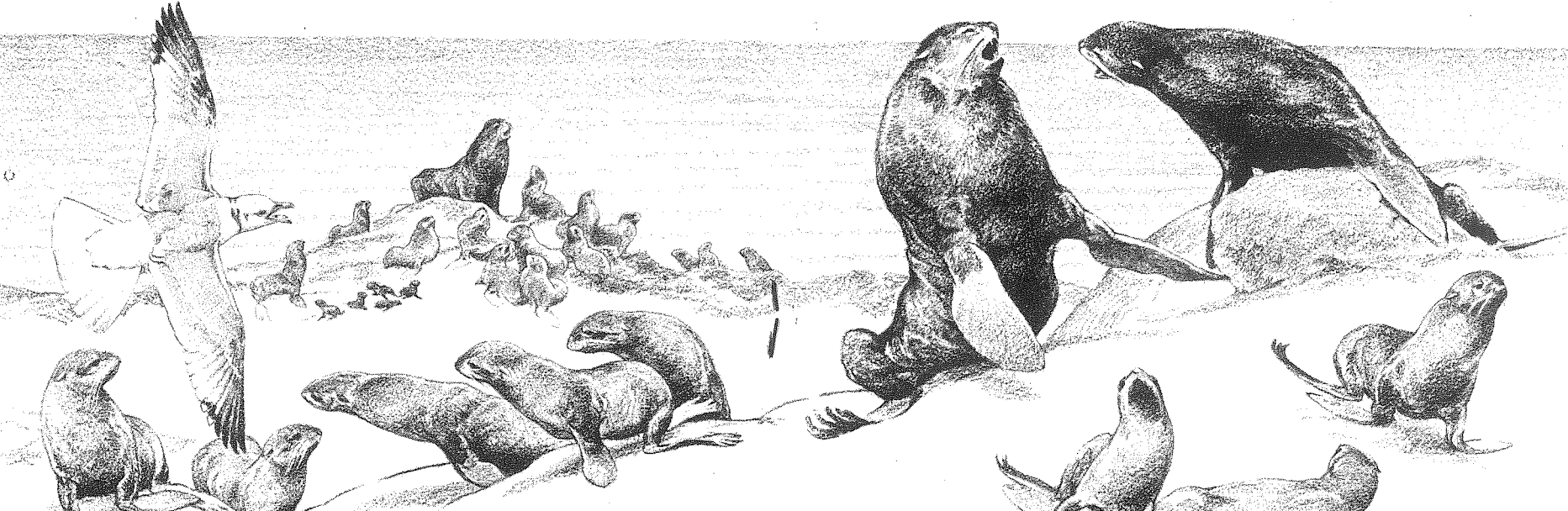
northward again. It is known that Fur Seals from different islands mingle during the winter journey; yet on the return trip they sort themselves out again into family clans and come ashore on the islands of their birth for the breeding season.



In late May and early June — before the deep snow drifts have melted from the rocky beaches and rough, volcanic hillsides of the Pribilofs — the big breeding bulls begin to put in their appearance. Heavy with fat from the winter's feeding—belligerent and full of fight—the 600-pound “beachmasters” come lumbering ashore, each to establish his “territory” of thirty to fifty feet in diameter which any other bull enters at his peril.

Before long, it is summer on the grim, gray islands where no tree grows but where, for a brief season, hundreds of varieties of wildflowers of rare color and beauty burst into bloom.

It is mid-June when the cows begin to arrive—small and demure in comparison with the great bulls, yet engulfing the breeding beaches in wave after wave of silvery brown. Up until this time,

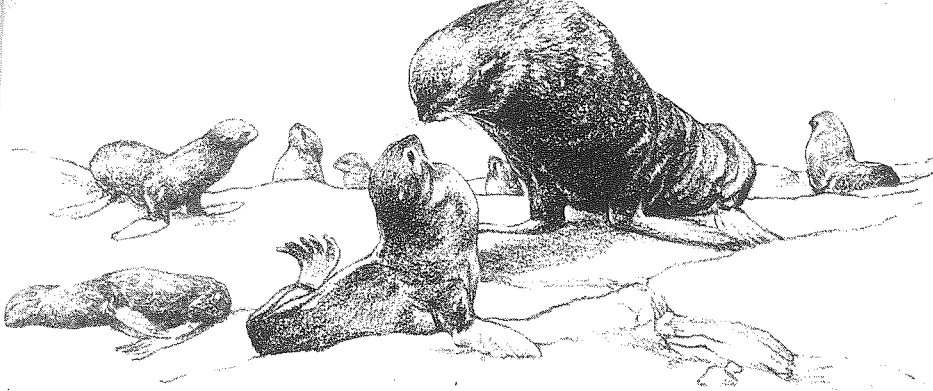


once the territories have been established, the bulls have rested and slept after their long sea journey. When the contest for their harems begins, however, there is no rest for the big beachmasters. Polygamous to an amazing degree, each gathers in as many docile cows as possible; the number varying from one or two to a hundred, but averaging perhaps forty. All day and all night the air is filled with the bleating of females and young and the roar of the big seals as each bull defends his harem against all comers. Battles are fierce and savage, sometimes fought to the death. Each bull is challenged many times and each is likely to lose wives to some stronger contestant. From now until the breeding season ends the bulls live without food and get little if any sleep, gradually losing much of the fat with which they came ashore.

Around the edges of the breeding rookeries range the younger bulls, varying in age from six to eight and not yet strong enough to compete

with the fully mature beachmasters. Now and then they may steal a wayward wife or two — or even take over the harem of some disabled monarch. Most of them, however, await the end of the active breeding season when the young unbred females appear on the shore to join their first harem. And while all this activity goes forward, the youngest male seals up to six years — known as “bachelors” — congregate on beaches of their own called “hauling grounds.” Here they live until they are old enough and strong enough to compete with the mature bulls and gather harems of their own.

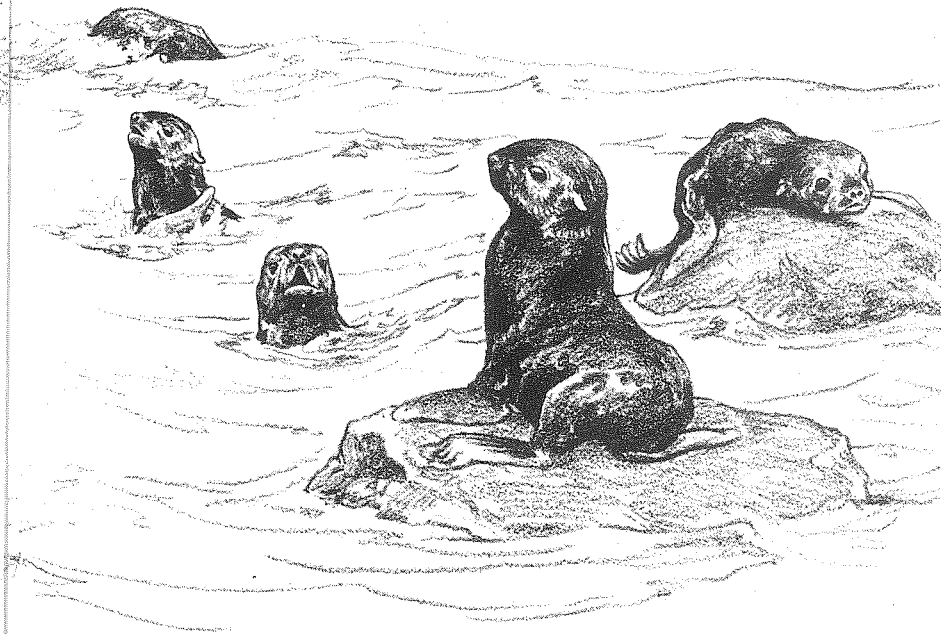
The whole scene during all this time on the fog-bound islands is one of almost incredible confusion — and the chorus of constant bellowing and bleating can be heard far out at sea. As many as a hundred thousand seals may gather on a single breeding beach and there are, in the Pribilofs, no less than twenty of these which carry enough seals so that the beaches have been



named. Almost as soon as the harems have taken form, the pups start to appear; dark little youngsters weighing perhaps a dozen pounds at birth. And immediately after they are born — since seals are bi-uterual — the cow seals are bred again. This is necessary because they carry their young for an entire year before birth. One pup per cow is the rule, though not all cows bear young each season; the proportion being about eighty per cent.

The pups at birth are precocious; eyes wide open, active and with a coat of hair — but it will be some weeks before the fur appears. They are,

of course, entirely dependent on the mother's milk for food and the cow generally stays close beside her youngster for several days, then leaves on a week's foraging expedition at sea. These trips may carry her as far as a hundred miles from the breeding island. When she returns, however, the pup makes up for lost time. It takes on about five times as much milk as would a human



infant of the same body weight; sometimes a gallon of rich, creamy milk at a feeding. Then, swelled up like a toy balloon, it sleeps away the hours.

Baby seals are as playful as kittens — or children. For the observer there is endless amusement in watching their games and mock battles. Fur Seal pups are able to swim at birth; though, to be sure with little endurance; and even when they venture to the beach at about four weeks of age, they are quite fearful of the water. During severe storms many of those close to the water's edge actually drown. Eventually the youngsters learn to swim, but not with any help from the mothers. At the first attempt the little seal will wade beyond its depth, then dog-paddle madly for shore with flippers going wildly and big eyes rolling. Gradually the youngsters pick up courage, however, and by mid-August the shallow water near the breeding beaches is filled with small bobbing heads.

The cow seals nurse their young for about three months, returning from a week's foraging at sea to pick out the right pup unerringly from the vast confusion of the beach. Never do they make a mistake, nor will they take on an orphan; so that if the mother is lost at sea while feeding, the pup also dies. By weaning time the weather on the islands has taken a turn for the worse to mark the end of summer. The pups are left abruptly to shift for themselves in the increasingly rough water — and early mortality is high. This mortality continues, in fact, throughout the first year. Many pups succumb on the island before migration; others fall prey to the killer whales and big sharks, while still more are lost in storms at sea. Yet enough young seals survive each year to keep the herd at maximum healthy size—and from their return the second summer until maturity, the loss drops each season.

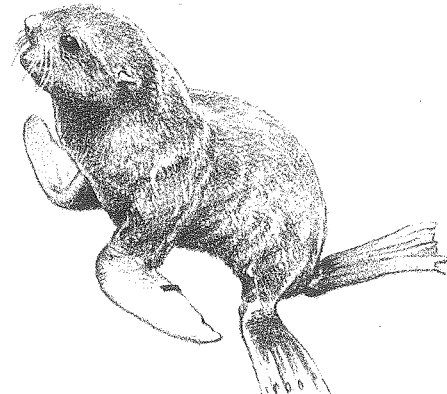
The Fur Seal harvest comes in mid-summer and will be described later. Meanwhile the pups

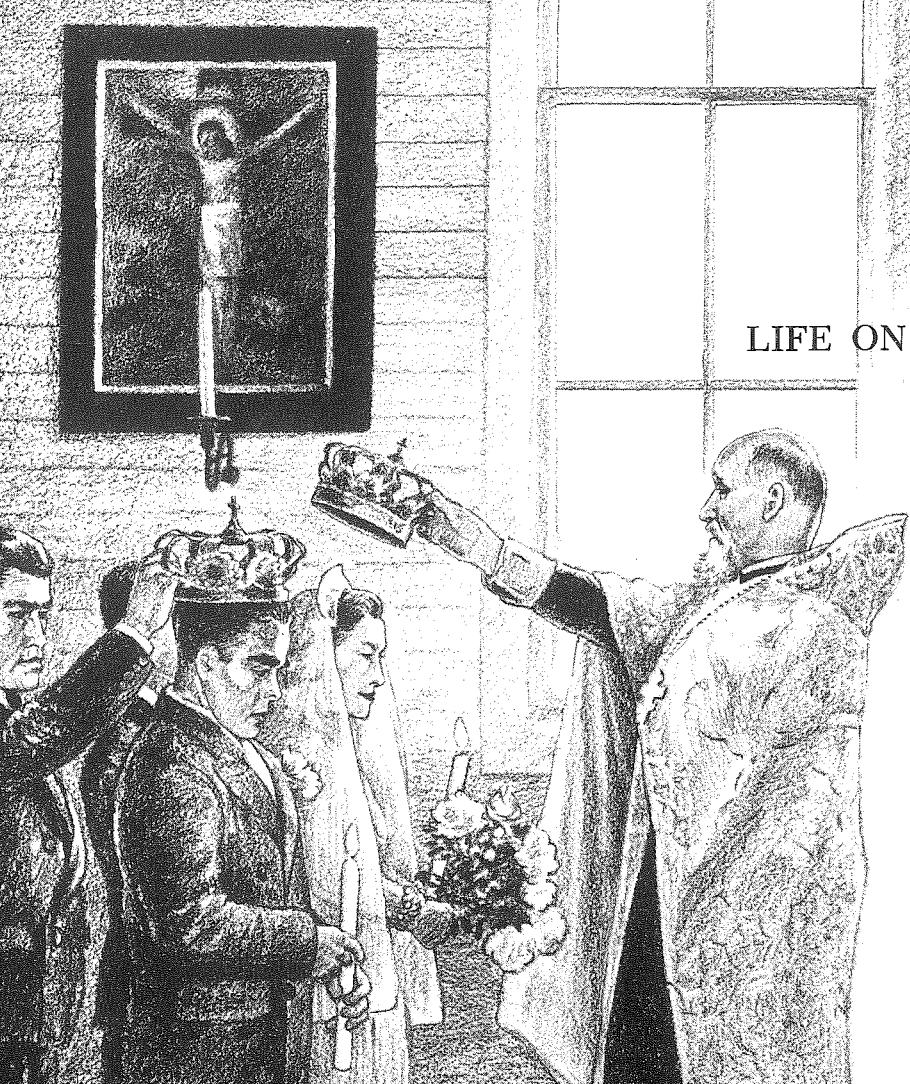
grow and learn to swim — and gradually the breeding season comes to an end. Now the territorial lines are forgotten, harems break up and bulls, cows and pups wander restlessly across the beaches. The weather grows more severe and icy gales of autumn begin to lash the fog-bound Pribilofs — and the Fur Seals take to the ocean for their incredible journey southward. Departure begins in October and by late November the last of the great seal herd has gone; on one of the longest migrations undertaken by any mammal. Now the islands are left deserted except for the foxes, a few wintering birds and the small group of Aleuts and government employees who live on St. George, St. Paul Islands.

Many attempts have been made — and none of them more than partially successful — to follow the southward migration of the Fur Seals. Most of the big bulls are known to winter in Alaskan waters and along the north coast of Canada. The cows, young males and pups of the season, however, fan out over a wide migratory

belt. Some are reported to appear in western Pacific waters off the coast of Japan, while others have turned up as far south as our Mexican border. On migration the Fur Seals are often encountered a thousand miles from land. Most of them probably gather in the comparatively warm waters along our Pacific continental shelf and spend the winter here, feeding to a depth of 200 feet or more and growing fat in preparation for the next long journey northward when spring comes again. A large proportion of young seals actually stay at sea during this entire year, returning to the islands during the second summer.

This is the story, briefly told, of the life cycle of the Alaska Fur Seal. Now let us see how the great herd yields the harvest which produces the rare and beautiful “gold standard” among furs.

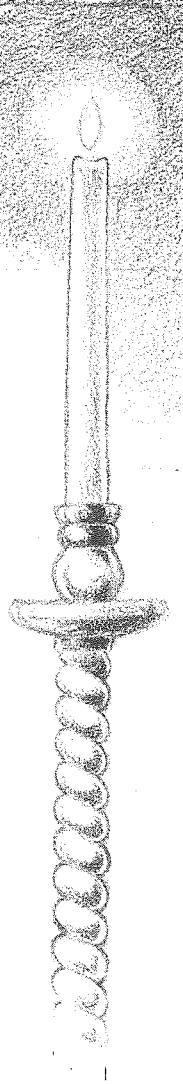




LIFE ON

The Pribilofs

The program of scientific management and wise use has now been applied to the Alaska Fur Seals for approximately forty years. It has resulted, as we have pointed out, in the rebuilding of the herd from its 1911 low of not many more than 100,000 animals to the present approximate 1,500,000. This is, we believe, close to the maximum which the habitat can support. The entire program, including patrol of the Pacific to prevent poaching as well as supervision of the annual harvest, is managed and administered by the Fish and Wildlife Service of the Department of the

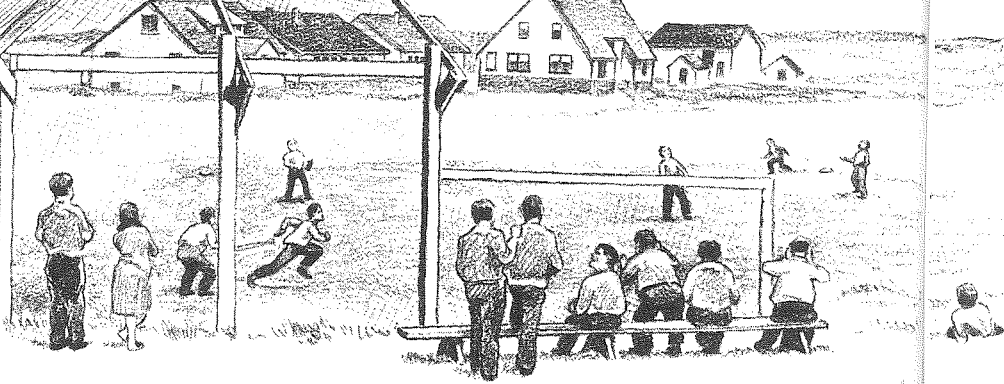




Interior. The United States Coast Guard cooperates in protecting the Fur Seals in the North Pacific.

Since the Treaty of 1911, nearly two million skins have been taken, with a revenue of many millions of dollars to the U.S. Treasury and a considerable profit to the fur trade. Originally both Canada and Japan participated in the harvest. In 1941, however, the Japanese terminated the treaty with the result that 20% of the

skins were credited to Canada and 80% were retained by the United States. In 1957, with the signing of the Interim Convention on Conservation of North Pacific Fur Seals, shares in the take of skins from the Pribilof herd were reallocated 70% to the United States and 15% each to Canada and Japan. Similarly shares in the Russian catch from the Robbin and Commander Islands are distributed 15% each to Canada and Japan, the remainder being left with Russia. Most of the actual work of harvesting the skins is performed by the Aleuts, many of whom are descendants of the natives who lived on the islands during the time of Russian occupation. Others come up each season from the Aleutian Archipelago when the Fish and Wildlife Service boats travel north in May. The permanent year-round population totals about five hundred and fifty men, women and children of Aleut origin, together with some thirty U.S. Government personnel.



The majority of these permanent residents live in two modern villages, the larger on St. Paul and the smaller on St. George Island. There are few remnants today of primitive life. Homes are comfortable and are of both frame and brick construction with many conveniences. The present Aleuts, who have a complex ethnologic background which perhaps includes an ancient Mongolian stock, later mixed with Alaskan Indian and still later with Russian, have not suffered from this blending of races. They are a handsome, intelligent people having a devoted family life and great love of children. Religion plays an

important part in their daily existence and there are Russian Orthodox churches on both islands, since the Aleuts became Christians in Russian times.

Their religious life in no way handicaps the love of fun which is an inseparable part of the Aleut make-up. On holidays during the summer – and especially for the Fourth of July – celebrations are held which are tremendously enjoyed by the entire population. Dancing is a favorite recreation and when a dance is held, everyone attends dressed in his or her best – and is in good taste with the latest mode. Their dances are the polka, waltz and schottische. Athletics including baseball and basketball are popular with both young people and adults. Movies are shown regularly and radio reception is good, although the Aleuts can provide part of their entertainment, since they are natural actors and born mimics.



It is fortunate that the Aleuts have this happy, carefree and industrious nature; they are thus well-fitted by temperament for their strenuous life on these rugged islands. It is, on the other hand, a good life. Aleuts are citizens who vote in Alaskan elections, pay taxes and are free to come and go from the islands as they choose. They are cared for by resident physicians and nurses of the Public Health Service. Hospital facilities are available. The work of these resident doctors is augmented by occasional visits from outside surgeons, dentists and oculists; while patients needing special care can be transported to the mainland or the United States.

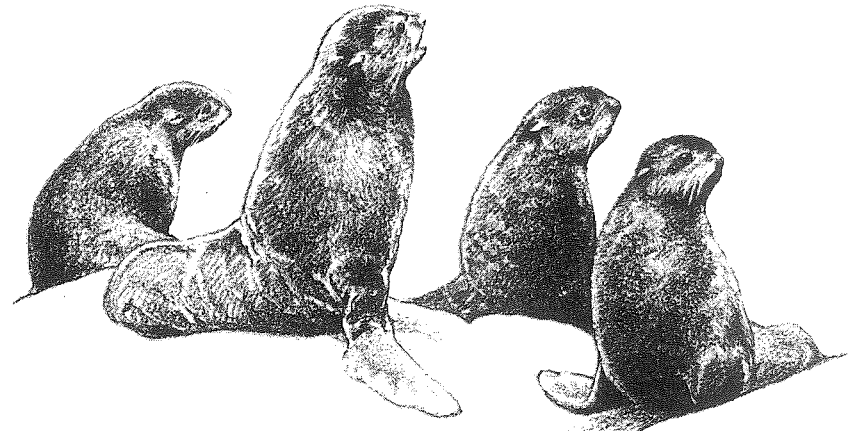
The Aleut children are, by and large, good students — especially enjoying arithmetic, home economics and manual training. If they are ambitious, as many are, they can continue their education in Sitka or the United States. Without the stable and capable Aleuts who, incidentally,

earn a good livelihood, the harvesting of the Alaska Fur Seals would be a difficult task indeed.

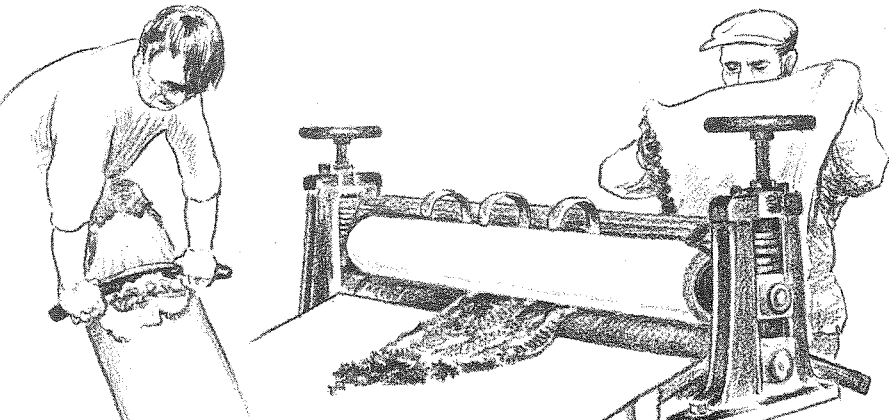
The chief thing which makes the seal harvest practical and profitable is, of course, the polygamous nature of the animals. Since the bulls do not breed until about the ninth year and since the number of males and females at birth is approximately the same, there is always a large excess population of young males. In the natural order of things, but especially because the bull seals are extremely belligerent and given to fighting, a heavy proportion of these excess males would be eliminated before reaching breeding age or on the rookeries during the breeding season.

Under these conditions, careful experimentation has shown that it is entirely practical to reserve a sufficient number of bulls for breeding and to take the rest of the young "bachelor" seals for market at three years of age. Since these bachelors live to themselves and are surprisingly

easy to herd when handled quietly, the taking of these seals for their skins does not at all disturb those in the breeding rookeries. The weeks from late June until early August find the Aleut sealers on the hauling grounds each morning before day-break. This may be as early as two a.m. during the summer months in the Land of the Midnight Sun. The bachelor seals are driven inland from the beaches and sorted into gradually smaller groups until only those to be taken remain on the grounds. After the pelts have been taken they are transported by truck to the modern plant on the islands.

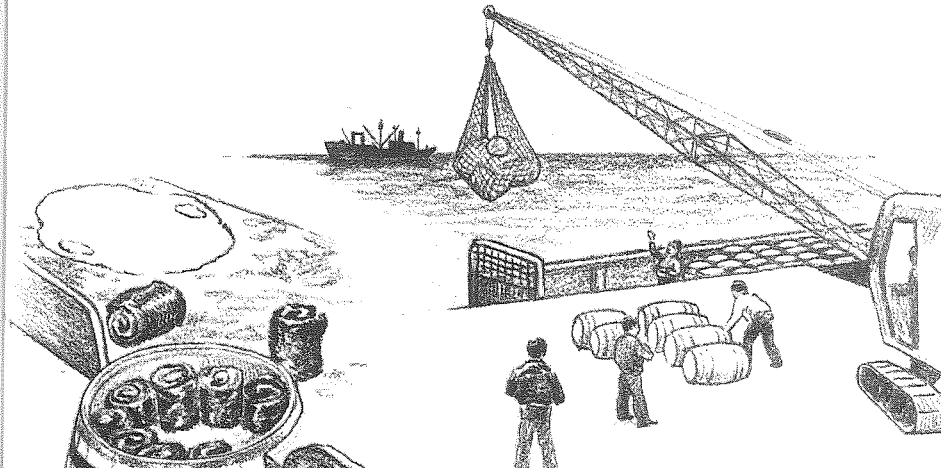


It is at this point that the work of the Fouke Fur Company begins. Each season, trained personnel from the St. Louis plant travel to the Pribilofs where they join the experienced Aleuts. Quickly the pelts are cooled and washed free of dirt, after which all fat or blubber is removed. Next step is to cure them in salt or brine — and when the curing process is complete, the pelts are carefully packed for shipment in wooden barrels, each marked as to number of skins and whether the particular allotment is destined for the Government of the United States or other



treaty nations. Once packed, the pelts are ready for shipment to Seattle and then on to the plant of Fouke Fur Company in St. Louis.

It is indeed a far cry from these raw pelts to the beautifully finished Alaska Fur Seal skins which are sold for the Government at the Semi-annual auctions in the Fouke Sales Rooms. When one compares the skins side by side, however, it is readily possible to appreciate the technical skill and long experience necessary to carry out the more than 125 processing operations which



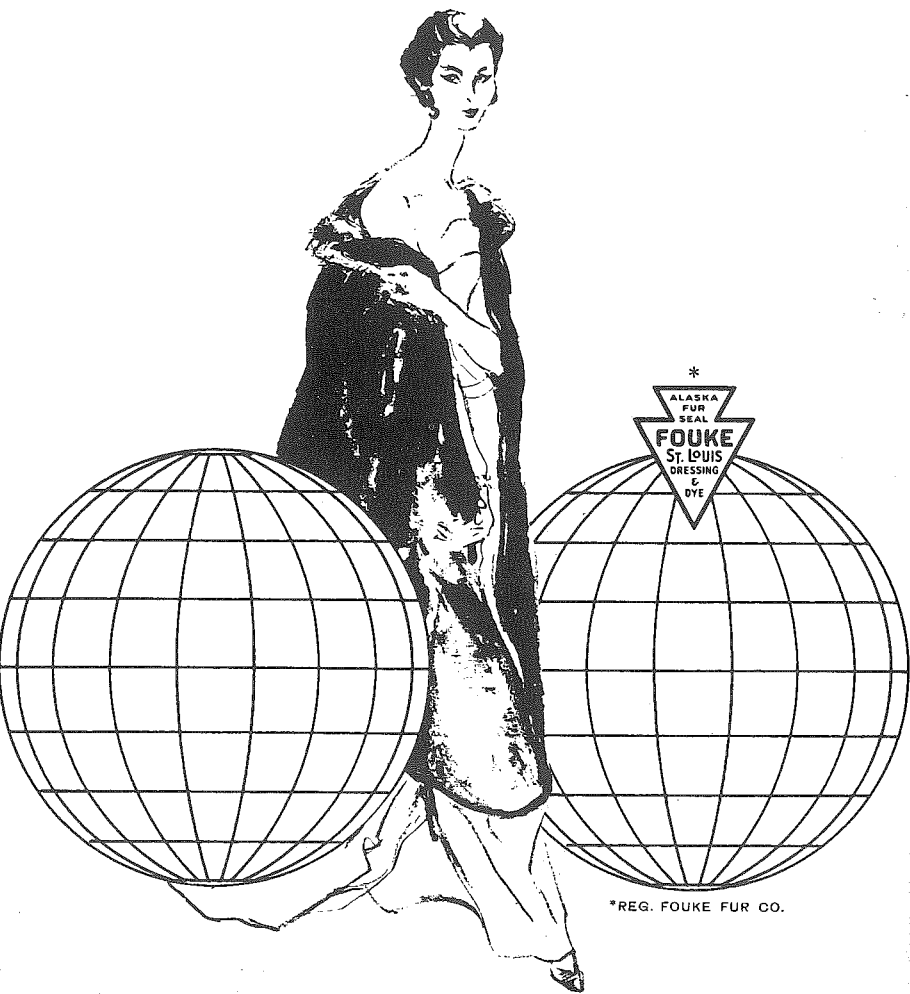
bring about the transformation — as well as the three months which must elapse between raw pelt and finished skins.

The guard hair is first extracted, exposing the soft, silky under-fur. The density of this under-fur has been determined, by the aid of the microscope, to be approximately 300,000 fibers to the square inch. The pelts are dressed by a type of chamois tanning, which produces unusual pliability, softness and strength. Alaska Fur Seal is finished in four different processes; one, "SAFARI," the effect of which is a rich dark brown; two, "MATARA," which results in a more neutral brown with an overtone of bluish-grey; three, "KITOVI," which gives a dark grey with bluish overtones; and a fourth process which produces a new, lustrous Black.

In the natural state, the under-fur is dull and curly, but through the Fouke Process, the fur is permanently de-kinked, leaving a gleaming luster

and evenness of pile which is a distinguishing characteristic of Fouke-Processed Fur Seal. Fur Seal of today is so much lighter in weight and so much more supple than in our grandmothers' time that no proper comparison can be made.

Today the leading couturiers and designers of New York, Paris, Rome, London and other fashion centers throughout the world are utilizing the grace and suppleness of this fur in many fresh and interesting ways. Fouke-Processed Alaska Fur Seal, long a prestige leader of the fine fur family, is most conspicuous in the fashion news of the season's openings, and women all over the world have been quick to take notice of its outstanding style position and real worth.



FOUKE FUR COMPANY, St. Louis, Mo.

*Agents of the United States Government,
the Canadian Government, the Government of the Union of South Africa,
the Government of Uruguay, the Japanese Government
and other shippers for the processing and sale of Fur Seal Skins*