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FUR-SEAL AND THE SEAL ISLANDS.

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AS the adventurous hunt of the little sable led the hardy Cossacks in that century's march from the Ural Mountains across the wild storm-swept Steppes of Asia to Kamchatka and Bering Sea, so the new-found sea otter in the waters of Alaska lured them on year by year until they had extended the Russian settlements for two thousand miles along the American coast. The fur animals were so plentiful and the profits so enormous that the hunt became a wild head-long race, so eager that time was not taken for the building of ships or the procuring of trained seamen. Boats were hastily constructed of planks fastened together with rawhide or sealskin thongs, and in these unseaworthy floats, without chart or compass, men boldly ventured into unknown and dangerous seas. One half of them found watery graves or died from other causes, but the

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other half returned home rich, and the slaughter went on—a slaughter so indiscriminate that in half a century the sea otter had become scarce.

But alongside the sea otter had been found his cousin, the fur-seal, and as the supply of the otter began to diminish, increasing attention was paid to the seal. For years careful observers among the early hunters on the Aleutian Islands had noticed that the seals went north in the spring and returned in the fall accompanied by their young. The old natives also had a tradition that an Aleut had been cast away on islands to the north, which they called Amik. Therefore when the usual catch of furs began to decrease upon the Aleutian Islands, earnest attention was given to discovering the home of the fur-seal. For eighteen years an unremitting search was kept up. For three years Master Gerasim Gavrilovich Pribylov in a small sloop doggedly continued the search, but so well had nature hidden these islands among the impenetrable fogs of Bering Sea, that Pribylov cruised for weeks in their immediate vicinity, with every evidence of being in the neighborhood of land without being able to find it. But one day early in June, 1786, with the fog so thick that he could scarcely see his vessel's length he ran against the walls of Tolstoi Mees and the secret was out. The island was named after his sloop, the *St. George*.

A party of hunters were left on the island and they in turn discovered the larger island of St. Paul. Over five hundred thousand skins were taken during the year, and the islands afterwards became a kind of "national bank" from which the celebrated Baranof raised the funds to carry on his government in Alaska. If he needed an additional shipload of provisions or supplies, all he had to do was to authorize the killing of more seals in payment.

With the discovery of the Pribylov Islands another fur-seal rookery was added to the supply of the world. Previous to this discovery the supply had come largely from southern waters. From 1770 to 1800 one million skins were taken from Kerguelen Land. In 1798-9 over one million were taken from the island of Mas-a-Fuera, near Juan Fernandez. From 1800 to 1823 one million three hundred and twelve thousand were taken from the Georgian Islands; in 1814-15 four hundred thousand from the Anti-

podes Island off the coast of New South Wales; and in 1820-1 three hundred thousand from the South Shetland Islands. At that time the principal market was in China, and skins were so abundant that prices occasionally fell to fifty cents each.

The indiscriminate slaughter soon resulted in the extermination of the fur-seal in those sections until now there are but three known rookeries in the world. The smallest of these is the Lobos Islands off the mouth of the river La Platte, and is under the government supervision of the republic of Uruguay. The annual take is restricted to twelve thousand skins. The second rookery is on the Commander Islands in Bering Sea and belongs to Russia. From these the annual take is forty thousand skins. The third and largest rookeries are those on the Pribylov Islands, from which the annual take for the twenty years preceding 1890 has been about one hundred thousand skins, or two thirds of the world's supply.

Upon the first discovery of the Pribylov group the destruction of the seal was so great that the Russian government was compelled to interfere, and in 1805 prohibited all killing for a period of five years. From 1820-67 forty two thousand skins were annually exported to the United States, Great Britain, and Canada.

The first years after the transfer to the United States again witnessed an indiscriminate slaughter of the fur-seal by different American firms, until Congress was compelled to interfere and authorize the Treasury Department to lease the islands under suitable restrictions to a responsible company. This was the origin of the Alaska Commercial Company of San Francisco. This company held the lease of the islands from 1869-90, paying the Government an annual rental of \$55,000 and a royalty of 62½ cents upon each of the one hundred thousand skins allowed to be taken.

At a recent congressional investigation it was ascertained that up to June 30, 1888, the company had paid into the United States Treasury the sum of \$5,597,100, and that for the same time the Government had expended for the protection of the islands in the form of salaries, etc., for the agents, expenses of the revenue marine steamers, and other outlays the sum of \$400,000, leaving a net profit to the Government of \$5,197,100. The net profit for the entire lease was over \$5,500,000.

In the spring of 1890 there was a reletting of the islands for a second period of twenty years, and the successful bidder was the North American Commercial Company of San Francisco. By the terms of the new lease the company pay \$60,000 a year rental for the islands, a royalty of \$7.62½ upon each skin taken, and a revenue tax of \$2 upon each skin taken. Upon a basis of one hundred thousand skins the annual revenue of the Government is \$1,000,000, and the probable net profit of the entire lease \$19,000,000. Commencing in the seventies, small schooners were fitted out at San Francisco, Victoria, and other ports to capture the seals as they passed north along the coast in the spring. Emboldened by their success, they followed the seal into Bering Sea, and even in a few instances landed upon the seal islands themselves. These increased in number and boldness until in 1885 thirteen thousand contraband sealskins were placed upon the market; in 1886 twenty-five thousand; in 1887 thirty-four thousand; in 1888 (very stormy season) twenty-five thousand; in 1889 forty thousand; in 1890 fifty thousand; and during the present year sixty thousand. They were taken in the water, where a large percentage of those shot sank before they could be secured. They were also largely females with young. Consequently the above enumeration represents nearly a million seals killed illicitly during the past five years.

This destruction of seal life by the poachers has sensibly diminished the number upon the seal islands, so that while the North American Commercial Company were allowed in 1890 to take sixty thousand skins, there were so few on the islands that they secured only twenty-one thousand. And this year partly to recuperate the seal life and partly on account of pending negotiations with Great Britain the take has been restricted to seven thousand five hundred; this number being allowed in order to furnish food to the native inhabitants.

During the years 1886-7 in order to break up poaching, ten American and nine British vessels were seized by the United States revenue marine steamers. The seizure of the British vessels at once raised the question of jurisdiction and made the "seal question" one of international importance.

Last spring through an act of the Parliament of Great Britain, that empire agreed to assist the United States in preserving the

seal from destruction, and this summer Bering Sea was patrolled by three United States revenue cutters, four American and two British men-of-war, while in the harbor of Unalaska are anchored one American and one British prison ship for the safe keeping of the captured officers of the poaching vessels.

The Pribylov group consists of the four islands Walrus, Otter, St. Paul, and St. George; only the latter two being utilized in the capture of seal. St. Paul has an area of thirty-three square miles, and St. George of twenty-seven. They are thirty miles apart, and distant about two hundred miles from the main land. Like all the islands of Western Alaska, they are treeless and in summer covered with a luxuriant growth of moss, grass, and flowers. In winter they are surrounded with great ice fields from the north and in summer enveloped in almost perpetual fog so dense that the sun is seldom seen. They are without sheltered harbors and oftentimes for days together a boat cannot land through the surf. But the fogs and storms are favorable to seal life.

When the islands were first discovered they were uninhabited, but the Russians colonized them with two hundred natives from the Aleutian Islands. At the time of the transfer in 1867, a number of them returned to their former homes. For those that remained and others who came the Alaska Commercial Company erected small but comfortable frame houses, which are provided to the people free of rent. The people are also furnished with meat, fish, fuel, medical attendance and medicines, schools, and schoolbooks free. The men receive on an average \$500 for a season's work, and the season consists of about six weeks' work. The remainder of the year they have little to do but eat, sleep, gamble, and attend the numerous feast days of the Græco Russian Church. In 1887 the three hundred Aleuts on the two islands had to their credit in the savings banks of San Francisco the sum of \$64,732.11.

It is estimated that four million seals annually make their summer home on these islands. They come when the ice leaves, April or May, and remain until winter commences, the following October and November.

A full-grown male seal is a fine large animal measuring six and one half to seven and one half feet from tip to tip and weighing from four hundred to seven hundred pounds. His hair is a dark, dull brown color.

A female seal or cow is from four to four and one half feet long and weighs about one hundred pounds. On first coming out of the water the color is a dirty gray, which upon drying changes into a steel and maltese gray luster, and later into a brown and gray mixed.

The young when first born are from twelve to fourteen inches long and weigh from three to four pounds. For the first three months their color is a jet black, with two white spots just back of the fore-arm. They are born on the land and if placed in the water would sink and drown. When two months old they commence to learn to swim, and soon become so proficient that in early winter they go to sea with their friends and remain away six months, without ever landing so far as known. Whither they go no one can tell. We know that each spring they enter Bering Sea from the North Pacific through the various passes between the Aleutian Islands. Early in May the strongest and most vigorous of the bulls arrive as the advance guard at the seal islands and leisurely proceed to select for summer quarters a section of the beach about twenty feet in diameter. There is much fighting for choice locations near the sea and possession is secured by the strongest. After taking their position they do not leave it until in the fall when they start southward. During the three or four months they are on the islands they neither eat nor drink. They come out of the sea in the spring fat and strong and return to it in the fall lean and weak. Having settled upon their location the bulls spend much of their time sleeping until the arrival of the cows.

The last of May or early in June the cows begin to arrive and then the great struggle of the season commences among the bulls for their possession. The strongest ones being nearest the water and having the double advantage of location and strength secure from fifteen to twenty for their summer's harem. The bulls in the second row from the water secure a less number, and those in the third row still fewer, and so on back from the beach until some of the old bulls that with increasing age and declining strength are forced to take a back place are left without any.

The younger male seals from one to five years of age that have not the courage to enter the lists and fight for a family are compelled to go by themselves and are called "bachelor seals." It is from this class that

the sealskins of commerce are taken. At four or five years of age the skin is at its best. After that it becomes more hairy and less valuable. At that age not only are the skins more valuable, but the bachelors are grouped by themselves and more easily taken.

Killing commences in June and lasts about six weeks, or until the whole number of skins are taken. As the seals are very shy and keen of scent, a day for their capture is selected when the wind will allow a party of twenty or thirty men to creep along the beach and get between the seals and the sea without being scented. Having got to the seaward of the herd, at a given signal they spring to their feet, shouting, beating on tin pans, striking their clubs together, making all the noise they can to frighten the herd. The astonished seals leap forward in their desperate efforts to escape. If their heads are seaward, into the sea they plunge, but if inland they run in that direction. Those that run inland are closely followed up. Once started they are driven with less trouble than so many pigs. After driving a short distance a halt is made and the herd is carefully assorted out. Those that are too old or too young are allowed to return to the sea, the killing being mainly confined to "bachelors" from three to five years of age.

The selected ones are then driven inland to the salting houses. As their pelts weigh about eight pounds each, it is a saving of labor to make the seal carry himself to the storehouse. During the driving great care is taken not to overheat the animals as that would render the skins worthless, causing the hair to fall out. Upon a cool day when the grass is wet, they can be safely driven at the rate of a mile an hour. For a short distance they can get over the ground as fast as a man can run, but being encased in a thick, warm coat of fat, they soon become exhausted. When the killing ground is reached, they are allowed several hours to cool off.

One June morning in 1890 in company with Mr. C. J. Goff, the U. S. Treasury Agent on the islands, I went out to the killing grounds near the village of St. Paul. A band of three hundred seals were huddled together in the care of keepers. From them a small band of fifteen or twenty would be taken at a time and driven a few yards from the main band. Four or five men with hickory clubs about five feet long went among them. A rap of the club on the nose, between the eyes, or

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back of the head quickly killed them. The clubbers were followed by men with knives, who stab the seal to the heart letting out the blood. They in turn were followed by the rippers, who cut the skin around the head and flippers and down the belly, to save the knives of the skimmers from any possible chance of being dulled by contact with sand in the fur. The skimmers are so dexterous that it takes only about two minutes to remove a pelt. These were followed by another set of men who separated the skin from the blubber. Thus a thousand seals can be killed and skinned in about three hours.

While the killing was going on a score of women and girls were filling sealskin bags with blubber, which was carried home on their backs to be fried out into oil (butter) for winter use. The flesh was also carried home, cut into thin strips, and hung on frames to dry. After being dried it is stuffed into the stomach of the sea lion, which has been cleansed and prepared for the purpose. After pressing in all the dried meat possible, seal oil is poured in filling up the spaces. This makes a huge sausage (Arctic canned seal meat) between two and three feet in diameter.

The intestines of the seal are also saved. They are cleansed very much as are the intestines of the hog when prepared for sausages. They are then inflated with air and hung out to dry. When dry they are slit lengthwise with a sharp knife and form a ribbon three or four inches wide and from seventy-five to one hundred feet long. From these strips of intestines are manufactured the famous kamileka, or waterproof coats, universally worn by the natives in this sec-

tion. These garments are much stronger, lighter, and drier, and resist rain longer and better than the rubber goods of commerce. Among the Eskimos of the Arctic the larger intestines of the walrus are used, making a correspondingly wider band. Thus every part of the seal is put to practical use.

From the killing ground the skins are carted to the storehouse, where they are counted, weighed, and salted down in bins. After seven days they are taken up and re-salted, and after forty days are taken up the second time, lightly brushed, and tied up into bundles containing two skins each for shipment. In the fall they are sent to San Francisco where they are packed into casks and shipped to London.

In London the grease is removed and the skins are shaved down by machinery on the flesh side until all the long outer hairs can be pulled out, for in their native condition the beautiful fine fur is hidden by coarse outer hair—a condition similar to the feathers and down on a bird. The remaining fur is now the native color of light brown bordering on a dull yellow. The treatment of the skin being completed, the fur is dyed to the beautiful color it has in sacs. The larger number of skins are then returned to the United States ready to be made up into garments.

The skin in its native condition is comparatively inexpensive, costing from \$10 to \$15. The preparation for market is so particular and delicate an operation that the original cost is greatly increased. It is claimed that furriers of New York can compete with those of London in the preparation of the skins, but the larger number of skins continue to be sent to London.