***Run of the Bulls***

***Alaska Style***

*By: Jan Verne’*

“When their tail goes up – they are a stick of dynamite!” Jeannie Pinkelman, of Delta Junction, gave me an ominous warning in the anticipation of being face to face with a bison, with merely a camera between us.

I was the only female of any species traveling downriver in late-May with five Inland Barge Service crewmembers, two Alaska Fish and Game biologists and twelve wood bison…bulls. Much has been publicized about the transport of the first hundred cows and juveniles, which were airlifted into Shageluk in late-March. For twenty years, this village community has been crusading for the reintroduction of bison that disappeared from the area over a century ago. This achievement is about to become complete.

The wide-eyed, heaving, steaming wooly “bison athabascae” arrived at the Nenana boatyard by trucks, two connexes per flatbed, three bison in each, in the record-breaking interior-Alaska temperature for May 23- 84 degrees! There was a human hush, almost silence, except for the unchaining and clanging of swinging steel on steel and a sense of reverence and respect. The bison were immediately cooled down by hosing river water on the containers and activating the air-conditioners. Tent tarps were erected to protect them from rain and the beating sun. This indeed was precious cargo by way of years of care and strenuous effort to move the project this far forward.

There is a contagious, calm passion in the Alaska Fish and Game team who brought this admirable accomplishment to realization: repopulating an indigenous species into the land of indigenous-Alaskans from the villages of Shageluk, Holy Cross, Anvik, and Grayling, which border the Innoko National Wildlife Refuge. This is one of seven herds at similar latitudes around the world. The request for reintroduction began 20 years ago by a group led by Arnold Hamilton, retired Tribal Chief, of Shageluk. At the time, there was only one Wood Bison (as opposed to Plains Bison) pedigree herd at Elk Island National Park, in Alberta, Canada. In 2008, 53 wood bison were imported from this herd to the town of Portage, Alaska, as seed stock.

The process and regulations in introducing a species are complex. In this case, they must be kept free of cattle diseases (Brucellosis) or breeding with other species of bison. Most difficult, human interaction, leading to domestication, must be as limited as absolutely possible. Alaska Fish and Game has been diligent and nurturing in every aspect and guardianship in bringing this population to Southwestern Alaska. Once the Endangered Species Act established bison as a “nonessential, experimental population” a year ago, the final approval, budget and endorsement of former-Governor Sean Parnell was signed in response to continuous and overwhelming public support.

When the cows and juveniles were flown by “Herc” into Shageluk, the entire village and school children welcomed the bison community into their own with art projects and a celebratory potlatch. The herd was held for ten days to adjust to the environment of their ancestors, then led out to their habitat with alfalfa pellets pitched from a “lead-dog” snow machine. They then gathered and broke into several matriarchal groups to calve (14 in Spring 2015) and begin to repopulate this beautiful wildlife area. Of course, repopulation needs one final force – bulls, the 2000 pound seed distribution machines.

If the bull cargo adapts as readily to the Innoko, as to river life, there will be a burgeoning bison population in this small portion of the planet. Early in the voyage, there were a few kick-the-can protests, but the beasty boys soon settled down to the quiet, yet constant engine shimmy, floating comfort, regular twelve hour food and water, and vigilant attention of Darren Bruning, Delta Area Biologist, and Josh Peirce, McGrath Assistant Area Biologist.

There were two concerns en route: a smaller bull went off-feed and a large one developed a temporary cough. This prompted an immediate text message to Tom Seaton, the Project Biologist, as we entered cell tower range in Tanana. An antibiotic/anti-inflammatory and electrolyte airdrop was to take place onto the river. This was a greatly anticipated new adventure for the barge crew to retrieve the two tiny parachutes plunging from Tom’s plane a mere 20’ off the glossy surface water.

Matt Krenzke, the boat pilot, retrieved the goods and handed them over with a wide grin; while the biologist team got down to a serious prescription plan for administering medication to celebrities. The big bull with a cough needed medication with a large gauge needle, to break through tough hide. The lethargic boy also had a poke, which prompted him to stand up in protest, turn around, and immediately slurp up his electrolytes. Both bulls responded excellently. The biologists were jubilant and ready to celebrate with the moist savory turkey dinner that had tormented olfactory senses all afternoon.

For three days, The MV Ramona glided downriver at a peaceful pace. The weather was reminiscent of a stern wheel paddle revolving between sunshine and coastal rain. As is usual early in the shipping season, a rising river rips trees from the shores. As they float, the boat must dodge and serpentine around driftwood, occasionally reversing, to force out the hitchhiking logs.

As we passed the magnificent Palisades (or “Bone-yard”) below Tanana, on the Yukon River, Darren fortuitously visited the wheelhouse, and we discussed the enormous ancient deposit of musk ox, wooly mammoth, and bison bones and decayed flesh in the depths of interglacial permafrost sediments, which drifted to this burial bluff in a huge sudden die-off back in the late-Pleistocene Era, over 10,000 years ago.

A day later, we reach the Innoko River’s burnish tannin water with pike rising and see greening prairie grass with little lakes beyond gossamer screens of brush. Foxtail fringes skirt above and below the placid surface. On the shore, alder is spaced and planted perfectly by nature’s hand, as if in an orchard.

Near Shageluk, the Captain and Owner of the barge service, Charley Hnilicka, took the skiff ahead to pick up Tom Seaton, so they could select the perfect riverbank gateway for the bison to disembark.

It was 4 a.m. when we arrived at Paradise, in pouring rain. All hands got very busy preparing for the release. The deck, ramp and pathway to a meadow must be as welcoming and instinctive as possible. Some brush was cut and placed to look natural and hold up a very unnatural red plastic fence lining the way out. We hoped there would be no possible exits to a potentially charging bull…but who knew?

Before the gates were raised one by one, Tom Seaton instructed the crew to be motionless. “Do not even blink,” he said. It was peculiar to see the active, hard-working men in an impromptu game of freeze-tag, poker faced at such a long-anticipated moment of introduction, finally meeting the esteemed beasts. We had whiffed the methane machines, heard a few protests, held careful concern about their daily well-being and occasionally daydreamed a conjured or real memory of what these bison boys looked like…but we were not allowed to marvel out-loud…only hold as still as possible.

As each gate was released, the first thing noticeable was the bison’s huge Argus-eye shining in their giant wirehair head. They exited their long container containment with an initial startled-look of quiet caution; then, like a tentative “toe in the water” took a first-step down onto the deck protected by skid-proof carpeting disguised by hay. They easily found their way through the curved path stanchioned with freight. There were two who got caught up in the line of sight and made eye contact with a homo sapien. Wary, they refused to exit, needing encouragement from a noisy red rattle. Eventually one had to be left alone for a long while to make his own bold decision to return to his ancestral Utopia.

As they made that choice, swaying away, following the path to freedom on the riverbank, the stem of their tails went straight up. But, most stepped slowly, examining the plastic fence, even licking it, then each one, at the high spot, turned his huge woolly head around and with steady eye assessed us, and from where he had come, then swaggered on to the meadow. The biologists, who later tracked them, reported that the exuberant bulls, as boys will do, thrashed a stand of willows, before sniffing and proceeding to seek a herd of cows.

The stick of dynamite must have been the release of emotion for the twenty years: conception, lobbying, inception, finite planning, diligence of many people, and success of this immense project. Can its magnitude be an intellectual dialog between biologists or animal lovers or the Native soul? Or, it is felt in the depths within, where braided rivers converge from a welling source of quiet pride, fortitude of cooperation between human and beast, and enduring hope for an infinite future for these marvelous creatures.

***The End***

***Sidebar***

The protective Game Management Plan is to grow the herd for a number of years until the population is 400-500 bison, with twenty extra individuals. The permits will be issued depending on the male to female to juvenile ratio. The twenty permits are to be distributed as follows: 20% (or 4), one to each surrounding village; 70% (or 14) for an Alaskan lottery; 10% (or 2) to be drawn in a worldwide lottery.