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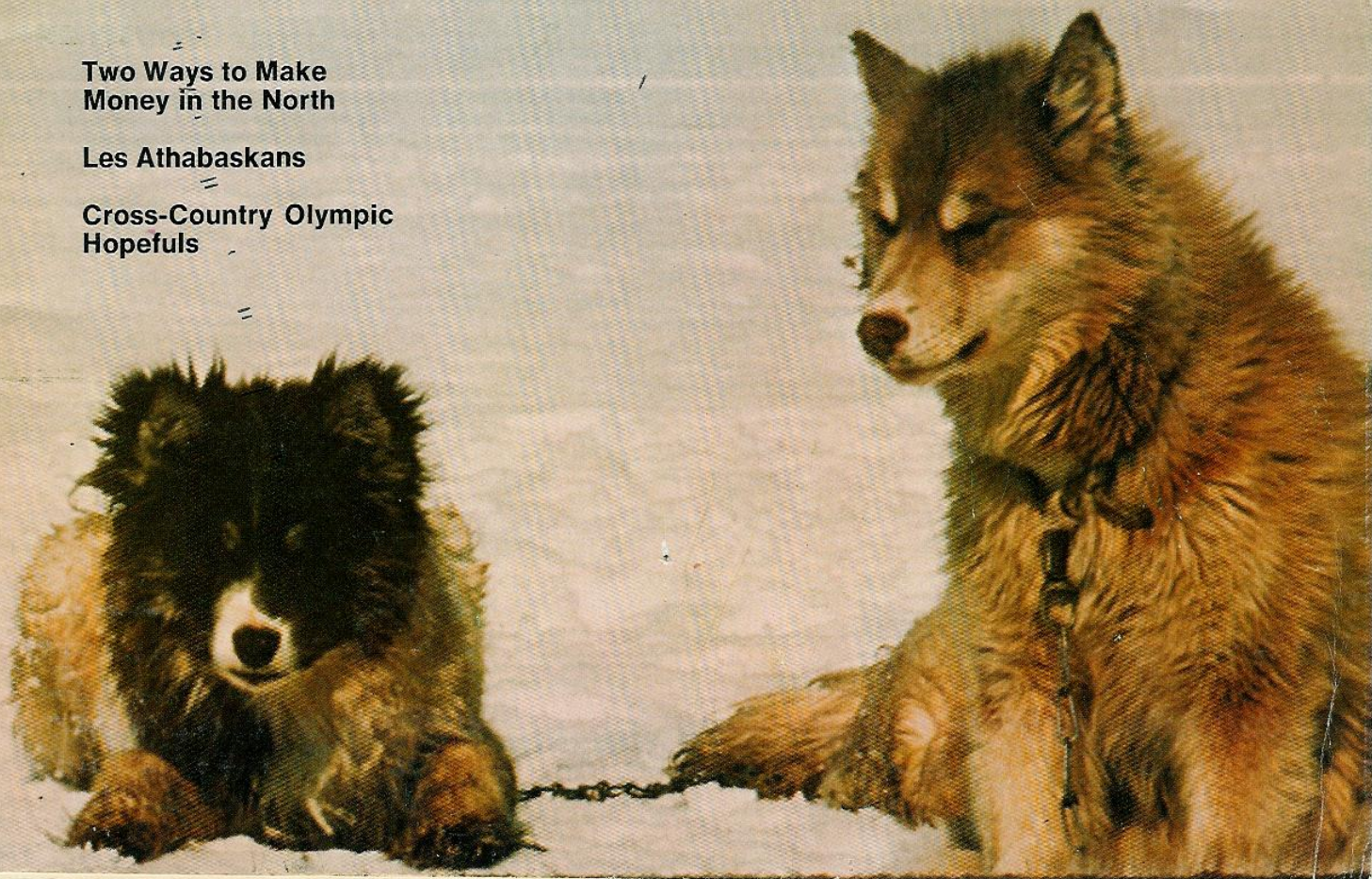
north nord

Canada's Eskimo Dog —on the brink of extinction

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Lynn Fowler

Canada's Own Eskimo Dog on the brink of extinction

by William J. Carpenter

The Eskimo dog — one of Canada's three indigenous breeds of dog along with the Nova Scotia duck trolling dog and the Talston bear dog of British Columbia — first arrived in Canada's polar regions with the Thule migration of Inuit in 1100-1200 A.D., and 800 years later is on the brink of extinction.

It is on this note that I begin the story of my personal involvement in a research project aimed at saving these dogs.

There is a population of perhaps 250 existing in northern communities, and only a percentage of these show strong purebred indications. The Eskimo dog should not be confused with the Alaskan Malamute nor the smaller and sometimes blue-eyed Siberian Husky, both popular breeds in the modern day world. Many people incorrectly refer to all three northern breeds as Huskies.

Allen in his classic paper of 1920 entitled

Dogs of the American Aborigines viewed the Eskimo dog not only as one of seventeen distinct types or breeds of dogs which belonged to inhabitants of the Americas at the time of white man's contact, but classified the Eskimo dog in a distinct group by itself while only two other groups differentiated the sixteen other breeds.

The Canadian Kennel Club some 85 years ago at the time of the club's inception, recognized the Eskimo dog as an aboriginal breed of dog. The breed standard found in the CKC for "Working Dogs" describes the dog in terms identical to those of both Allen (1920) or J. G. Children, who in 1827 wrote what is now recognized as the first scientific paper on the Eskimo dog.

The Eskimo dog is a sturdy and majestic-looking dog weighing 65 to 85 pounds for males and slightly less for females. The average height at the shoulder ex-

tends from 20 inches for females to 28 inches for large males. The animal has a powerful physique with thick neck, broad chest and strong muscular legs. The feet are densely furred. The Eskimo dog has a thick coat with shorter under fur and guard hair which may grow longer like a mane over the neck and shoulders. The ears of the dog are thick, erect, and pointed, while the eyes are small and deep-set. In a healthy and active state the dog holds his thick plume-like tail high and acutely curled. The colour combinations of the Eskimo dog range through white, grey, black on white, red, or buff, red on white, and red-black, or white with grey patch on head around ears. Also typical are white eyebrow spots in the fur mask of dark coloured dogs. The Inuit refer to these latter as Takoolik.

Viewing the dog as I do, one can observe an animal marvelously adapted to Arctic conditions. The Eskimo dog is not de-



signed for speed but rather for strength and stamina in relation to his weight. He can live on raw meat alone and because of his reserve strength, can go for several days without food while still drawing up to 120 pounds in harness. With proper feed, teams have been known to haul 110 pounds per dog on journeys lasting 40 days at 20 to 40 miles per day.

The noted northern explorer Peary stated "The Eskimo dogs are sturdy, magnificent animals; there may be larger dogs than these, there may be handsomer dogs, other dogs may work as well or travel fast and far when fully fed, but there is no dog in the world that can work so long in the lowest temperatures on practically nothing to eat . . ."

In spite of strength, stamina and survival ability, the dogs are playful, submissive, and exhibit such familiar traits as tail wagging and leg rubbing. The Eskimo dog does have certain primitive characteristics, however, such as ripping and tearing his food and a wolfish appetite. A well-fed Eskimo dog will ferociously devour a four to five pound fish in about two minutes.

With such an animal spread across the Canadian North and trained by the Inuit, it is little wonder early explorers and scientists used the dog on polar expeditions. The animal was an all-round worker, draft animal, a pack dog, carrying up to 40 pounds, and a hunting dog for the Inuit. The latter use found him sniffing out seal-breathing holes for his Inuit master or aggressively holding the polar bear at bay during hunts.

Expedition use of the Eskimo dog brought him not only into demand and respect but made him an object of study by the scientific community. The dog was researched by various groups during the 1800's and up to the 1950's. The British used Eskimo dogs in their Falkland Islands Dependencies Survey and acquired dogs from both Canada and Greenland.

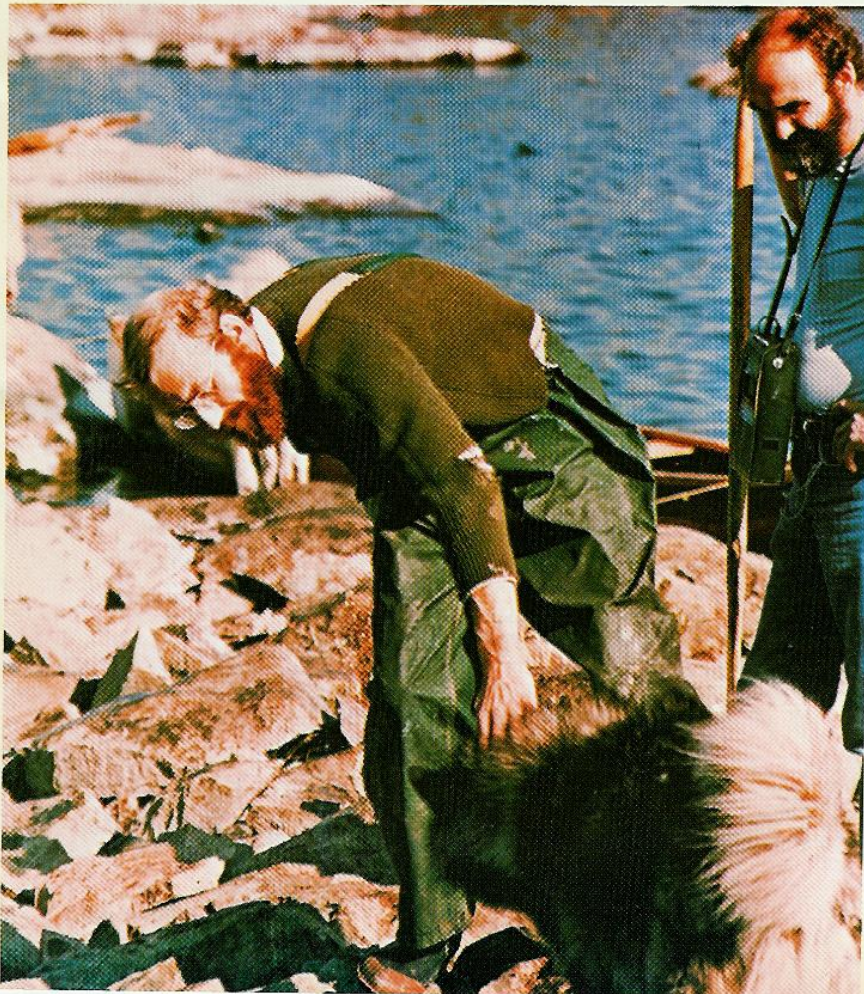
American and New Zealand Antarctic expeditions also used Eskimo dogs and found them far superior to other breeds.

The Canadian Defence Research Board during their scientific studies in the Lake Hazen area of northern Ellesmere Island

Bill Carpenter's drive to keep the Eskimo dog alive is also driving him into bankruptcy. He has found 41 reasonably pure dogs, 11 female and 30 male, among the North's 250 remaining Eskimo sled dogs; has spent \$3,500 buying these 41 dogs as foundation stock; and says he can breed the Eskimo dog back to purebred status in three years. If he gets help.

Food bills for the dogs, which are tethered behind his home on the outskirts of Yellowknife, are running \$70 a week, he needs money for kennels and fencing, but Carpenter, 33, married with two children, and specialist in wildlife management, feels its worth his own trouble, his own money, and his own money raising efforts, to save the breed, and get purebred Eskimo dogs back in the North.

Ann Taylor



Bill Carpenter, with friend Bob Rhoades behind, examines one of the dogs he will use as foundation stock to restart the breed.

Bill Carpenter examine avec son ami Bob Rhoades, à l'arrière-plan, un des spécimens qu'il veut utiliser comme souche pour relancer la race des chiens esquimaux.



from 1957 to 1959 used Eskimo dogs both for sledging and packing. One pack trip in particular covered a distance of 200 miles from Hazen Camp to Alert and back.

My interest in this breed is not new, for I recall first learning of the Eskimo dog back in 1956 and 1957 as a member of the Alberta Kennel Club and the Calgary Kennel and Obedience Club. Instructional classes were held and the history and status of various breeds were presented to those of us who were junior members. The majestic and dominant look of the Eskimo dog was something I did not forget. Fourteen years later, in 1971, I found myself living in the Northwest Territories working as a biologist for the Territorial Government.

Over those 14 years my interest in dogs in general continued and my hobby centered around raising and training Springer Spaniels for field trial competition; however, once in the Northwest Territories, I was exposed to the working sled dog.

My first observation was to note the distinct difference between the types of dogs used by the Indian people of the boreal forest region compared to those dogs used by the Inuit of the coastal areas and barrenlands. The dogs of the Inuit, though showing some variation, in general appeared very similar. I also noted during my first two years, a dramatic decline in numbers of sled dogs in many Inuit settlements.

In 1972 I met John McGrath, then Economic Development Officer for the Government of the Northwest Territories in Spence Bay. John was not simply Economic Development Officer. I believe he was a Game Officer, a Co-op Specialist, a Fisheries Officer and by special appointment, was viewed by some as the Art Director for the Central Arctic. I believe his business card stated "John McGrath, Pooh-bah of the Arctic". Our discussions on dogs began over a 40-ouncer of rum as most meetings with a Newfoundlander should, but by mid-evening we both realized that the breed we were talking about was, in most cases the Eskimo dog, and its numbers were diminishing by the day.

Within two months John acquired several dogs and our search for more began. The cost of transportation in the North made it impossible to visit all communities, but through friends and contacts in various locations the project began. The search

went as far west as Holman Island and Paulatuk, and east to the east coast of Baffin Island. Sight unseen, I began purchasing dogs and by various means had them shipped to Yellowknife where I was living on the outskirts of town and had built a kennel to continue my hobby of raising spaniels. The results of my purchases were unfortunately disastrous, and John was not having any better luck. The influence of the Siberian Husky-Alaskan Malamute cross that the RCMP had introduced to the North was so significant that the dogs we obtained, all displayed Siberian characteristics such as blue eyes or slender builds. Concerning the RCMP's plan of introducing these exotic dogs to replace an aboriginal dog, I will state that the plan was influenced by emotion, politics, and perhaps some wild desire to have matched teams, and that it was mishandled from the beginning. To be overly critical would be rude, for likely those involved thought they were doing the North a favour. They were not, however, they were only adding to the demise of the Eskimo dog.

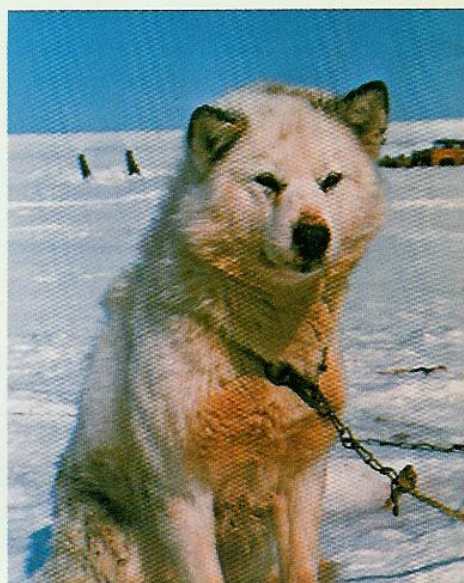
While the search for Eskimo dogs continued in the North, I began to track down other sources. The breed was recognized by the Canadian Kennel Club and I hoped that in the south I could locate a few breeders who were raising pedigreed stock.

My hope soon faded when I learned from James Hueston, General Manager of the Kennel Club, that the last Eskimo dogs registered with the CKC were entered in 1965 and 1966. This put the youngest dogs at 10 years of age if they were still alive. With the assistance of Mr. Hueston, I began to track down the people listed as former owners or breeders, again only to reach a deadend. All reported they no longer had the Eskimo dog. Thus, technically, as far as the CKC records were concerned, the breed was gone.

By the Fall of 1974 however, things were beginning to show life in the Northwest Territories. John McGrath had located some dogs among the Netsilik Inuit which appeared pure in their outward expression of genotype. Another individual in Yellowknife, Fred Negal, volunteered to select dogs while attending to some electrical contracts in remote Arctic coast settlements. Again success, as Fred returned with two magnificent specimens, a white male and a grey bitch. He also had pages of notes from discussions with elderly Inuit hunters who had used Eskimo dogs all their lives. He suddenly found that part of the key to suc-



Lynn Fowler



Carpenter



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