

Book Reviews

The Fur Farms of Alaska: Two Centuries of History and a Forgotten Stampede. Sarah Crawford Isto. Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press, 2012. xi + 230 p., preface, acknowledgements, introduction, illustrations, maps, endnotes, bibliography, index.

Some years ago, while researching her family's history in Alaska in the early twentieth century, Sarah Crawford Isto discovered a series of autobiographical essays written by her favorite uncle. He'd been the territory's official veterinarian in the 1930s, and his duties including visiting numerous fur farms to check for disease and provide care to the fox, marten, rabbits, and other animals being bred for their pelts. Isto had never heard the story before and, curiosity piqued, she began researching the history of fur farms in Alaska. We are the beneficiaries of this fortuitous discovery now that University of Alaska Press has published *The Fur Farms of Alaska*, Isto's engaging and authoritative account of this previously unstudied topic.

The book, which takes a chronological approach from 1749 to the present day, opens with the arrival of Russian fur traders in the eighteenth century. After decimating stocks of fur seals and sea otters to satisfy lucrative market demands in East Asia, Russian entrepreneurs began stocking small, uninhabited islands in the Aleutians with foxes. They would return a year or two later in winter, when the animals had multiplied and their fur was thickest, and harvest fox by the hundreds. Isto describes how fur farmers selectively bred the animals for certain traits, especially fur colour, in response to fashion trends around the world.

This economic link is one of the book's main strengths. The author continually connects the practice and methods of fur farming to local and international market factors, thereby placing this history in the larger context of resource development, the boom-bust nature of which has exerted an influence on Alaska that cannot be overstated. Fur farmers struggled first with nature (e.g., climate, disease, predation) and next with economics (e.g., feed cost, fluctuating fur prices). As these deterministic factors caused fur farms to alternately succeed or fail—or simply break even for years until the operators gave up—the threads of social history, labour history, and Alaska Native studies are woven into the story.

As one might expect, the introduction of non-native foxes to islands in the Aleutians and elsewhere brought widespread environmental change. The voracious predators ate ground-nesting birds and their eggs by the score, thereby altering within a few years whatever ecological balance had been established over millennia. Here, too, Isto shows how fur farming has a place in Alaska's history of environmental impact vis-à-vis economic development.

Of the many time periods covered in the book, perhaps the most interesting is the interwar years of 1919 to 1940, when fur farming experienced both zenith and nadir in remarkably short order. At its peak, the industry boasted seven hundred farms statewide, government-funded experimental stations, specialized journals and newsletters, and a fur exchange in Seattle that promoted the wearing of furs worldwide. The Great Depression then all but eliminated the market for luxury furs and forced Alaska farmers to experiment with new techniques to remain economically viable. It is in this period that Isto's talent as a social historian comes to the fore. She vividly describes the lives of the veterinarians, wildlife management officials, and men and women who work the farms. In drawing distinctions between island farms that allowed animals to run more or less free and cage farms that penned them in enclosures, the author demonstrates how the animals came to exist in an unusual space where they were not exactly wild but not domesticated either. Many farmers did breed foxes as pets; most fascinating are the photographs of tame animals resting on a man's shoulder. How Alaskans have conceptualized nature across different historical periods is a rich and wide-open field for scholars, and Isto has provided a most interesting frame.

The book ends with the closing of the last known Alaska fur farm in 1993, once again the result of low pelt prices, and if there is a disappointing aspect to the work it is the way Isto allows the story to simply peter out. A very short last section breezes through the complexities behind this most recent downturn and thus insufficiently contextualizes the overall history. This is a small quibble, however. *The Fur Farms of Alaska* is a terrific book well worth the time of scholars and general readers.

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