Agroborealis

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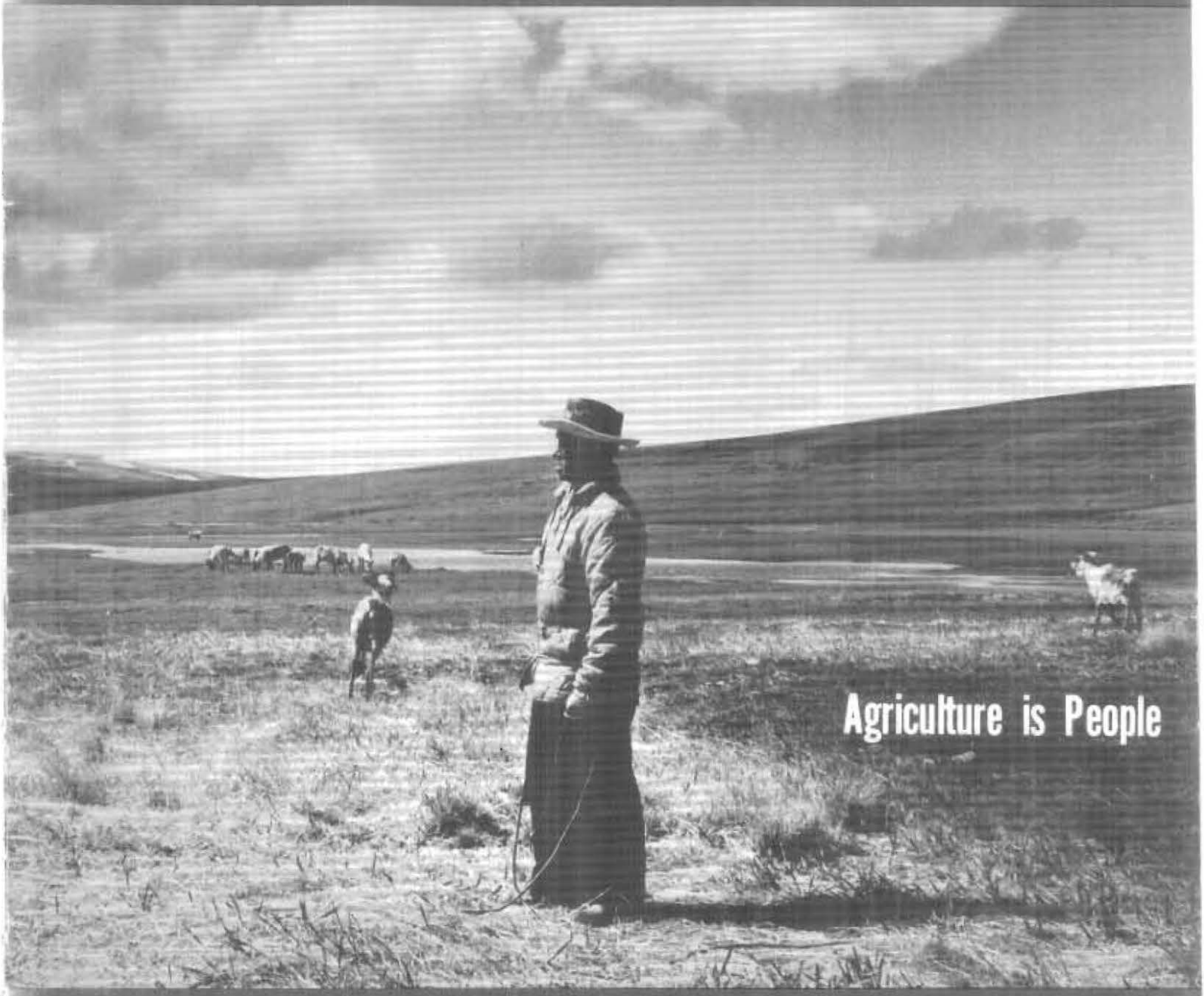

Institute of Agricultural Sciences
University of Alaska

from the

Director's Desk . . .

The great American dream! To be independent. To be completely self reliant and, if possible, self sufficient. Not necessarily to be rich, but to be one's own boss and beholden to no one. This is what brought our forefathers to this continent in the first place. This is the rainbow that led them over the Alleghenies, across the plains, and through the mountain passes to California and Oregon. This is the magnet that still draws people to Alaska.

Several times a year I get a letter that begins:

> Dear Sir:
>
> My husband (it is usually the wife who writes) is a bank teller, but both of us have wanted to come to Alaska for a long time. We like animals and the out-of-doors and we are both willing to work hard. Please send me any literature you have on raising beef in Alaska. . .

Sometimes it is dairying, or mink ranching, and last month the wife of an Indianapolis veterinarian called me long distance to say that her 50-year-old husband would be perfectly willing to go back to school for a year or so to brush up a little if I thought there would be a place for him working with farm animals in Alaska. The dream still lives!

Director Horace F. Drury

In this issue of Agroborealis we would like to tell you a little about some of our dreamers. Our examples are all full time farmers, although many of them also put in an extra 8 hours a day on other jobs to help out with expenses. They don't have a great deal of time to spend sitting in front of the TV set with a can of beer and a box of Krispy Krunchies, and when they think of the future, the possibility that the nation may soon be switching to a 3 day work week seldom crosses their minds. In fact many people would consider them slaves – but then they work much too hard for that. We call them pioneers, and Alaska is proud of them!

These men and women hope to confound the experts who say farming in Alaska is not economically feasible. They propose to do it by working double shifts and forgetting to add the cost of family labor to the bill; by lending their own capital to the business without charging interest; by not recognizing that there are alternative uses for their land and money – in short, by not playing the game according to the economists' rules of thumb. They are not behaving like rational economic beings. Maximizing profits is not their present goal. For the majority of these people, money is of secondary importance. If they had just wanted money, all of them could have found easier ways to make it. Their immediate reward is the joy of being able to do what they want to do more than anything else in the world. Naturally, making a living at it is vital to their plans, but that is their long term goal. It can wait.

Can they succeed? Of course they can! People just like them have been succeeding for 350 years. That's how America was settled. They are not blind fanatics. They are not screwballs. They are not really breaking the laws of economics. They are just substituting sweat, ingenuity, and guts for conventional financing – an old American custom. And, as we have already explained many times on these pages, Alaska shows great agricultural promise. The land will not fail them. Their ultimate success depends largely on their judgment, managerial skills, and farming abilities, just as it would anywhere else. We think their prospects look pretty good!

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Editor – Wilma M. Knox

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The cover photo shows Vincent Solick Okleasik of Teller acting as roper at a reindeer roundup. Photo by Wilma M. Knox. Photo page 11 by Charles Darby. Page 12, Dr. D. H. Dinkel. Pages, 21, 22, 23; Dr. L. J. Klebesadel. Top photos page 25 by Burton's. All others by Wilma Knox.

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Reindeer in corral with herder at roundup near Teller

Ruth Kakaruk and son Wilfred, reindeer owners from Teller

Lawrence Davis: Reindeer owner

At round-up time, stockman Lawrence Davis charters a small plane to help in spotting his animals and herders. From the passenger's seat, he scans the rolling, river-slashed landscape below and long before the average eye could distinguish them, his keen gaze has picked out sand-colored specks with the darker specks which are his men.

In his use of aircraft, Davis is not too different from stockmen in other parts of the United States in the air-minded 20th Century. But beyond this slight resemblance, few cattle ranchers would find much similarity between their own operations and that of Davis who runs 1,200 head of reindeer on 658,000 acres of sub-arctic tundra near Nome.

Davis is only one of a number of reindeer herdsmen on the Seward Peninsula where the bulk of Alaska's $400,000-a-year reindeer industry is located. Here, eleven different herds, all owned and managed by Eskimo families (plus one government-owned model herd), range over a vast and ragged tract covering more than 10,000,000 acres bordering the Bering Sea and the Arctic Ocean.

While this reindeer husbandry may seem unique, there are in fact more than 3,000,000 of the domesticated animals found in circumpolar regions around the world, about one per cent of these in North America. The domestic reindeer in Alaska are not indigenous but were brought over from Siberia in 1892 in an effort to build a more substantial economy for the Native population.

But because of the design of Eskimo life, the isolation and nature of the Arctic regions where the deer are raised, and the complexities of slaughtering and marketing under these conditions, the industry has always been highly unstable. In the 1930s, it was estimated as many as 640,000 of the animals ranged across Alaska's Arctic; by 1950, they had diminished to their lowest point of 25,000. But about 1960, renewed interest had developed, and received a considerable boost from a government loan system that allowed capable Eskimo men to borrow animals to get their start.

One of the men who has tried the loan system and feels it may well prove to be a success is Larry Davis, who came to Nome from Deering where he had been a herder. Today, he has a well-established herd and serves as president of the Reindeer Herders' Association,

Lawrence Davis

offering much-needed herd-management leadership and inspiration to herdsmen throughout the association.

"I came down in '54," recalls Davis, a short, sturdy man with a quiet, purposeful manner and animated way of speaking. "By '65 I suddenly realized there was a really good market here for reindeer meat and there wasn't a herd in the local area. I thought I might try it and see how it came out. Lucky I did because I was one of the first. There were a lot of people after that came to the local area because they suddenly realized there was some money in this reindeer business."

Davis' leased land lies north and east of Nome — more or less surrounding the city — so it is easy for him to use Nome as his business headquarters. This is his home, too, where he lives with his wife, Mary Ann, and their eight children: Lawrence, Karen, Cheryl, Clark, Thomas, Ruth Ann, Paula, and William. The new house he built for his family last year is a reflection of the optimism and ambition he feels for the reindeer industry, as well as tangible evidence of his own leadership talent. As he tells it:

"I tried to build myself a fairly decent place to show these other guys what can be done with reindeer. I'm trying to set an example and really taxed myself doing it too. But you have to show these people something if you're going to preach to them. You can't do that without doing it yourself. If I can show them what can be done, they can probably follow. I hope I'm doing the right thing."

While Davis devotes as much as 65 per cent of his time to duties for the herders' association, he is primarily a herdsman and has only two years to go to repay the animals that made up his original loan. For him, as for other deer owners, the animals provide several potential sources of income: meat, antlers, by-products and live animals.

At present, meat from the Seward Peninsula is sold locally. Even shipment as far as Anchorage would require the animals be slaughtered and cared for under stricter regulations for which the herders feel the industry and Native economy are not quite ready. Then, too, the local demand for the meat far exceeds the present supply. While there is a qualified cooperative slaughterhouse located in Nome, it is used mainly for holding meat at present.

"All of our slaughtering is done out in the field," Davis says. "Some people tell us it's unsanitary the way we dress our meat. But I think it's more sanitary than bringing it into the processing plant because you're out there in the real clean snow. No dirt or anything."

He also points out that reindeer meat butchered in this fashion is far more palatable since it lacks the "wild taste" that results from the barely-domesticated animals milling around in a corral just prior to being slaughtered.

Although it lags in dollar value, the antler harvest is next in importance to meat production for Davis and other herdsmen. In Alaska, this harvest was begun eight years ago. It consists of taking a portion of reindeer antlers while still in the velvet, to be dried, processed and sold on Far Eastern markets as an aphrodisiac (love potion). The

final product is reported to sell for up to $50 a pound, but the herdsmen receive only about $3.50 a pound for the green antlers. Even so, the crop has been worth up to $55,000 a year to the herders, with 12,000 to 15,000 pounds shipped out in recent years.

The antlers are taken at a summer roundup, and a cattle rancher visiting Larry Davis then, would find the operation both astonishing and vaguely familiar. Most astonishing would be the lack of horses for Davis and his herders manage the animals afoot.

But there is a big corral, and from this the deer are run through a squeeze chute into a waiting group of people, one with a rope. Once captured, the deer is thrown or wrestled to the ground, antlers are removed with nippers (only a portion is taken), fawns are earmarked, and a certain number of bulls castrated. A ratio of one bull to 15 cows is considered good; steers are scheduled for slaughter.

For his herd of 1,200 animals, Davis employs — in addition to himself — one herder in winter and two in summer. In winter the deer are not herded constantly because they tend to roam less, generally staying within a radius of about 10 miles. But care must be taken to see they do not stay in one area too long, since they chop up the ground and often overgraze their range. Lichens, an important component of reindeer range, may take as much as 15 to 20 years to grow.

At least one modern innovation has proven extremely helpful in keeping reindeer herds in check in winter — the snowmobile. Davis points out that one serious problem in the past might have been averted if these had existed — luring away of tame animals by wild caribou.

"Years ago they had about five or six herds in the Kotzebue area but then migration of caribou started coming in that area and the first thing you know there was no more reindeer," Davis says. "The herds just followed the caribou out. If they had had snow machines at the time the caribou started coming up there, there wouldn't have been a problem."

But no machine can iron out some of the other problems facing the industry today, as Davis would be the first to admit. He tells of problems concerning management, marketing, and financing, but he is optimistic that some of these will gradually disappear as a younger generation continues to take over.

"In the future as the older people start retiring, well the younger people will come in and they'll naturally think more in line with the modern culture. The old reindeer herders more or less based their function on subsistence."

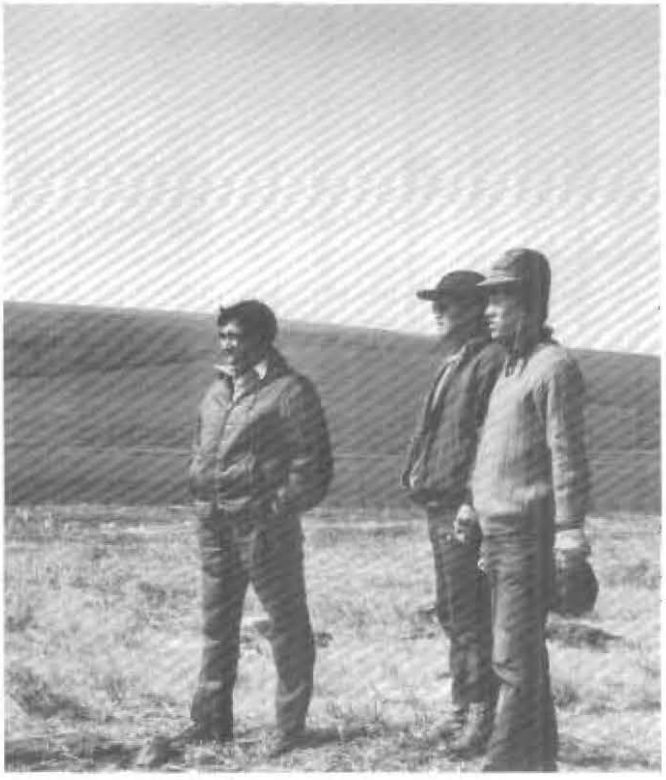
As for the future of the reindeer industry, Davis foresees a million-dollar business one day. He believes the meat will sell as a gourmet item, once the animals have been domesticated "until they are as gentle as beef cattle," thus removing the wild taste from the meat. Reindeer meat from Sweden is sold in the U. S. at present, he points out, "and they're getting a good price for it."

There are other possibilities: For instance, use of the by-products. One would be reindeer suede leather, which Davis describes as remaining soft and pliable even after soaking with water.

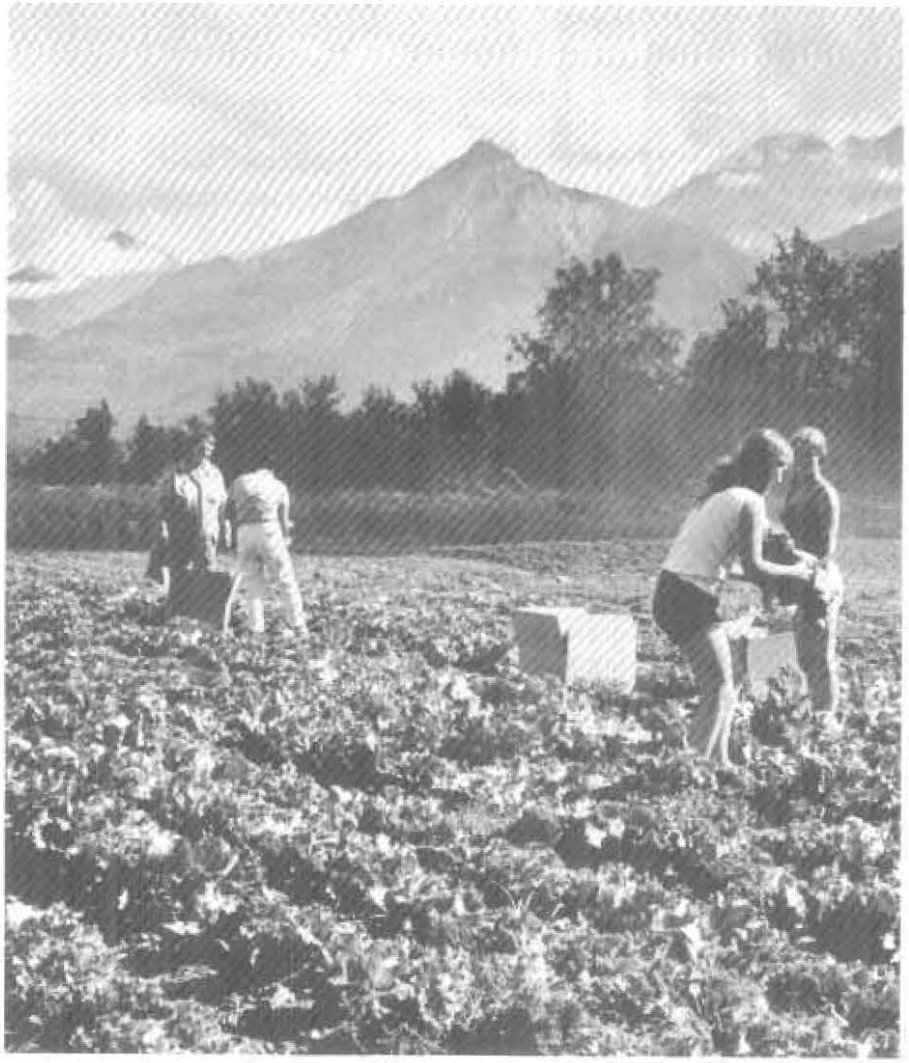
Certainly the 80-year-old reindeer industry as it stands now is a far cry from the much older cattle industry, but with the aid of far-sighted leaders such as Larry Davis, perhaps it one day will mean just as much for its area of the far north.

Reindeer just after being de-antlered

Larry Davis and Korean horn buyers at roundup



The Bannons grow vegetables on scenic farm



Harvesting lettuce on the Bannon farm

Possibly one of the most scenic farm areas in the world is the Matanuska Valley in Southcentral Alaska. Located between the Talkeetna Mountains and the Chugach Range, the verdant valley is a pastoral paradise with its dairy farms and vegetable fields spread beneath towering peaks. While many of the farms can be glimpsed from the main highways, a whole host of others are never seen by the average motorist.

One such homestead farm is reached by a side road which leaves the Glenn Highway north of Sutton. Winding and narrow, the dirt road makes a fairly sharp ascent up a wooded canyon, often beside a small creek. Topping one last rise, brings to view a cluster of large buildings: The home, greenhouse and root cellar of Al and Mary Bannon and their children who make a living raising vegetables.

If you are a visitor who stops by the farm in summer or at harvest time, it will depend on what time of day it is and what phase of work is in progress which Bannon will greet you. Al himself is apt to be encountered just in passing as he rushes off to the next job. If it is mid-harvest, all or some of the four children remaining at home might be out of school lending a hand: Berti, a pretty blonde teenager who is now a junior in high school; Jesse, a slender-built boy with unruly dark hair, Wesley, blond and sturdy, or son Endo, at 12 the youngest member of the family. (Two married daughters are away from home: Norma Muhlbauer of Rochester, Minnesota; and Patricia Wilson of Anchorage.)

Provided she isn't in the midst of supervising field employees, Mary Bannon may stop to rest and chat for a moment. A warm and friendly woman with a calm, sincere manner of speaking, Mary is obviously a mainstay at the farm which has been her home for going on a quarter of a century. She was from Greensboro, North Carolina when she and Al were married in 1945; he was from Mesa, Arizona.

Shortly after they were married they moved to Arizona but this was only a temporary thing. It was Al's dream to be a farmer in Alaska – a dream he had fostered throughout three and a half years in the service. During that time he had read all the literature he could find on Alaska and farming there.

The only thing that prevented the Bannons from coming north during the first couple years of their marriage was the birth of their first child, Al wasn't certain there were doctors in Alaska. By the time the child was two and a half they decided to make the move north. It was April of 1948 when Al left and about a month later Mary followed.

The 160 acres they homesteaded north of Sutton has been their home since then. At least a portion of their place has an east-south exposure, where the vegetable fields are planted now, the home site itself has a small clear creek rushing through, and a stand of fine birch and cottonwood for protection from the wind.

The house the Bannons built in the beginning was on the opposite side of the creek from the one they now have.

At that time too they had a different form of livelihood. In 1950 they went into the hatchery business, hatching baby chicks for themselves as well as for others. A short time later they bought 1,000 laying hens. They had all but decided they didn't care much for the poultry business when they were struck by fire.

"So my husband was forced then to go to the (vegetable) farming, but it wasn't a bad thing," Mary concludes. "I definitely like it better than chickens because you have to live with them 24 hours (a day)."

And vegetable farming it has been since then. This summer the Bannons harvested about 90 acres of crops: 45 to 50 acres of potatoes (Norgold Russets and Bake Kings), and the rest cabbage, lettuce and carrots for the most part. They also had 1,000 tomato plants in one of their greenhouses.

In addition to their homestead, they also own 160 acres near Palmer, at Mile 52, where most of their potatoes were grown this season. Throughout the year the Bannon children help with all phases of the vegetable raising, as their mother points out, "They're all trained in this type of work." But Al and Mary also hire additional help during the busier seasons, with a total of 10 or 12 in summertime and about eight during the harvest.

The Bannons start planting ordinarily in May, though Mary says they have started in April at times in the past. The next big rush comes in the fall, to get cabbages, carrots and the last of the lettuce out before freeze-up.

While winter may be leisure time for some gardeners, it provides further work for the Bannons who are then busy in the cooler bagging carrots and preparing other vegetables for market. This year they started selling to Palmer Produce instead of doing their own marketing, as they had in the past. For some time when the family did its own marketing Berti drove their large truck full of produce from the farm to an Anchorage supermarket.

Berti is also her mother's right-hand helper as the two team up to run the business while Al spends several months during winter or early spring in the other states doing research on how to improve the farm. He nearly always goes to Washington and Oregon, but he frequently travels further afield as well, to Ohio and other places, looking for new techniques and machinery that can be applied to or used on the place at Sutton.

One of his projects Outside has been to learn more about greenhouse horticulture, in which both he and Mary are interested. They have two large greenhouses and Mary predicts that before long they will go more fully into that type of business. Now she has time for it since her children are older. Last spring on his trip out, Al had 500 small poinsettia plants sent back. These are really thriving inside one of the green houses and Mary points them out to a visitor:

"He's topped them - you know, you call it pinching. You do that and it makes so many flowers. However many leaves you leave, that's how many flowers you're supposed to have."

Besides working with the greenhouses, helping to plant and harvest in the fields and then bag vegetables for sale, Mary frequently cans and freezes produce for her family's winter consumption. At times she makes as much as 100 pounds of sauerkraut – "the kids eat it about as fast as I can make it" – which she later freezes. She makes hot sauce for beans, and some chowchow for the kids, and maybe freezes some cauliflower. Neighbors give them moose and she freezes that.

Sometimes Mary complains or at least points out that, while the costs of most products – equipment, fertilizer and so on – have gone up considerably during the past 20 years, the prices for their farm produce never seem to rise. And prices to the consumer are considerably above those received by the grower. She cites 98 cents per pound for tomatoes and $1.20 for a 10-pound bag of potatoes in Anchorage stores – both far more than they get for these items fresh from the farm.

Then she smiles and adds:

"But farming, it's altogether a pretty healthy life. We have our own potatoes and all our own vegetables. Now we have our tomatoes too and they are really wonderful. And the kids enjoy eating everything. We have plenty to eat, better than the average."

Most average Americans would certainly agree with Mary. Looking at the hard-working, healthy Bannon kids, at the teamwork among the Bannon family members, and at the fertile, productive farm Al and Mary carved out of the wilderness, they would also agree that Al's dream of farming in Alaska has been an unqualified success.

Mary and Al Bannon grow poinsettia plants in a greenhouse

Marie Fett wanted fresh eggs

As far as Lee and Marie Fett were concerned when they moved to Alaska, there wasn't any question about which should come first – the chicken or the egg. It had to be the chicken for the simple reason that Marie wouldn't eat any but the freshest eggs.

Farmer Lee Fett tells the story this way:

"When we came here my wife wouldn't eat store-bought eggs. So I had to build a chicken house which was insulated, which was heated, so she could put 13 chickens in it so we could have fresh eggs. I did this. Those eggs cost us $3 a dozen if they cost us a penny. Well, anyhow that's how we really got into the chicken business. Because she wouldn't eat store-bought eggs."

Today, 11 years after they moved from Wisconsin and homesteaded at Mile 1417 on the Alaska Highway in the Delta Junction area, the Fetts have 7,500 laying hens housed in what may well be one of the most modern and automatic poultry houses in the United States. The $150,000, totally automated building was designed by the Fett family, built in their carpenter shop and erected by them from the ground up.

But that isn't all. In fact it's only a small portion of the family-owned and run operation. The Fetts also have a modern pig barn with 90 brood sows, plus their own slaughter facility, cutting room and cold storage facilities. Elsewhere on the 2,200-acre farm, they grow vegetables and grain; and at the same time plan and work on long-range future projects in cattle raising and even possible production of lawn turf to be sold commercially.

With all this in mind, it is understandable why Lee Fett wants Mountain View Farms to be known as a diversified farm, not a specialized one. As he puts it: It is not a pig farm, not a poultry farm, grain farm or vegetable farm, but all of these together, each as important as the other, totalling up to what must surely be one of the most diversified family agricultural projects ever put together in Alaska. And, it is a dream realized.

Long before he started his farm – when he was growing up with 11 brothers and sisters on the family farm in Wisconsin – Lee Fett had his dream of coming to Alaska. But what with one thing and another, such as getting married and raising a family of six boys and three girls, and making a living in a shipyard and in the construction business, it was 1961 before Lee finally arrived in Alaska.

The Fetts and school bus camper that brought Lee to Alaska

He and two of his sons arrived in a little yellow school bus he had bought for $250 and converted. It was 53 degrees below zero on March 4 when they hit the Delta area and stopped along the Alaska Highway to visit.

"Well," as Lee tells it, "we kinda liked what we saw here. But I made a reconn, really. I went up to Fairbanks. And I took the little car (a Ranchero, pulled behind the bus) and I covered the state."

In the end, they returned to the Delta area where Lee learned of a piece of land near the junction. Within two days he had filed on what would be his home place, and one son had filed on the 160 acres behind. Today, Lee Fett stands on the park-like grounds, with his neat home, attractive poultry house and meticulously-painted hog barn arranged around the perimeter, and points across the Alaska Highway to the thick birch forest beyond.

"That was just the way it looked when we came here. And of course you start that way and ten – nine years later you begin to see some end results, huh?"

The crew that helped attain results at Mountain View Farms included Lee himself, his wife Marie and five of their sons, Colonel, Tom, Larry, Dale and Doug, and daughter Lou Ann.

Lee's time was divided between the farm and other jobs; for five years now he has been building and grounds superintendent at Fort Greely, a nearby military base. The boys also worked elsewhere, though today Tom and Doug actually manage the farm, with Tom managing the hog operation and Doug the chickens. Marie has her own crew to care for the eggs.

Besides the eggs and endless other attentions the place demands, Lee, Marie or others in the family often show visitors around. Ironically, while few Alaskans outside the local area know of Mountain View Farms, tour buses and out-of-state motorists in growing numbers stop to see the wonderful Alaskan farm.

Depending on the visitor, Lee is apt to impress on them that he and his

family were neither the *first* nor are they the *only* people engaged in Alaska in the same operations. He feels that the people who pioneered farming in Alaska in years past – although many failed in the attempt – have not been given the credit they deserve for showing the possibilities. And he wants others to regard Mountain View Farms as just one family's version of the rich potential Alaska can hold for agriculture.

While any of the Fett operations could serve as an example, the chickens are especially interesting, particularly after hearing the history of Marie's demand for fresh eggs and the original flock of 13 hens. That inauspicious beginning is a far cry from the sight of the 7,500 hens, caged in three rows of 2,500 each, that stretch the length of the long room in the Fetts' new building (the fourth row should be filled with another 2,500 chickens by mid-September, 1972).

These hens represent a sizeable investment: each row is worth $7,500. Hatched in Washington State (they are Leghorns, of the H & N strain), they are flown north by commercial airliner as 20-week-old pullets. Roughly $1,500 has to be set aside each month for bird replacement.

One of the questions asked most often by people aware of the 50 and 60 below zero temperatures common to the Delta area in winter, is just how the henhouse is heated. Lee says the birds themselves help to keep the building warm. Actually, the Fetts try to maintain 57 degrees and do require extra heat when the temperatures dip to winter extremes. According to Lee, a convection-type heating coil around the perimeter of the chicken house preheats incoming air and in extreme cold the heat exchange system provides for limiting the amount of incoming air.

Although the Fetts raise grain, they get their chicken feed at Alaska Mill and Feed in Anchorage, "the same kind you can buy anyplace in the United States." Doug owns a trailer truck and makes regular trips to Anchorage to pick up the feed. It is dumped into large, elevated drums located outside the far end of the hen house. An automatic feeding system augers up the feed and delivers it to the cages at specified times and in specified amounts. The water supply is also automatic.

The Fetts say their birds should produce between 80 and 88 per cent every day. Lights play a big part in production, going on at 7 a.m. and off at 10 p.m. If they go off during these hours it can create a problem since the chickens are thrown off schedule and production is lowered from 200 to 300 eggs per day. Ten to 15 days can be required to bring them back to peak production.

One thing the Fetts tried in their old poultry house and plan to install in the new one is piped-in music. Lee says it is surprising how the hens respond to the different types of music.

"You put on some of that hot rock and roll and those chickens' heads were just going every which way."

Fast-tempo music, half an hour or so before the lights go out for the last time, makes the birds perk up and eat; while a slow tempo a bit later soothes them and makes them bed down.

Marie shows off special new egg carton

Temperature control also plays a big part in production since a drop of three or four degrees in the evening causes the birds to eat more food, which "holds them over for the night," and results in better over-all production.

Since each chicken costs $3, and an additional 75 cents in air freight, there is no wonder the Fetts seek new ways to extend the working life of each bird, which is roughly 14 months.

"They've come out with a new gimmick now," Lee says. "You can throw this bird into a moult, completely take the feed and water away from it, put it in the dark for a couple of days. Then the bird revitalizes itself and it'll lay for another four or five months. This could be very advantageous for us here in Alaska."

After the bird's working life is over, it is sold as a stewing hen. But of course the egg production itself is the big thing. And just the task of gathering from 6,000 to 6,600 eggs per day is no mean task. Marie says it is all done with trays; when you get through you just count the trays and this tells the number of eggs.

Filled trays are rolled into Marie's spotless, bright processing room where eggs are sorted, graded, washed and dried, all by machine. The scale itself is electronically controlled. At the end, they come out in the Fetts' attractive, new egg cartons.

"We sell extra large, small, medium, large and peewee," Marie says. "That's how they're graded. And we're running our grade between three and five ounces above USDA standards."

Why the additional ounces?

"We're giving the people more for their money," Lee replies. "As long as we can make a profit selling a product and we can sell them a better product at that price, we're happy."

Most of the eggs go to Fairbanks. But they are also widely distributed in Alaska's boondocks, traveling by bus, train and plane to various highway lodges, such communities as Galena and Garner, and even remoter outposts on Wien Airlines routes. Today, these fresh Alaska eggs are being enjoyed by people in isolated spots who possibly never tasted anything but boat eggs before. All because Marie Fett wouldn't eat "store eggs" and her husband – a firm believer in Alaskan-grown products – saw to it that she had fresh ones.

Ann Dolney has turned her hobby into a business

Many people who have absorbing hobbies dream of turning them into successful businesses. More often than not such attempts result in much hard work and prove futile in the end.

Not so for Ann Dolney of Fairbanks whose hobby of gardening has grown into the largest greenhouse business north of the Alaska Range and the most varied in the entire state. While the process has taken several years and untold hard work, Ann is still amazed when she looks at the four large greenhouses and acres of nursery plants and vegetables that have grown up around her home.

"Sometimes," she admits, "I think I'm dreaming."

Actually, Ann and her husband, Edward, operate the business together, with considerable assistance from their three children, Linda, 18; Karen, 17; and Walter, 11. The Dolneys are located several miles out of Fairbanks on Sheep Creek Road. Here the family home and business share a sweeping view of rolling, forested countryside and distant mountains. But not even this splendid backdrop can quite compare with the color and variety of vegetables and flowers that surround the Dolney enterprise.

Ann and Ed Dolney work among their greenhouse flowers

While many Fairbanksans visit the greenhouse and nursery throughout the season, they account for only part of the visitors. All summer long, tourists and out-of-state motorists come to marvel and buy. Since a large proportion of the business is raising of bedding plants, the Dolneys busiest time is from about the middle of May until the middle of June, a really hectic time for them. This is also one of the most colorful as the greenhouses blaze with beautiful geraniums, petunias, and dozens of varieties of annuals that do well in Alaska.

However, it is the lucky visitor who comes after the big rush, perhaps in late July when Ann's spectacular blue delphiniums are at their peak and she herself may have a moment to go on a tour of her gardens and tell her story.

Ann is from Germany where she and Ed were married in 1952. Shortly afterward they moved to Pennsylvania where they stayed for a year near Ed's folks and where Linda was born. In 1954 Ed asked if she wanted to go to Alaska for the summer, so they made the trip over the highway hauling a trailer and arriving on the first of April. In mid-July they lost everything — including the trailer — in a fire. Since there was no insurance, they virtually had to stay, though as Ann quickly points out, they probably would have anyway.

For the first few years they lived on Davis Road but in 1958 they homesteaded. After Ann and the children paid a visit to her mother in Germany, they joined Ed out at their present location in the spring of 1959. It was during the next seven years that Ann's gardening hobby grew and grew, finally developing about 1966 into a full-fledged business. And it's been growing ever since.

Ann recalls her early gardening experiences:

"Besides having a little store, we farmed at home. I've always enjoyed gardening, although my mother did most of it.

"I have some pictures of my first greenhouse — about as big as my kitchen. Very small. I had a garden on Davis Road. But when we came out here, with all this extra area, we kept increasing the size of the garden and, naturally, you have to start most of your plants indoors to get anything. I had to keep increasing plants I grew for myself. I had the bedrooms so full of plants you couldn't get in and finally Ed decided to build me a little bigger greenhouse.

"After Ed built the first greenhouse, I was still running it by myself. He's a mechanic by trade — he was running heavy equipment for the state and then

he worked in the GSA garage for several years. But after the second greenhouse, I just couldn't handle it any more, so he decided to build a third. Ed can do all these things himself. It's his own design. He does everything himself.

"Then we started going into the nursery business. We have all different types of shrubs and perennials. So, the first thing is bedding plants and after they're gone, we plant the greenhouse into tomatoes. You have to utilize your space.

"Would you like to see our outside gardens? Come along, I'll show you. We have some under plastic on the other side of the road.

"Right now *(in late July)* we sell garden products – we sell vegetables and strawberries and actually we have been selling a lot of shrubs lately. Cabbages? Yes, and peas. We supply the Tiki Cove, our Chinese restaurant, with pea pods. Friday afternoon, I picked 200 pounds of squash. Zucchini and yellow.

"Last year we had some new strawberries that were really delicious. We didn't think there was any chance of them coming through the winter but they did remarkably well. They came through fine. Taste these. *(The flavor is superb.)*

"See my little watermelon over there. Usually I have a lot of them like this, by this time. I doubt these will make this year. We sold some last year. They're sweeter than any melon you've ever eaten."

Watermelon in Alaska. Pickling cucumbers. Green peppers. Hot peppers. Pumpkins. Gold Nugget squash: "The most delicious squash you ever ate in your life." Sweet corn. Things the average Alaskan just doesn't expect to see growing in Alaska.

Many crops are grown under clear plastic which holds the heat and helps warm-weather plants mature better in the short growing season in the far north. Watermelons under plastic were doing better than those in the greenhouse; and even the strawberries under plastic were recognizably superior to those without.

The variety of plants produced in the Dolney operation, both in greenhouses and outside, literally defies description. Ann is an adventurous gardener and has discovered many new varieties in flowers and other plants that people were not aware would grow in the Fairbanks area.

The secret of the Dolneys growing success? No doubt many ingredients are involved, and one of these could be the care they give their soil. As Ann describes it:

"Our soil is very tight, very tight. So we have to put in sand and some kind of humus. We buy sand but we have our own peat moss. We also have a compost pile. Ed mixes the soil. He uses part peat moss, part sand, part of our old icky soil and part of the compost. From now on he's got to get all of our soil ready and move it into the greenhouse because if you don't, you're done. When you start out in March, you can't dig anything."

Ann ascribes part of their success to the hot summer weather and long daylight hours in the Interior of Alaska:

"See, we have a lot more sunshine and that's what it takes for tasty vegetables and colorful flowers."

But the most important ingredient – Ann's continuing absorption with her former hobby – comes through as she sums up and reflects on the split-second timing and frantic, hard work involved in her type of business in Alaska:

"It's so seasonal, you just have to make it or you don't. And in a very few weeks. Everything has to be done when it has to be done, not tomorrow or the next day or the next week. Other places it's not that vital. But up here (in Alaska) you really just have to . . .

"You know, if you didn't love it, you couldn't do it."

A young visitor admires some roses at the Dolney greenhouse

Russell James does his gardening under glass

"As far as I'm concerned about this Alaska agriculture, if we would put a fraction of the money behind agriculture here in this state that we're putting into some other things, we could have a going concern."

The man who has this emphatic opinion about Alaskan agriculture is Russell James, owner and operator of one of the state's unusual horticultural enterprises, Sport Lake Greenhouses, Inc., near Soldotna on the Kenai Peninsula. The operation is unusual on three counts: It is one of Alaska's largest greenhouses; it is one of the few to operate in winter; and, even more important, out of it comes some of the most delicious tomatoes many residents have found since they came to live in the north.

Raising plants successfully in Alaska, both in a greenhouse and outdoors, is something about which James has accumulated a vast store of knowledge in his ten years here. Actually his experience with agriculture started long before that. A Coloradan by birth, he grew up on his parents' farm there, and built his first greenhouse — "just a little thing" — while still in high school. He says he's been interested in greenhouses ever since, always progressing to larger ones.

James' residence in Alaska dates from 1962. His wife died in 1958, and four years later he brought his family of three daughters and one son to Alaska. It was his intention then to set up a greenhouse business in Homer, but his church, the Seventh Day Adventist Church, changed that plan. Church officials asked him to become a missionary in the Dillingham area and that is where he went, as food service director.

James crates tomatoes for marketing

The next six years, working at the church's Bristol Bay mission school at Aleknagik, were some of the most interesting and valuable of his horticultural career. With help from children at the mission, he cleared land and built greenhouses, ultimately having about five acres of outside land in vegetables, as well.

For the first time this remote section of Alaska — reachable only by airplane — became a real garden spot as cabbage, broccoli, cauliflower, turnips, radishes, potatoes, tomatoes, cucumbers, squash and bedding plants flowed from mission gardens and greenhouses in quantities large enough to allow profitable sales to local residents.

"All of our work there was done by hand," recalls James, a trim man of 43. "We had no farm machinery at all. One little rototiller. We cleared all that land and grew all those crops by hand."

So prodigious was their output, the mission actually air-freighted bedding plants and tomatoes into Anchorage, as well as into isolated areas such as St. Lawrence Island and villages north of the Arctic Circle. Mostly as a novelty, they even sent a few items to places in the other states.

At the same time that he was acting as food service director, assistant principal and horticulturist at the mission, James was carrying on experiments in vegetable growing. The March, 1968 issue of *American Vegetable Grower* carried an article about his successful experiments in starting potatoes in peat pots, which he found increased production over ordinary seeding by as much as 60 per cent. Experiments in starting other plants, such as tomatoes, cauliflower, squash and many more, in

peat pots, are still being conducted by James.

James was happy with his work at the mission, but there came a sad day in 1968 when the school was forced to close for financial reasons. As James says: "The people over there are still shook up over it." His own regret at having to abandon the project is apparent as he describes taking out that last crop and turning the keys over to a caretaker.

But a man devoted to his work is not apt to be long in finding new opportunities. James started working at Sport Lake Greenhouses in October, 1970 when the business was owned by Bob Halcro of Anchorage. Later the business was sold to Stan Thompson of North Kenai. Now James is in the process of purchasing it from Thompson.

Originally, the greenhouse was built in 1966 and received national publicity for its unique fluorescent lighting and plant-growing system. But since then the large greenhouse business had somehow failed to progress. It presented just the challenge and opportunity James needed after his successful gardening venture at Dillingham. Today, he has incorporated the business and operates it with his children, Sheryl, 20; Howard, 18; Carolyn, 17; and Jannelle, 14. Howard, Sheryl and Carolyn are attending school Outside, and Jannelle will go to Anchorage this year.

James recently got married and there are now four more members of the family corporation, his wife, Louise, and her three children: Dennis, Sharon and Letah. (James hires three men: Don Gibbs, foreman, Keith Bolin and Charles Cornish, growers.)

This family-owned business is a far cry from the small greenhouse James built when he was in high school. The area under fiberglass is approximately one acre. At present, work is going on to divide it into smaller sections since these can be easier controlled.

James says cleaning out the greenhouse and trying to work out its many flaws has been a monumental job. He admits the task is a long way from completed but he is optimistic.

"People who have been here since the place was built tell me it never looked as good as it does now," he says with justifiable pride. "Of course, they can't see the problems back in the corners. The entire operation was built for Southern California. We've had to re-do the building. We've got to reconstruct the whole thing on one side. It's going to cost between $10,000 and $15,000 to rebuild the north wall.

In the first place, he points out, the building was erected without an adequate foundation. Then the ventilating system, the irrigating system, the circulating system, and the heating system developed faults. He said former owners could never get the elaborate lighting system to work adequately. The reason as James explains it: No amount of light will induce plants to grow unless they have the proper amount of gases in the air.

The secret, he says, is to add carbon dioxide to the air. James installed CO_2 generators (using natural gas), and for the first time the plants responded to the lights.

The big crop in the greenhouse thus far has been tomatoes. This year at one time right around 9,000 pounds of tomatoes were being picked each week. While cucumbers are also grown, as well as flowers, houseplants and bedding plants, the tomatoes have been the backbone of the business. The largest market, of course, is in the Anchorage area, but they are also supplying the local Soldotna-Kenai area and have shipped to the Dillingham area and to other points on the Kenai Peninsula.

Asked why his fruit is superior to hothouse-grown tomatoes shipped in from outside the state, James points out that his are vine ripened, while the ones shipped in are picked at an immature stage in order to withstand the journey. Then, too, many tomatoes from elsewhere are grown in a water solution, and James says that while these may appear reasonably attractive, they tend to go to water on the platter. All of his plants are grown in soil.

But this is not James' most pressing concern at the moment. His biggest problem is to get enough financing to properly rebuild and equip his greenhouse so that it can keep on producing California fruit throughout the Alaskan winters. This winter he will keep only about half the house going because the lighting system in the other half cannot be used. That alone will require about $10,000 to rebuild.

If there is a way to overcome this problem of financing — a problem he feels is holding back agriculture all over Alaska — it appears quite likely James is the man to find it. And Alaskans who have tasted the delicious, firm, fragrant tomatoes he and his family grow will be hoping earnestly that he is able to continue his work of supplying dinner salad bowls around the state.

Jannelle and angel-wing begonia

It's not Kansas -- but Alaska!

Combine harvesting barley near home headquarters on OHM farm

Few Alaskans outside the Delta Junction area in Alaska's interior are aware that one of the largest grain and hog-raising ventures in the state's agricultural history is under way in the Clearwater section of the Tanana Valley, about 100 miles southeast of Fairbanks. The farm, a block of partly-leased, partly-owned land has been incorporated by Ed Merdes of Fairbanks and Jim Harding of Delta, who operate it under the name of OHM.

Located a few miles off the Alaska Highway near Mile 1415, the OHM tract covers 7,000 acres of the fertile plains bordering the Tanana River. The river itself, a major tributary of the Yukon River, rises in the eastern section of the state in the Alaska Range and flows roughly 500 miles northwest. Portions of the valley it traverses have long been recognized as rich in potential for agricultural purposes. Some sources have estimated as many as 200,000 acres of this central area of the Tanana Valley might be suitable for farming. But thus far, only a fraction has been utilized, largely around Delta Junction.

No doubt one reason for this lack of wide interest is the harsh winter climate of the region, though summer and winter often bring wild extremes. On the one hand, summer temperatures may range up to 93 degrees, with long hours of daylight and sunshine that favor the growth of a wide variety of warm-weather crops and plants. At the other extreme, winters frequently bring violent cold. In January of 1971, a low of minus 71 degrees was recorded at Clearwater. Temperatures in the minus 50s and 60s are not unusual.

Freezing also can occur occasionally in late spring and early fall, thus reducing the already short growing season. An example of how early cold weather can strike occurred in September of 1972 when the Clearwater area experienced two consecutive days of plus one degree temperatures. (However, such temperatures in September should not adversely affect barley, since it has already hardened by then.)

Much of the Delta-Clearwater section is also known for its high winds. Wind velocity of 74 m.p.h. has been officially reported in the Big Delta region.

Despite its austere weather conditions, hardy homesteaders were drawn to the Delta-Clearwater area years back. Most of the farms gouged out of the thickly wooded valley were small, comparing in size with those in other parts of Alaska where, for the most part, farm acreage has remained on a homestead-sized scale. Several different

forms of farming were attempted, including dairying and grain production.

Today, many of the original settlers are gone and during the past decade or so, a small spurt of more ambitious farming has occurred. At least one other farm corporation utilizes more than 2,000 acres and serves as an example of the modern techniques that may turn the rich central Tanana Valley into the grain hog and garden capital of Alaska.

Now OHM is moving forward to become a large, specialized, mechanized operation paralleling trends in other states. This year, the ranch had 2,300 acres in barley. By late August and early September between 1,750 and 2,000 acres of golden grain were being harvested by two big combines. Next year 3,500 acres will be planted, by 1975 the entire 7,000 acres will be in production.

The corporation also owns between 650 and 950 head of hogs housed in modern two-story swine barns with these barns covering an area one-half the size of a football field. There are plans afoot to increase these to as many as 14,000 animals in the years ahead. The second story of these barns will be used to grow tomatoes and strawberries under artificial light in a hydroponic system using recycled CO_2 from the hogs on the lower floor. The farm has further plans for its own slaughter facility, curing ovens and sausage kitchen, as well. For the time being, however, the animals are taken to slaughter facilities in Fairbanks and Palmer.

What lies ahead for this experiment in far northern agriculture would be a hazardous guess for anyone. Even the OHM people themselves cannot find a ready answer at this point, but they are optimistic. And Alaskans interested in the future of farming in their state would do well to keep an eye on this little bit of Kansas as OHM paves the way to a more progressive brand of agriculture on the rolling, fertile plains of Alaska's central Tanana Valley.

Breaking new soil on the farm

Jim Harding, left, and Ed Merdes confer at farm

Barley fie

Harvesting the crop

ld on OHM farm

Barley goes into storage bins

Holsteins make up bulk of Fairview herd

Profile of a Matanuska dairy farm

While Myrtle Gislason, nee Montpetit, was growing up on her parents' diversified farm in North Dakota, one chore she heartily disliked was helping to milk 15 head of cows. The thought of never having to milk another cow filled her with elation when she was 17 and her family moved to the Pacific Northwest away from farming.

Today, Myrtle has been a dairywoman in Alaska for going on a quarter-century. Furthermore, when her hired milker is gone, she can often be found capably milking 90 or more dairy cows.

The herd she helps to tend is at Fairview Dairies, located off Alaska Route 3, twelve miles west of Palmer. It is not owned by Myrtle alone but is a joint operation with Bob and Merlie McCombs. This interesting and unusual arrangement is a partnership, involving the pooling of business resources, including the animals, buildings, equipment and operational expenses.

While the Gislason and McCombs homes are located close together, the two farms are considered separate. As Bob and Merlie point out:

"We want to keep our places separate. We can tell you we have 200 acres of land and Myrtle can tell you she has 225."

The partnership was formed in 1960, the year after Myrtle's husband was killed in a farm accident. To help with the manual work, Myrtle hires the milker which is a full time job. But she and Merlie McCombs are active participants in many phases of work around the farm, from harvesting to milking. Both also contribute time in office tasks as well, Myrtle keeping books for the partnership and Merlie maintaining records on the cows themselves.

Myrtle and her husband actually started the dairy operation. They came to Alaska in 1946 from Seattle and he worked for a year and a half for the Alaska Railroad. In 1948 they bought the farm and for the next two years struggled with trying to grow vegetables, an attempt she remembers now with considerable aversion:

"With vegetables we had a crop one day and the next day we didn't know whether we did or not. Like lettuce, you could have a field of lettuce one day and the next it was all slimy and you'd lose the whole thing. And we worked just like dogs on that too, but you weren't sure of anything."

The second fall they changed over and Myrtle says now:

"I was never so glad to see cows. Milking cows is a big gamble too, but at least you're getting that check every two weeks, and that makes a difference. I never minded going into the dairy business."

The first five of their commercial herd were sent up by boat from Seattle by a man who supposedly knew about dairy cattle. Myrtle claims they turned out to be "just every kind of a color of cow", and her husband was unhappy they were not all Holsteins. Nevertheless, with these five and a milking machine, Fairview Dairy was launched.

A few years after the Gislasons got into the dairy business -- 1951 to be

exact – their long-time friends, Bob and Merlie McCombs, and daughters Luann and Linda, arrived in Anchorage. Merlie was originally from Idaho, Bob from Walla Walla, Washington, and like Myrtle, he had also spent his early life on a diversified farm. The McCombs' lived in Anchorage until 1956 but that year they bought the 200-acre, 11-cow dairy farm adjoining the Gislasons.

By the time of Joe Gislason's death in 1959, the two dairies were thriving, each milking about 30 cows. Myrtle's son, Gary, had no inclination to become a dairyman (today he is a professor teaching math at the University of Alaska; daughter Joyce, employed by Matanuska Electric, lives at home with her mother). For both Myrtle and the McCombs', pooling resources meant many advantages.

"It cut the overhead quite a lot," Bob notes now with his characteristic economy of words. "See, they had about the same amount of cows and we had about the same amount of cows, machinery and so forth," The land also was nearly equal.

Today, Fairview milks around 92 cows (they have a total of about 165 head, including calves). Most of these are Holsteins, with a few head of Brown Swiss, Guernseys and Jerseys thrown in. The business has a milking barn and attached milkroom, a silo, farm equipment to grow and harvest its own feed, and a new 200 x 44-foot loose-housing barn, with room for 114 stalls. The barn went into operation in October of last year; with extras, such as a barn-cleaner, it represents at least a $70,000 investment. The silo represents roughly $25,000, the milking equipment between $10,000 and $15,000, and an 800-gallon stainless steel bulk tank that would cost today about $9,000.

All this modern equipment and the increased herd is a far cry from that early farm and five head of dairy cows the Gislasons started out with.

"In those days," Myrtle recalls, "we said if we could milk 15 cows year around we could make a *good* living – if we could have 15 milking all the time – we could have a nice living. And we would have been satisfied with that. You see how things have changed? We never intended anything like this."

Such changes, of course, are reflected in the entire dairy industry in Alaska. Of the 80 dairy farms operating when the Gislasons started, only 26 remain; all of these, with the exception of one at Shaw Creek in the Fairbanks area, are located in the Matanuska Valley. Small farms of 10 and 15 cows have given way to larger operations (though the cow population too has declined from 3,000 to a current 1,800 head) and more modern and efficient operational practices.

While many phases of agriculture in Alaska are hampered by the isolated location and harsh weather, in several important aspects the dairy people here are almost as well off as their counterparts elsewhere. These days, for instance, due to the AI (artificial insemination) program, it is unnecessary for Fairview and other dairies to have the expense of buying or keeping bulls. Simply by picking up the telephone, Bob McCombs can secure the services of the finest bulls in the United States, resulting in a high grade of selection and replenishment for the partnership herd.

Under this program, semen from a huge selection of bulls across the nation

Partners Myrtle Gislason and Bob McCombs (top photo) check over herd records. At bottom are Myrtle Gislason, left, and Merlie McCombs of Fairview Dairies.

is frozen in individual ampules to 320 degrees below zero, shipped by air in liquid nitrogen to Alaska to the breeders' association, and stored at that temperature until it is needed. Dairy people then choose from a catalog a bull with characteristics to complement their cow, and thus can expect a calf of superior virtues. As one expert describes this system: "These people are as exposed to the forefront of the dairy industry as if they were in Wisconsin."

Another important way in which the dairy industry in Alaska has kept pace with the times is in marketing, an area in which all other agricultural people across the north are seriously impeded. The reindeer herdsman on the Seward Peninsula, the vegetable grower on the Kenai Peninsula, and the hog raiser of the Fairbanks region might look with something akin to envy as a huge milk tanker drains off the contents of the Fairview bulk milk tank and leaves. At that point the milk is out of the hands of the Fairview partners. They have no distribution worries; if the milk spills on the way to Anchorage, it is not their loss. And every two weeks their check is sent to them.

Even the harsh weather of the north has been conquered to some degree. Nowadays, when winter temperatures hover at 35 below for days on end, or when one of the bitter, hurricane-force "Matanuska" gales rakes the valley, the Fairview herd is at least approximately as comfortable in their "controlled environment" barn as cows in Iowa or Washington State.

Fairview can even take advantage of an advanced technological development to help keep track of milk production. Every month the milk from each cow is measured and a special sheet with this information sent to Washington State University at Pullman. There a computer assesses it and tells what each cow is doing, and even estimates what she will do the following months. Such a record is absolutely vital when large numbers of cows are involved in each milking; otherwise a cow might come through the line, give no milk at all and no one would be the wiser.

Still, technology and modern conveniences notwithstanding, all is not totally rosy on Alaska's dairy scene, as the Fairview partners explain. Myrtle is all for milking fewer cows and better cows; but "it's just hard to keep good cows – very hard in this country." She feels the controlled environment is not without flaws, that confining a cow in relatively close quarters results in increased mastitis, for one thing. According to Bob, a cow's working life here is from five to seven years, after which she is culled out, generally because of "either mastitis or they get arthritis."

Beyond these things, feed itself is expensive and hard to come by. Throughout the brief growing season there is a never-ending struggle to fill the 30 x 60 silo with bromegrass, oats, peas and barley raised on the farm. The women, as well as Bob, often help with the harvest, and one or two hired hands are needed too. It is cheaper to ship in grain than it is hay so they try to produce as much forage for silage and roughage as possible and ship in only concentrates (straw for bedding has been eliminated, replaced in their new barn with rubber mats). They feed the cows 1,200 pounds of grain per day (the amount varies according to the amount of milk, in ratio of one pound of grain to each 2 to 3 pounds of milk) which costs them $96 per ton.

Besides the feed problem, another difficulty is farm labor itself – someone who can do the job and will stay. The present Fairview milker, who has a wife and two children, has been there 14 months and his employers wish he would stay.

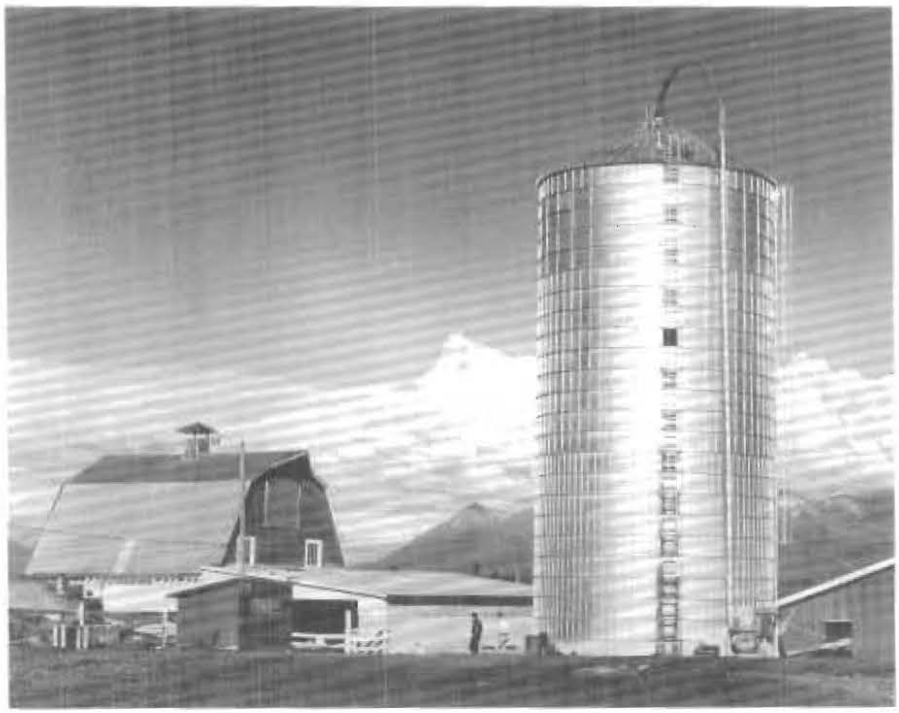
A location-related problem for Fairview Dairies is in disposing of surplus animals, cows that need to be culled, and bull calves. With shipped-in veal selling in Anchorage for up to $3.50 per pound, depending on the cut, Myrtle and the McCombs' have still been forced to simply knock some of their unwanted calves in the head. Until very recently, there has been no qualified slaughter facility to take them to, no one to market the meat if they had been slaughtered, and the operation cannot afford the expense of feeding the calves to proper slaughter age, in any event.

Money from cull beef, of course, is the least of the worries at Fairview. Myrtle points out that they are actually getting less money from the milk now than they did 14 years ago.

Even so, retail prices have increased and now it costs 50 cents a quart. Since it costs the dairy more for what they produce and use, one alternative seems to be to have more cows and do a better job with them.

"You get more cows – more land," Bob observes laconically.

Fairview Dairies' silo represents $25,000 investment



Holmes family runs Aleutian Islands sheep ranch

Eight hundred air miles southwest of Anchorage lies the island of Unalaska, one of the Aleutian chain which stretches westward into the Eastern Hemisphere. The Aleutians are among the most remote and sparsely populated sections of the United States. They are one of the stormiest as well. But despite hurricane winds and more than ample rainfall, some of the islands have amazing potential for livestock raising, offering lush pastureland and normally light snowfall and moderate temperatures at lower elevations.

On the 120-mile-long island of Unalaska is the sheep ranch operation of Milton and Beverly Holmes, one of a handful of sheep and cattle ranches in the islands. The couple has lived on the ranch two different times: First from 1948 until 1953, when they left and returned to Idaho. In the next seven years Beverly went to college and became a teacher so they could return to Alaska with an assured income. They returned in 1960, bought the ranch on Unalaska in 1964, and have lived there ever since. (They have two sons, Stanley, city engineer in the village of Unalaska, the only populated spot on the island and some 80 miles from the ranch headquarters, and Val, 19, also in Unalaska.)

Beverly grew up in eastern Idaho, and Milt came from the western part of the state. As she tells the story:

"We'd been married two years and my folks came to see us one summer. Milt had read an article about this place (the ranch) in the Boise paper. My mother said, 'Oh, our neighbors know those people.' She said she'd get the address for us. This was in August. She got the address and Milt left on Thanksgiving to come to Alaska. It just sounded really interesting."

When they arrived at Unalaska they were taking over a ranch which had been in operation since 1923. At the time they arrived the sheep consisted of about 650 ewes and about 900 wethers. Now they have between 4,500 and 5,000 head – although they had more

Val, Beverly and Milt Holmes beachcomb for fishing net floats that have been wafted from Japan to Alaskan shores via the Japanese current.

before the heavy losses during the past two winters when the island has been hit by unusually harsh weather. (Although horned Dorsets, Lincolns and Romneys were all included in the flock in the past, Milt has shipped in only Columbias and they now predominate. The Holmes ranch also has some 200 head of cattle.)

"Once we went into the winter with about 8,500 sheep," Milt says. "We had quite a loss two winters ago and last winter. Our lease is 152,000 acres. They rate it at 10,000 sheep but the way the winters have been the last two winters it wouldn't hold up to that."

Despite the freaks of the weather, there are definite advantages to ranching in the Aleutians as Milt and Beverly see it. For one thing the animals are practically disease-free.

"Ticks on the sheep and lice on the cows are about the only problems we have," Milt points out. "We never have any foot rot and we never vaccinate anything for anything."

Another advantage of sheep ranching in the Aleutians as compared to other parts of the U. S. is that the sheep can run out year around and it isn't necessary to feed them. The Holmes ranch also has the advantage that there are no neighboring flocks to get mixed up with and there is no need to trail or truck the sheep from winter to summer grazing areas.

"They don't have much of a flocking instinct anymore," Milt says, and adds: "That's a good thing, too, because if your sheep are just in one area you'd be hurting the range and the sheep wouldn't be doing any good. That's the fine thing about them here – they just spread out."

But there are also problems for the sheep rancher in the Aleutians. The biggest problem of all Milt sums up in just two words. No market.

He relates that in one instance they were told that they could sell all the mutton they had if they could just get it over to the neighboring island of Umnak where a plane would land on the airstrip and pick it up. But there was no feasible way of getting it to Umnak.

"We'd slaughter it right here at our slaughterhouse, but we don't have any way to get it to Umnak," Milt explains.

"And I don't know as I could get enough help to slaughter that many. They'd want 28,000 pounds to a load so that would be 250 to 300 head. It'd take us so long to slaughter that many that the first ones would be spoiling before we got the last ones done because we don't have enough refrigeration to keep that many."

The weather can also bring on big problems – and it has done so in the last two years.

"Not counting the last two winters, for the most part winters are open and we used to get a lot of rain," Milt says. "Ten above zero was the coldest we ever saw here. But the last two it's been getting down to zero – down in and below the 20s a lot of time. For weeks on end. That much cold with the snow and the wind is really tough on livestock."

There are also potential problems with predators. Milt believes the eagles bother lambs: "Every time you go out there where there's a bunch of sheep with lambs you'll see some eagles circling around. They're really watching those lambs. And the ravens, if they catch a sheep that's down, they'll just eat him up alive. The foxes are easier to contol: We shoot them. The dogs chase them."

The roundup actually starts the seasonal cycle on the ranch. It begins in the spring as soon as the weather gets good enough. The animals are brought in and then shearing starts – toward the end of May. "If it's a good summer so we can get sheared out in July, we spend the rest of the summer fencing and maybe working on line cabins and that sort of thing," Milt says. "We must have 40 to 50 miles of drift fence right now" (to stop the livestock from drifting any further in a given direction).

"Then in the fall we round them up and dip them for ticks," Milt continues. "Then we should have them on another range and keep them off the summer range. Later in the fall, in December, we've got to get them bunched up to get the bucks to them. Between late December and spring it's pretty quiet but I've got this little bunch of Columbias in here that I lamb in wintertime."

The ranch has been sending its wool to the Midwest Co-op in Kansas City and before that to the Pacific Wool Growers in Portland. This year it was sold to an individual mill back east. The wool goes out on the *North Star*, a Bureau of Indian Affairs vessel that services the Aleutians and villages in the Arctic.

"The North Star has always picked it up so far, but there's getting to be an awful hassle," Milt says. "It takes them a lot of time, and due to bad weather they've been having an awful time getting out of the north and back to Seattle. They give us the Native Arts and Crafts rate – about three cents – but we have to pay lighterage and demurrage. On the North Star the demurrage (payment for standing by) is a hundred bucks an hour. If they have to stand by two or three days it adds up pretty fast."

The ranch also ships in a small amount of feed on the same vessel. This averages about 10 tons a year and includes grain and hay cubes to feed the horses.

The North Star's visit is one of the major events in the year at the isolated ranch which gets few visitors and has only monthly mail plane service (it is also possible to call the ranch by RCA radiophone via Dutch Harbor if anyone wants the Holmes' to ship them a beef

Val finishes a shearing job (above) and Beverly and Milton examine wool

or mutton). One year when they were getting mail drops all of their Christmas presents and mail was dropped in the ocean.

Does this isolation bother the Holmes? Not to any great extent. As Beverly comments: "When we're here, even the two of us, we manage pretty well. I don't think it bothers him. I get cabin fever once in awhile. If the weather's not too bad, we do lots of hiking and get out in the boat. We have a lot of good weather in the winter too."

The winters bring the greatest isolation for Milt now, as Beverly is away teaching in Unalaska. "It gets kind of tiresome," he comments "but we have the radio and read."

The isolation can also be a major problem in the event of accident or illness. The nearest nurse is stationed in Unalaska and the nearest available doctor would be in Anchorage, those 800 air miles away. But Milt and Beverly have been fortunate. Milt says: "They're not much for sickness out here. We hardly ever have a cold unless somebody comes out that's got one."

However, Beverly did have one adventure due to illness with appendicitis. It happened the first winter they were on the ranch, and she tells the story this way:

Beverly gathers rhubarb in her yard

Milton checks out mutton carcasses

"I'd gone hiking out here in a big storm just to watch the wind. While I was up here on this hill was when I first started feeling bad so I came back. A boat had come in during the storm so they said they'd go to Umnak and get the doctor and they had a fellow who knew a little bit about it and he'd stay with me. Turned out he'd watched his own operation in a mirror. That's what he knew about it. And he entertained me with this. It was so stormy they could hardly get into Umnak. So stormy they had to anchor here behind that mountain and hike over, the medic and his aide, a guy with a telephone – oh, all sorts of stuff.

"They stayed three or four days and gave me penicillin. But they didn't have to operate because I wasn't dying. I didn't get better and a month later I had to catch the mail boat and go to Unalaska and catch the plane and go to Portland."

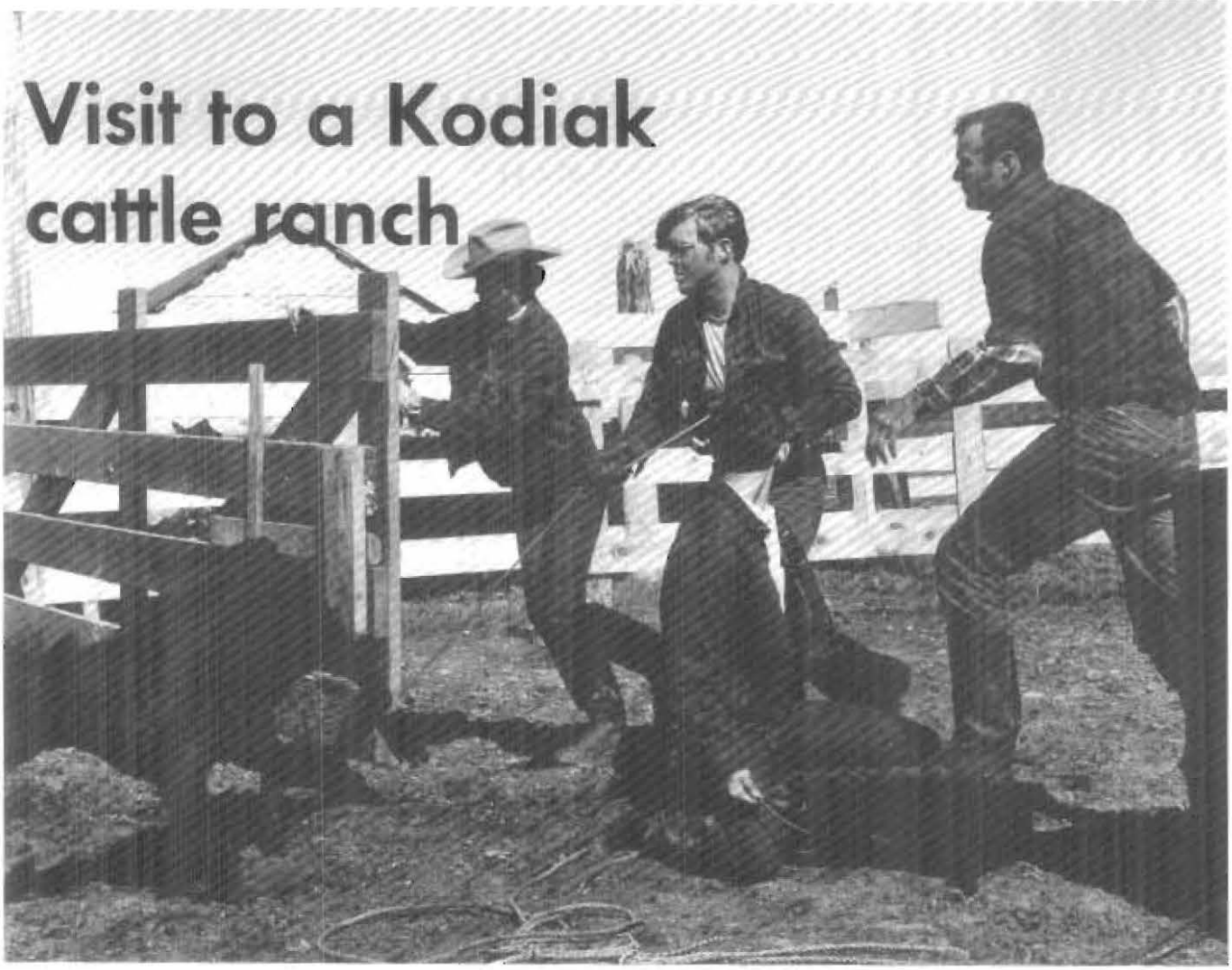
Now what of the future of the ranch? Milt is hopeful of getting more of a market established for meat sales of the sheep and also the cattle they raise.

"It'd be a real going concern here if we could get an outlet for the meat," he says. "And you wouldn't have to have near so many sheep to make it pay. We could sell the lambs and beef we raise. We keep trying to build up the beef herd, because I think we'll get a market for it quicker than we will the mutton. And there's much less work to it. We have about 225 head now. We're down – we lost some last year. They're mostly Herefords; there's some Angus in them. They can stand that deep snow, they can paw down through quite a lot and get around. The sheep can't take much snow – they are pretty well tied down."

Milt also sees advantages in selling lamb rather than mutton, going to a meat operation rather than a wool operation.

Those are just some of the possibilities for the future of the Holmes ranch. But the certainty seems to be that livestock raising is now firmly established out in this remote and isolated section of Alaska. And that Milt and Beverly Holmes with their sheep operation are playing an important part in this unusual industry and have also established their own interesting way of life in these stormy Aleutians.

Visit to a Kodiak cattle ranch



Branding time on the Burton Ranch – Kathy in white hat, Bill at right

On a clear summer day the road to Narrow Cape on Kodiak Island presents dozens of seascape panoramas. For miles it winds around small bays and quiet inlets that reflect surrounding snowy peaks. In other spots it overlooks the wild white surf of the open Pacific where waves beat against driftwood covered beaches.

This island terrain might seem a strange area for cattle ranching. Yet, from here westward to the boundary of the Kodiak Wildlife Refuge, is located some of Alaska's most important cattle country. The road itself bears testimony to this industry as it takes the motorist across cattle-guards and winds between groups of grazing black Angus and white-faced Herefords. Roughly 50 miles from the city of Kodiak, it tops a rise and makes a long, gentle descent to the home headquarters of the Kodiak Cattle Company.

At present, and for more than two years now, the Narrow Cape cattle ranch has been home to William Burton, 34, and his wife Kathleen, who are half of the family-owned corporation. The other half – Bill's brother Jim, 37, and his wife Toni, and daughter Andrea, 5 – lives near Kodiak where Jim works in construction, and Toni for the Department of Public Safety.

After the two couples bought the ranch in 1967, it was Jim and Toni who lived at Narrow Cape for about three years. The ultimate aim, of course, is for all of them to live there when the ranch has reached a stage when it will support them. However, that day is still a few years off, as they will testify.

Why the Burton brothers decided to become cattle ranchers is not too hard to explain. They were raised on a cattle ranch in Florida, near Lake Placid (Kathleen is from Miami, Toni was born in Fairbanks but grew up in Colorado), and have more or less always had ranching in their blood. But the question of why they chose the remote island ranch is not so easily answered since raising beef on Kodiak offers several knotty problems perhaps not found anywhere else in the United States (with exception of the neighboring Aleutian Islands). The brothers are optimistic, though. Asked his present impression of Kodiak ranching, and if he would describe it as "challenging", Jim observes dryly:

"Yes . . . that's the nice way to put it, I guess. It's definitely a challenge, there's lots of problems. They can be worked out – there's problems any place, I guess."

Stockmen have been grappling with the problems of raising beef on Kodiak Island longer than many people might imagine, for the first livestock were introduced by the Russians in 1795. During the next century, cattle herds remained small, numbering up to only 50 head or so. But by the early 1900s, four or five homesteads had been taken out and at least one man had a herd of some 200 head of cattle.

Today, the Kodiak Cattle Company is one of seven ranches on the island, and it runs 550 head of cattle (excluding calves) on 21,000 acres. Most are Herefords and the remainder, about 100

head, are purebred Angus. According to Bill, the size of the ranch operation is awkward since it still is not large enough for regular extra help. Some of this problem has been solved by having small roundups rather than one involving the entire herd or even a majority of it.

One such mini-roundup this summer found Bill and a young friend gathering in 40 to 50 cows with their calves. At the corral they were joined by Kathleen, and still a second young man who had come out from town to help with the operation. While the men wrestled the calves to the ground, ear-marked them, branded them and castrated the little bulls, Kathleen brought equipment as it was needed, closed gates, ran errands and kept tally. That morning, as often happens, she had spent riding on one task or another involving the cattle.

"It's too big a job, too big a ranch for just one person — a couple," admits Bill. "Kathy, my hired hand, does a lot of work but we still could use somebody else. Lots of time you know you need someone stronger than a woman. We've had kids out here three or four months at a time, off and on. That's about the only way we can afford to get help out here. We just don't have enough money to have someone else out here otherwise."

But summertime help problems are only part of the picture. The island has a typical maritime climate with fairly high precipitation. Normally, winters are more rainy than snowy but when the pattern changes and winter brings high snowfall, as it has for the past two seasons, the effort needed to carry on the operation with only one man and one woman can be grueling. Bill, a tall, soft-spoken man with a powerful build, describes it thus:

"We got awful tired this winter. It was a long winter and (it) seemed like it was never going to quit. And you're feeding from dawn to dusk, you know, and pretty short days of course, but that's all you're doing, feeding. You've got 100-pound sacks and Kathy's carrying them around as much as anybody.

"That's pretty hard on her. And then we were going in hauling grain, right in the middle of the winter. That's the reason we want to get this grain here, if we can have it. Then we could get it out here whenever we need it, rather than having to order it and then go in and haul it."

Winter feed is the biggest problem the Burtons and other ranchers face. Summertime grazing in the northeast section of the island where the ranches lie is considered excellent, and no doubt accounts for part of Kodiak's long attraction as a cattle area. The average mild winter also offers grazing and foraging for kelp on beaches; and even during more severe winters the high winds keep many areas swept clear of snow, especially at the Cape. According to Jim, the early ranchers wintered their cattle out and fed them hardly anything:

"They'd take their losses but they'd get by. These days we just figure they're worth too much to just take a loss on. They used to figure it would take about 500 pounds of barley to winter an animal. I don't think we've ever gotten

Jim and Toni Burton of the Kodiak Cattle Company

Bill and Kathy Burton

by quite that cheap. I think it's between 500 and 800 for a grown cow."

The Burtons have their feed shipped to Kodiak, whatever is "cheap but good", and this may be rolled barley, alfalfa pellets or even corn. The barley averages out to about $100 a ton; they get it in 22-ton lots and use it in winter at the rate of about 1½ tons per day. This expense will hopefully be lowered by $25 to $30 per ton if a cooperative deal for grain shipment and storage, now under discussion by the ranchers, actually materializes. It would allow the feed to be stored at Kodiak in huge amounts and hauled by the individual ranchers as they need it, thus eliminating, too, the long, frequent trips to town in winter.

In addition to shipped-in grain, the Burtons harvest, in a good year, from 30 to 35 tons of native hay, and "cut maybe a little silage". They hope in the future to provide their own winter feed, or at least a bigger share of it.

One advantage that comes from raising cattle in a remote place such as Kodiak is the relative freedom from diseases such as Bang's disease, tuberculosis and leptospirosis, although some parasitism is suffered. Occasionally, the Burtons lose an animal to poisonous plants; and while their ranch is farthest from the bear refuge, they also have some loss from bears.

"None of the ranchers like to kill bears," Bill says. "I definitely don't like to. I wouldn't want to see the bears eliminated."

Unlike some of the ranchers, he discounts the theory that eagles prey on calves: "We've had eagles out here, sitting in all these trees, and they didn't even bother the chickens. I just don't think they bother a calf, if the calf is alive. They go for dead things."

The most serious predator problem is people with guns — and for reasons that make the Old West cattle rustlers look good. There was a rash of killings on Kodiak ranches last fall. The Burtons lost four on top of a mountain and Bill says no meat was taken: "Just shot them and left them. Just trying their rifle out or something."

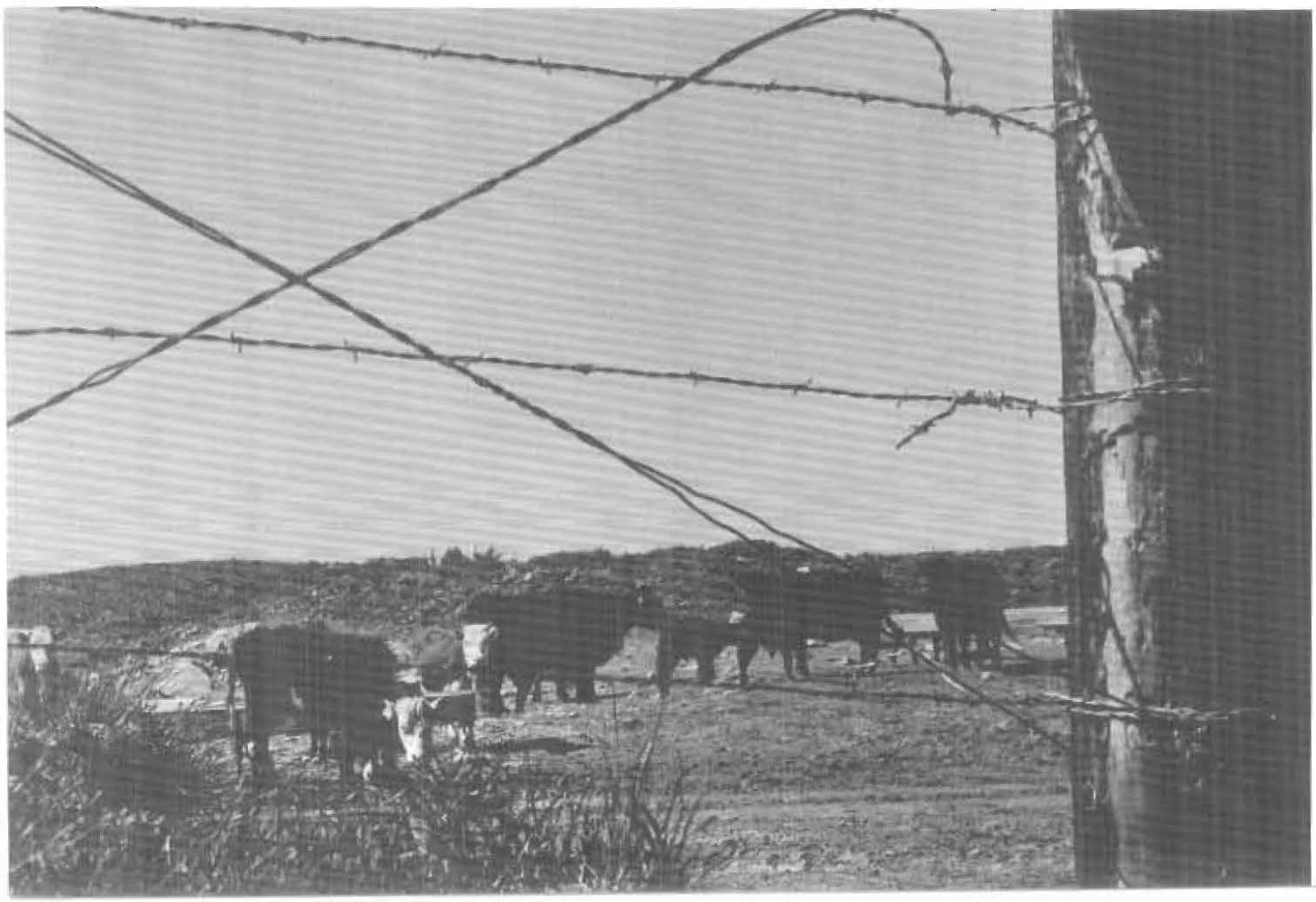
Last year the Burtons were able to slaughter for the first time in a new facility located out of town on the road past the naval station, the Kodiak Livestock Cooperative slaughterhouse, owned by the ranchers on the island. The slaughterhouse is federally and state inspected and makes them eligible to sell to the military and anyone else in the state.

They normally slaughter (they use two-year-old steers) in the early fall. Often they slaughter a second time because some people want a beef-half early and another one later. Most of their customers are individuals, although they also sell to stores.

With the interest today in organically-grown food, and the fact that it commands higher prices in most cases than food grown with chemicals, the Burtons have speculated on how they might help to supply this growing market in other areas. But until cheaper freight costs are arranged, or the demand becomes great enough, the possibility will likely remain unfulfilled.

Meanwhile the Burtons try to solve more immediate problems and work toward the day when both families can live on the remote ranch at Narrow Cape. Despite the wild weather and problems in feed and marketing, the isolated spot offers a certain way of life not easily found in the United States today and one which many people would envy.

Cattle on the Burton Ranch on Kodiak Island



The Robert Mielkes, Matanuska Valley potato farmers

Evelyn and Bob Mielke

By late August and early September farmers in the Matanuska Valley become extremely weather conscious. This is harvest time and these far-northern farmers know that only a brief interval lies ahead for crop gathering before winter descends.

If they're lucky, this interlude brings warm bright days with birches and meadows shimmering gold, nights will be frosty but not frigid. If they're not so lucky, hard rains often arrive by August and continue with hardly a let-up right through September. Each storm brings fresh dustings of snow to the nearby Chugach peaks. And slicker-clad farmers harvest peas and bromegrass, cabbage and potatoes in rain or drizzle.

On such a day this season, with cloud banks hovering below white-dusted peaks, farmer Bob Mielke and a small crew of two girls and a truck driver harvested potatoes in a field bordering the Glenn Highway west of Palmer. Bob and the girls were on the harvester, which dug the potatoes two rows at a time and deposited them into a truck alongside.

As soon as the truck was loaded a second replaced it and the first left for the root cellar, a long building located next to the Mielke home just out of Palmer on the old Wasilla Road. Here, the driver backed the truck up to the cellar doorway where the second phase of harvesting was progressing under the careful supervision of Evelyn, Bob's wife.

At this point the potatoes dropped from beneath the special truck bed onto a conveyor belt. As the tubers traveled past them, Evelyn, a truck driver, two other men and a girl picked out marble-sized rejects, mud chunks and weeds, and the potatoes were finally dumped from the belt into pallet boxes.

When each of these was leveled off with its capacity of about 1,800 pounds, Evelyn expertly maneuvered forklift prongs under the box and trundled it to the rear of the cavernous cellar. At the end of harvest, roughly 400 of these filled pallet boxes would be stored three-deep to await marketing throughout the winter to stores and a few restaurants, locally and in Anchorage.

The man who will do the marketing is Bob Mielke himself, one of Alaska's potato growers for more than a decade (though full time only since 1966). Both Bob and his wife are long-time Alaskans. Bob arrived here from Wisconsin with his parents in 1945, when he was 21. Evelyn's parents were colonists who arrived from Michigan when she was five years old. Her father, a farmer off and on for a number of years, had fully converted to agriculture by the time he sold his place and returned to the states ten years ago.

The house Bob and Evelyn bought in 1953, where they still live, was built by his father. Here the Mielkes have raised a family of three daughters and one son. The daughters, all married, are: Marie Dryden and Teresa Ziegler, now at the University of Alaska, and Gwen Combs of Anchorage. Son Robert, who is majoring in Wildlife Management at the University, is interested in the farm as well and returns to help when possible (and the best help he has, according to his dad) in the potato fields.

Actually, Bob himself was on at least casual speaking terms with potatoes before he started growing them about 1960. Since about 1951 he had had his own truck line and had been busy trucking produce -- including potatoes -- out of the valley. The "Mielke Way" trucking company endured until 1966 when he sold it and became a potato grower.

An articulate, big, dark-haired man who laughs easily Bob reflects on the change-over from produce trucker to agriculture with ironic good-humor:

"Don't know why I didn't have more sense than to get in the agricultural end of it except that it looked better than trucking. But in trucking, the only way you could get a job was to cut prices, which is self-defeating. I was always a small trucker — I think at one time I

had four trucks. And I looked around then like I do now and I decided I was working awful hard for a bunch of other people. All the drivers were prospering and I was spending a 16-hour day fixing the trucks after they were through. '

Today, Bob and Evelyn have 35 acres in potatoes – 15 acres of their own and 20 leased. Because their operation is mechanized, they get by with a minimum of hired help for planting and harvesting.

"We have a machine to cut the seed and that cuts down on labor." Evelyn says.

Planting (anytime between May 18 and June 10) is also with a machine but this requires someone to sit on the back to make certain the planter is planting every row – generally Evelyn or a part-time helper. Shortly after planting, before the plants are up, they have to be sprayed for weeds, which takes less than two days. Then, before they blossom, they are hilled, a four or five day job. Aside from these things, the potatoes need hardly any attention until harvest time; unless, as Bob says, you "get involved in this irrigation system and then you live in the field." But this he doesn't often have to do.

At harvest time, it's a different story on the help situation.

"That's where you get in the bind in the potato business," Bob admits ruefully. "You have to have machinery operators."

It is difficult to find these for part-time help, though they have little trouble for the less sophisticated jobs, often hiring teen-agers, most of them girls. This year they were trading help with a neighbor; because harvest was somewhat late, Bob figured on a short, fast harvest period. There would be six or seven people helping besides themselves.

The potatoes are stored without being washed, with the field dirt clinging to them. Bob explains.

"A washed potato doesn't store too good. They have enough moisture on them. You have quite a session for two or three months getting it out. And there's no use getting any more moisture in the cellar than you need to get. If there's any disease or anything the water automatically spreads it through them."

The highly-insulated big root cellar where they are stored and processed for marketing is the only building directly connected with the potato operation. Winter temperatures inside are kept at between 40 and 45 degrees, and during extreme cold, heat is needed to maintain this. In late spring and until the potatoes are sold, refrigeration helps to drop the temperature to reduce sprouting.

"They want to grow like mad then and you have to keep them real cold," Bob explains. "So you keep them at 36 to 40 degrees until you get your crop sold." As they are taken out to be distributed to stores, they are washed, graded and bagged.

This year Bob has two varieties to market: Kennebecs and Bake Kings. He keeps experimenting, looking for something better, and in the process has found that every potato has its drawbacks. Even the Kennebecs, which he considers a standby, show some undesirable traits, at least in Alaska. For one thing, up here, they don't set very many potatoes: "You only get five or six under a plant under the best conditions." If you slip a few days in harvesting, this variety gets too big and turns up hollow in the middle (a trait the Bake Kings have not displayed). Despite their drawbacks, Bob swears by them because "you *always* get a crop off Kennebecs, no matter how adverse the conditions. You always get a crop."

The Bake Kings he considers "the best baking potato that's ever hit Alaska". This variety was developed in New York State six or seven years ago. Bob had them on the commercial market last year and he admits with some pride: "I was the first one to make it. I got a baker size and put 'em in a five pound sack and got a premium price and they were pretty well accepted."

Young worker levels off pallet box of potatoes

Harvesting potatoes in the rain.

Bob's woes about the marketing end of his business could easily fill a book. When he was selling to the military the sheer volume of the sales made up for a lot. These amounted to as much as 100 to 200 tons per month. But the mess-halls no longer use fresh potatoes in large quantities, and nowadays selling to individual stores he is lucky to dispose of 40 to 50 tons in the same amount of time. It thus requires many months of marketing for each crop.

So far, grocery stores have been his best customers. The one big chance he had to sell to a large chain restaurant was flubbed, through no fault of his, when the chef was accidentally given refrigerated potatoes for baking. When he didn't turn up with baked potatoes in just the number of minutes he expected, he would try no more of Bob's. Bob points out that restaurants want a certain size potato and they want it at a warm temperature for fast cooking.

Last year he took Bake Kings for a free trial to still another restaurant chain, this time of local origin. The manager wouldn't even consider local potatoes.

"They were free potatoes, but he wouldn't even monkey with 'em," Bob says.

Such reluctance no doubt stems largely from the bad reputation Alaskan potatoes have been saddled with for many years, and which at one time was undeniably true. Twenty years ago housewives who tried them were dismayed by the sweet flavor and the way the potatoes disintegrated in the cooking process. None were good bakers. Like the hotel chef, many women are still reluctant to try again, though in the past decade Alaskan potatoes have changed dramatically in quality. There are new varieties, for instance, that do everything Outside potatoes will do and do it well.

One thing that dismays the Mielkes is that few housewives recognize different varieties. "They know the difference between beef and pork but they don't know the difference between varieties of potatoes," Bob claims. Yet not all varieties lend themselves to all methods of preparation. One may be superior for potato salad, another for baking, and still a third for french frying. This is as true of Alaskan varieties as any others.

Bob Mielke thinks of trying to educate the Alaskan housewife to buying the variety of potato for the dish she wants; thinks about the problems he battles marketing his product; and about the brief growing season in the North where drought or rain, or unseasonal freeze, could ruin his crop for the year. Sometimes after reflecting on these things, he thinks he might be better off to join Evelyn in her tax work (she has the H & R Block franchise in Palmer) and forget about potatoes.

Then again, their son rather likes the potato business and Bob wonders if he should hang onto it until the boy knows for certain whether he might like to farm. And too, Bob admits he himself likes to play – he and Evelyn have a cabin on Crosswind Lake and in between planting and harvesting, they can spend some time there.

All things considered, while there aren't any plans for expansion at the Mielke farm, Bob admits with a laugh:

"Oh I'll probably be in potatoes a long time. Maybe this year we don't get rich. But maybe next year we do."

McKee family runs Fairbanks area hog ranch

It could be that people in Fairbanks consume more roast pig than any of their fellow Alaskans. One reason might be the warm summer weather there which is conducive to barbecues. But whatever the reason, the people in Fairbanks have a handy source of roasting pigs out along the Chena Hot Springs Road, 24 miles east of town. Here, in a scenic spot overlooking the Tanana Valley is located the site of McKee Enterprises, a hog-raising farm owned and operated by an interesting agricultural family.

Not that the Don McKees raise *only* roasting pigs, but as Don points out:

"That's one of the things we do quite a business on in summertime."

Besides this specialized item, the McKees conduct a brisk wholesale and retail business in all fresh pork products, from sausage they make themselves right down to pig's feet. Their business is divided about equally in wholesale: to Fairbanks stores and restaurants; and retail: to local families who buy meat supplies direct from McKee.

The processing end of their operation is carried on in their own modern $60,000 slaughter facility, complete with cutting and wrapping rooms, coolers and freezers. This new building is located on a hillside overlooking the other parts of the operation: the Bacon Bin barn where the pigs are housed in winter, and several outside pens where breeding sows and other hogs run loose in summer. An average of around 400 hogs, in various sizes, are found on the premises at any given time.

The family that owns and operates this industry consists of Don McKee and his wife Alice, their oldest son Dale and his wife Yvonne, and Douglas (currently acquiring experience away from home but sending funds to pay for a hired hand on the farm). There are two other sons, David and Donnie, who will have shares in the business if they want them; and two daughters, Kathy Johnson, married, and Karole.

It was not the plan of the senior McKees to start a hog ranch in Alaska when they arrived from Minnesota in 1951. In fact, by 1956 it did not look as if they would remain in Alaska. Both had farming backgrounds and they found it too confining to be cooped up in the city of Fairbanks through the long winters. After some research they had just about decided to move to Idaho when an interesting prospect opened up for them locally.

While working with the state Department of Highways (a job he still has), Don heard about a tract of land which was open to homesteading along the Chena Hot Springs Road, which was then being built. He and Alice walked in and looked the land over. They liked its fine stand of timber, and lost no time filing on it. In a few weeks they were full-fledged homesteaders, living in a 16 by 24 tent on their own claim while building a small cabin. Don, a pleasant-faced man with a highly contagious laugh, concludes that portion of their story with a sentiment obviously shared by his wife:

"That first winter out here, we enjoyed being out of the hubbub of downtown and the ice fog so much. I don't think you could move us out of here now."

Right away the McKees started pondering what to do with their land. At first, they had their eyes on becoming dairy farmers and started a small herd. At the same time they acquired several pigs, mostly for their own use. Then the dairy business around Fairbanks started declining and the McKees were struck by disaster when their barn burned, destroying their cows and all but two of the pigs.

One of the pigs rescued was a boar they had brought in from Outside, and with this small nucleus, they started pushing the hog raising, "just little by little, a few more and a few more."

By the time the Federal Meat Inspection Law – forbidding sale of any but inspected meat – was passed three years ago, the McKees were deeply involved. But there wasn't an inspected slaughterhouse in the area to handle their hogs.

The family put their heads together to hash over the problem: Should they build a slaughter facility of their own, or should they get out of the hog business.

As Don says: "That's what it boiled down to, you either got in or got out." They got in.

In order to make a $60,000 investment really pay they had to run enough animals through it to get some kind of a return, which meant more hogs and a $50,000 barn to put them in.

"So this is what we did," Don says. "We just got some financing and jumped in. We're still building because that facility could handle a lot more animals than what we're running through it."

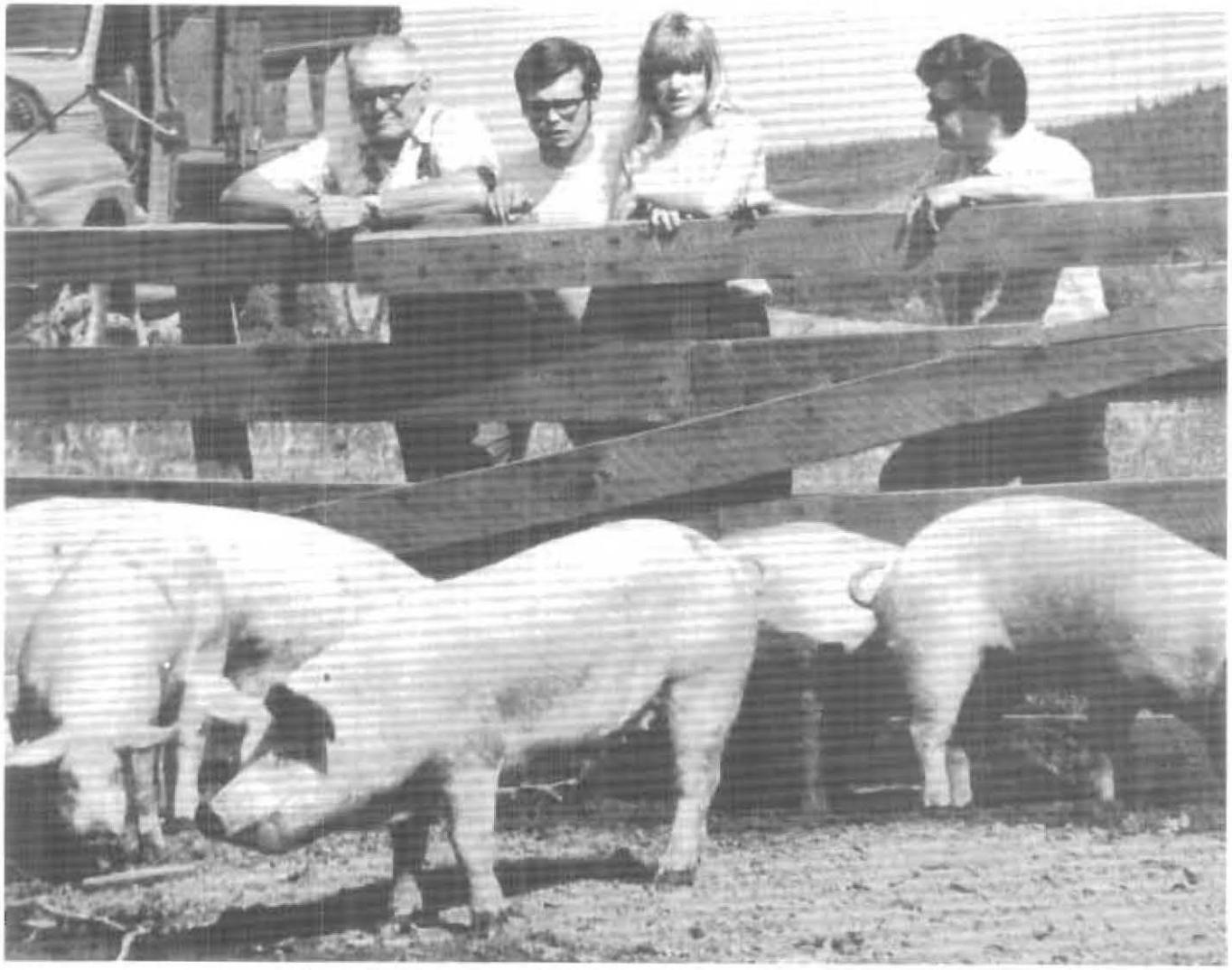
The number of McKee employees fluctuates; one man has been steady; three others only fairly steady. When they butcher – at least once a week and sometimes twice – a professional meat cutter comes out from town and does the cutting. Don makes the sausage, a process they have kept in the family to keep the quality and ingredients stable. Alice and a helper wrap and label as much as a ton and a half of sausage at one time (the amount produced for the month of July, 1972).

While the McKee hogs are fed as much local grain as possible (the 300-acre farm produced about 60 acres of barley last year which didn't go far with 400 pigs), the bulk of the feed is sent by van from Seattle. A load of 22 tons of feed lasts about six weeks and costs $3,500.

Caring for the hogs, just like obtaining their feed, and the ultimate processing of the pork products, is a never-ending process. Don and Dale have an unusual working arrangement dictated by their jobs away from home. Don's work with the Highway Department keeps him from eight in the morning until four in the afternoon; Dale, who works for RCA Alaska Communications, goes to work at four in the afternoon and works until midnight.

"Between us," Don says, "we kind of keep our hand on things. And Dale has taken over the care of the barn and so on."

Dale and his wife Yvonne keep an elaborate card file with detailed information on all the sows: When they



The McKee Family – Don, Dale, Yvonne and Alice – at the ranch

were born, their registration, dam and sire, the litters they have and how they're producing, personality traits, and so on. On the basis of this information their selection of breeding stock is made.

"All the animals are purebred Yorkshire," Dale says. "We try to keep the papers up on the breeding stock, but for the ones we butcher, we just let the papers go."

Their breeding stock which is obtained in the other states, is flown in. They tried bringing in bred gilts, in order to get boars from them, but this didn't work out well because the shots they have to have before being put aboard an airliner – such as tranquilizers – appeared to have an adverse effect on offspring.

"One of the nice things about raising pigs in Alaska is that there is basically no disease here," Dale points out. "Our biggest problem is either scours or pneumonia. That's it. There's none of this other stuff. It's just not here."

Part of the reason for this is that Canada is so strict about animals brought through by truck; and Dale says that "to put an animal on air freight they're just as strict too. So to get an animal here, it's got to be a good animal."

The bulk of the McKee hogs have been housed in a "Bacon Bin," a prefabricated metal building put out by Black, Sivalls & Bryson of Kansas City, Missouri. They have found that for the Fairbanks area, with its long, cold winters, certain modifications are needed. For one thing, it has a propane heating system which is expensive in the north; and it also needs a more effective ventilation system.

Don and Dale plan to build a furnace room on the outside of the building and install an oil-fired hot air furnace that will heat incoming air. Temperatures inside should be around 60 to 65 degrees to be safe for day-old pigs. That means that air from outside must be heated sometimes as much as 120 degrees or more. But the McKees feel most of their problem in heat and draft will be largely solved with the new furnace room.

It is obvious to anyone who hears the story of the McKees that extraordinary ingenuity and versatility have been required to found this small industry, and to meet the challenges it continually presents. In this respect, it is typical of other agricultural projects around the state where farmers are called on to be everything from animal raisers to architects and marketers.

Perhaps few Alaskans think of the hard work and unusual problems that it took to produce the fresh eggs, milk, roasting pigs, beef or garden produce they buy at local markets. But Don McKee knows, and he sums it up with a wide grin:

"Well, it keeps us out of mischief."

Realm of Alaskan agriculture extends thousands of miles

The realm of Alaskan agriculture extends from Ketchikan in the south to Kotzebue in the north and from the Canadian border to the east to far out west in the Aleutian Islands, distances as great or greater than from border to border and coast to coast in other states.

To prepare these reports on people in agriculture in this issue, *Agroborealis* traveled by air a total equal to the distance from San Francisco to New York, and by highway a distance equal to the mileage from New York back to the West Coast.

A team of scientists from the Institute of Agricultural Sciences flew from Anchorage to Unalaska, a round-trip distance of 1,600 miles, and on this trip obtained material for the article on the Holmes sheep ranch.

Agroborealis made a round trip from Anchorage to Nome (1,088 miles), one to Kodiak (520 miles), and several trips to Fairbanks (274 miles).

There were also numerous trips by automobile from Anchorage to Fairbanks, Delta, the Matanuska Valley, and the Kenai Peninsula, for a total distance by highway of 2,902 miles.