

Carnation the moose harnessed in front of Bob Moore's House in Skagway, 1900.



SENSE OF PLACE

Moose Buggies and Goat Sleds

Creative transportation experiments by early Alaskans

BY MICHAEL ENGELHARD

EVER SINCE CROSSING THE VAST LANDMASS BERINGIA trailed by their wolf-hybrid pack dogs, Alaskans have put domesticated and half-wild critters to work. They adopted smart devices from other traditions: dogsleds from Russian explorers, and *pulks*, sleds brought here from Lapland by reindeer herders tasked with converting Eskimo hunters to pastoralism. Improvisation sprang from necessity, possibly never more so than during the crazed days of the 1898 gold stampede. Some propositions were farfetched or outright cons. A “consolidated” Trans-Alaskan Gopher Company promised to get rodents to tunnel through permafrost soil to reach nuggets in gravel below. Another scheme involved messenger pigeon relay stations that were to deliver news to men starved for word from home. But nobody succeeded in finding a fast way of getting live pigeons to the upper Yukon.

Mules, horses, donkeys, and oxen, packing or wagon-hitched, some trudging along on wooden snowshoes, were efficient and in high demand—yet dying exhausted, like August mosquitos. One of the thriftiest freighters owned 335 mules, making more money each day than most prospectors could in a year. “Dog-punchers,” too, did well for themselves; the primary means of winter transport throughout the region, teams hauled sleds, and in the summer, carts, *travois* (frames of joined poles), and even river barges, from shore. Powered by eight eager mutts, Dawson’s fire engine rushed to at least one conflagration. As told in *The Call of the Wild*, dogs were nabbed stateside to supply the goldfields or titillate betting men through pulling contests of strength. It was said then that, like London’s protagonist Buck, no canine bigger than a spaniel was safe on the streets of Seattle, San Francisco, or Los Angeles. “Car loads of mongrel curs have been shipped into Seattle and other points of departure for Alaska, and then trained to work in teams, making both day and

PHOTO COURTESY NATIONAL PARK SERVICE, KLONDIKE GOLD RUSH NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK, CYNTHIA TAYLOR COLLECTION, KLG0 MR-17-1687



night hideous with their howlings,” wrote Frank La Roche, about to embark for the northern claims.

Animals meant to provide meat, milk, or wool to the miners at times served as beasts of burden or draft animals. At least one elk was led over the Chilkoot Pass. The Swedish emigrant Eric A. Hegg—whose photos immortalized seekers tackling the pass—ran Angora goat sled teams all the way from coastal Dyea over the White Pass to Bennett Lake to set up another studio there. A canvas banner tied to one sled read “Views of Alaska,” shrewdly advertising cyanotypes.

A few animals became celebrities. Marc Hanna, an Oregon ox named after the party boss who managed McKinley’s presidential campaign, routinely beat horses to camp on the Dyea to Chilkoot Pass stretch even though he carried nearly twice their load. He survived the lethal Palm Sunday avalanche that obliterated the trail. Found two days later, the ox was chewing cud in a space he’d somehow created inside the slide.

The star of them all, without doubt, was Carnation the moose, property of Skagway’s founder, the steamship captain William Moore. On March 23, 1900, *The Daily Alaskan* announced in the era’s stilted prose that “All idle eyes in the business center of the city yesterday afternoon were amused by the sight of a fine specimen of the monarch of the woods, a moose, parading in the streets in harness and subservient to man.” The gangly creature, a calf captured upriver from Dawson, had been reared as a pet and “carriage horse” for Moore’s son, Ben. Carnation spooked horses in Skagway’s streets, and once, an upset army mule chased him. “A victim of gluttony,” his entertaining came to a

sudden end. “Too much clover caused his early death,” *The Daily Alaskan* grieved that September.

Outlandish animal uses did not disappear when the weary moved on from the Klondike. Six dogs trundled passengers in the “pupmobile,” a Nome mining lorry on rails. Retired in Seattle in 1909, the legendary mushing mail carrier Jack Carr taught his two Alaskan-born moose to pull a sulky. And in 1916, sled dogs dragging a turf roller groomed an Anchorage baseball field. As the craziest idea yet, in the 1920s a representative of a large fur company made a case for draft polar bears after watching one of the most interesting “experiments” ever attempted in the north country: an Inupiaq boy on a small sledge behind plump twin cubs. “Both bears had been in harness for some time, were fairly well broken, and showed no signs of viciousness or stubbornness,” the enterprising fur trader reported. A half-dozen bear team, he calculated, would be able to travel 100 miles a day, compared to the huskies’ 20 to 40 miles. However, the bears would consume much more food, which they’d also have to tow. “Naturally swift, capable of running long distances without tiring, they would make the most powerful sledge teams in the Arctic,” this dreamer believed. In the end perhaps, the potential risks must have outweighed the benefits. Early Alaskans, however, continued to experiment with various forms of animal-powered transport. 🐾

Michael Engelhard is the author of Ice Bear: The Cultural History of an Arctic Icon. He worked for years as a horseback guide but never with draft animals.