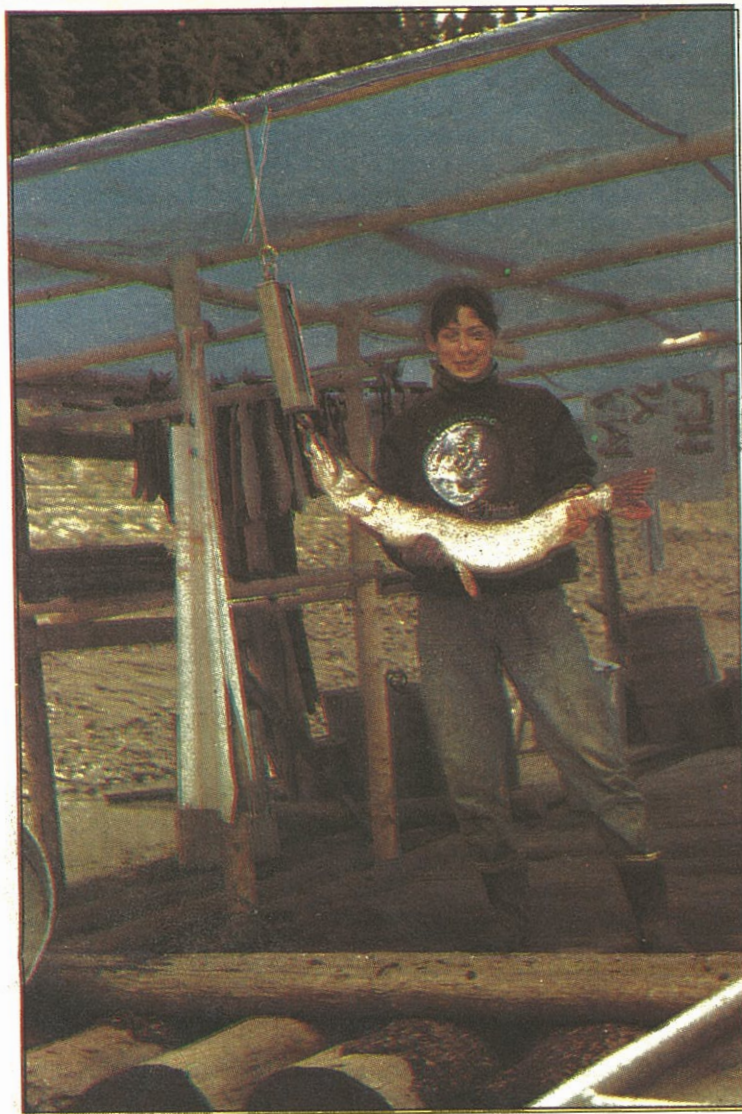


Salmon on the Yukon



Carol holding one of the Yukon's finest.

kon fishery is thriving. For these reasons, the mighty river is a busy place during salmon runs.

Historically, Eskimos and Athabaskan Indians, Alaska's native people, were less concerned with the merit of salmon as haute cuisine and a challenging catch than as a plentiful and reliable source of food for both man and beast.

Sled dogs worked long hours in the days before snow machines. Fish bones provided calcium while the salmon flesh carried ample fat, both necessary to a working animal's diet. Dog sledding is largely relegated to the world of sport nowadays, but modern mushers have not forgotten the logic of a salmon diet.

Subsistence laws in Alaska allow dog owners to take what they may from the river to feed their kennel. Sounds easy enough, but to extract the back-breaking amounts of fish needed to feed ninety hungry canine, one must be a willing bedfellow to the Yukon from May to October.

I worked for Dale and Mari Raitto, owners of Salcha Outfitters in Salcha, Alaska. Salcha is on the Alaska-Canada highway, about a day's travel from Whitehorse in the Yukon Territory. The hour-long trek north from Salcha to Fairbanks is paved, but just past

the state's largest city, the only road north turns to dirt. It's another three hours or so to the Yukon River bridge.

The Raittos were my hosts, mentors, critics, and employers. Dale Raitto came to Alaska in 1978; he and his buddy, Doug Tilton, had hangovers for breakfast following their high school graduation. Still, they managed to steer the pickup in the direction of the last frontier, barely glancing at their hometown of Fitzwilliam, NH, retreating in the rearview mirror.

That was 16 years ago. Raitto and his wife, Mari, a Norwegian woman, now breed sled dogs to sell and race in their top sprint mushing team with which they compete all winter long. Raitto bought a piece of land shortly after arriving in Alaska and built a stripped log cabin. Now he is king of a sizeable homestead, with two guest houses, a feed shed, several outhouses, a two-car garage, and an expanded main house.

While the kennel rests in the summer, the Raittos leave their compound behind, pack up the kids and the dogs, and head for the river to ply the Yukon for a supply of winter dog food.

May was our month of preparation. We hauled supplies from Fairbanks and dogs from Salcha-sometimes entire six-

week old litters-to the Yukon River by truck, then boated our goods 25 miles downriver to the Raitto's camp. Several other fish camps proceeded ours along the shoreline, but they were all miles apart, separated by many tributaries and turns in the river. When our boats rounded the final bend before the camp, the Brooks Range rose from behind the forest, white peaks touching the sky.

While we toiled to ready camp, our prey was one thousand miles down river at the mouth of the Yukon, feasting on their last supper. Upriver, we towed fishwheels out of just-thawed sloughs, hammered loose nails, cut firewood, kept an eye out for unwanted bears, and inoculated the new puppies for any diseases.

Two years earlier, Raitto had returned to camp in October to retrieve moose ribs from the smoke house and close up the camp for the winter. As he climbed the steep river bank, he heard a ferocious noise, and looked up to see a grizzly break through the tarp wall of his smokehouse.

Raitto knew he had to kill the bear, for it would surly return to loot the camp. Now he and his family were in danger. He hunted the grizzly for two days, and finally shot it. I had buried my face in the soft rich bears-

By Carol Connare
NHS Correspondent

A "fish" ionados of gourmet salmon will tell you the Yukon River in Alaska yields the ultimate product. On average, four million king, chum, and coho salmon return to the swift waterway each year after completing their four-year tour in the Pacific.

A single instinct propels their journey: to make babies. Yet this is not a casual act of getting eggs laid; there is a certain amount of romance to the salmon's mortal migratory habits. In the throes of death, which leaves them pale, frail, and snaggletoothed, these creatures hearken back to where they themselves swished as young fry, seeking out the tributaries of their youth.

So powerful is this sense of duty that some fish travel 2,000 miles against a raging current all the way into Canada to com-

plete the pilgrimage. The enormous scope of their expedition is what makes the salmon from the Yukon so palatable, for they carry a sizeable cache of fat on board to sustain them on their journey.

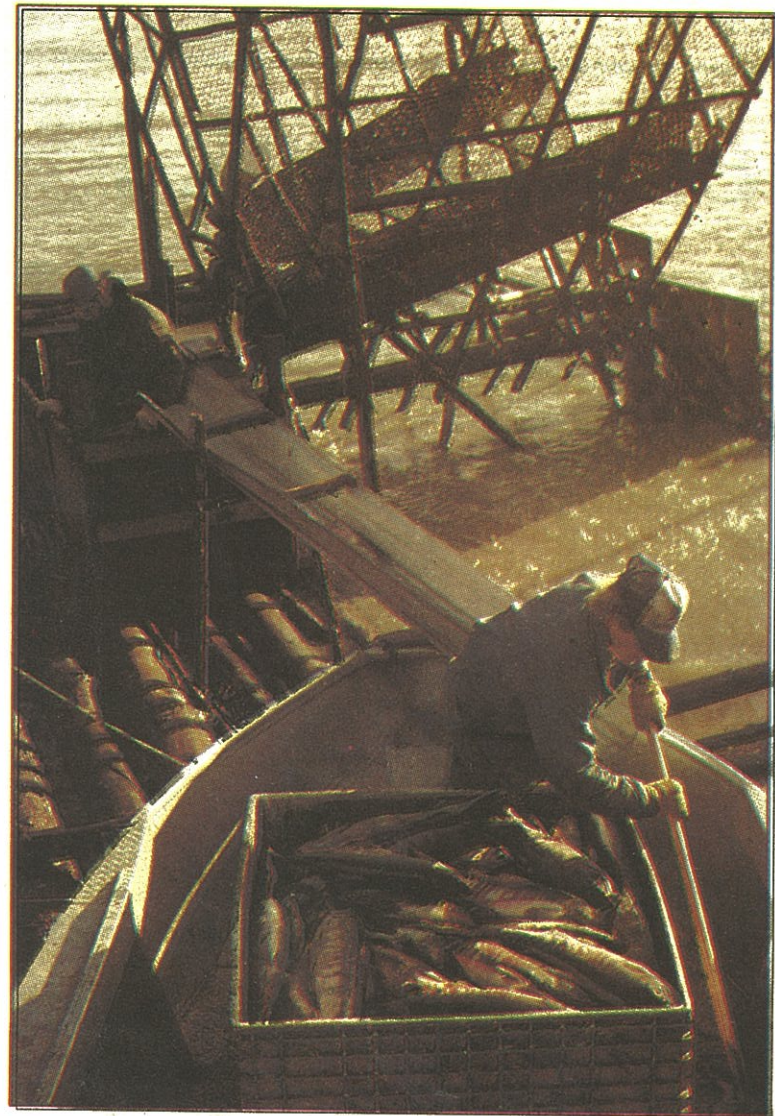
While this geographical and zoological state of affairs make streams that feed the Yukon favorite of sport fishermen, this same rich store of food is what attracts commercial fishermen to the waterway.

There are also a breed of folks who live somewhere between the worlds of sports and profit: subsistence fishermen. I spent two summers in the early 1990's working for subsistence fishermen on the Yukon River in Alaska learning how to fish to live.

Kippered, pickled, smoked, or raw, as the Japanese and bears prefer, salmon's rich, pink flesh is excellent eating. Their spunk and zest for life makes them a formidable sporting fish, and despite the Exxon Valdez oil spill, the Yu-



Elvis enjoying a savory salmon backbone.



A boat load of chum Salmon.



Dale Raitto puts up winter dog food for 85 Alaskan Huskies.

kin rug in one of the guest houses back in SALcha, and while we waited for the fish to come, we ate the last of the frozen bear meat, disguising its greasy taste in spaghetti sauce.

We set up two fishwheels, one on either side of the river, to catch salmon. These traps are curious contraptions—skeletons of spruce poles and chicken wire. Each of the 16-foot elongated baskets spins gracefully on an axis anchored to a floating raft. Underwater fencing from the shore out to the raft leads fish underneath the wheel, and with the dip of the basket, they are scooped free of the river, and deposited in the box on the raft.

By the end of May, we had cabled our fishwheels in place on the river, shored up the walls of the tent and platform we lived in, expanded the dog yard, and cut and split firewood for camp and the smokehouse. Our boats were in good repair. We were ready.

The heavy-weights of the salmon species, the kings, hit in early June. They teemed with oil and were the best fish for making strip jerky. We would filet them, and cook the heads and bones to feed the dogs. We

cut the fish into long strips leaving the skin on, and brined the coral strands in salt water. After drying for a day at the river's edge, we hung them in the smokehouse where they cured for two weeks.

When I finally got to taste our smoked strips, pink grease rolled down my chin. They were oily and sooty, chewy and delicious. To a cheechako, or newcomer, like me, this was fish jerky, but Alaskans call it squaw candy.

"Down at the mouth of the river you won't see Eskimo men making strips," Raitto said of other fish camps run by indigenous people. "It's considered women's work."

As quickly as they swelled the Yukon, the kings were gone by the end of June. The river was virtually fishless. We accepted handouts of leftover fish heads from other camps just to feed the dogs. The lull between the king and chum runs made for slow days at camp.

"This is why it's called a hurry-up-and-wait operation," Raitto told me, as we wiled away the hours repairing nets and listening to Trapline Chatter on the radio, the means by which people in the bush com-

municate via public radio. I finally had a few moments to explore the river.

I climbed the rough hillside and turned around at the top. A jagged rock wall dropped 1,100 feet to the river and I watched the fishwheel slowly spinning far away. Sandbars wrote the river's name in cursive. I got a glimpse beyond our particular bend—rolling tundra and forest lay out before me like lumpy camouflage sleeping bags, the Yukon a wide silver zipper down the middle.

That summer was short and sweet in the interior of Alaska.

Days were hot and dry in the semi-arid land, sometimes reaching in the nineties during July, the summer month. The sun did not rise or set, but rather circled the horizon, dipping behind hills leaving the midnight hour a gray dusk.

The abundance of light caused the world to become vibrant green overnight, overflowing garden plots in a few weeks' time. Wildflowers in brilliant blue, gold, and purple painted the hillsides, and mosquitos hovered in choking clouds around every warm-blooded creature.

We caught a steady but meager amount of rogue salmon and whitefish in our wheels, but we were waiting for the heaviest run of all; the chums.

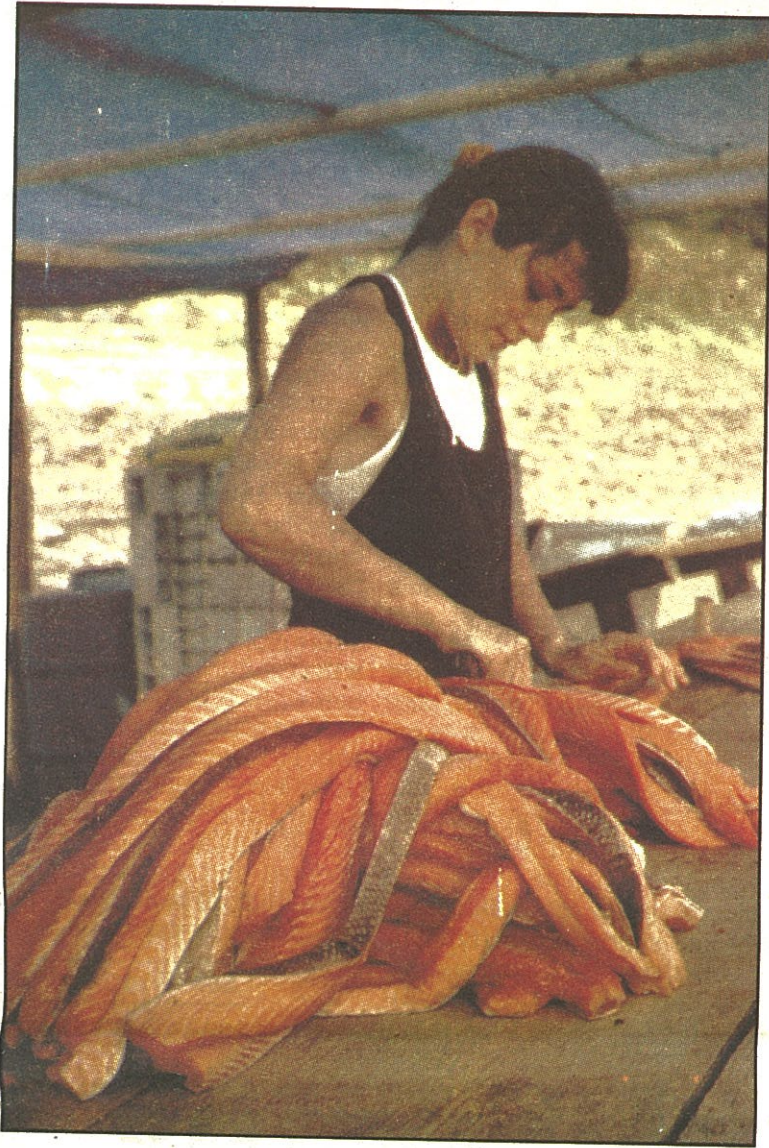
By mid-August, a funny thing had happened. Night, that dark fella, shyly crept back into town. Before I got used to the darkness, word had come from downriver that the chums were hitting in Tanana. They'd be here in another day.

We sharpened our knives—this was it, pay dirt for the kennel. Our mission to be accomplished.



An august sunrise paints the Yukon.

Salmon on the Yukon-Part II



Carol hard at work cutting Salmon

By Carol Connare
NHS Correspondent

By the first week of September, a wintery chill hung in the air on the Yukon River. The salmon were running hard and so were we - the chums hit thick and strong, and we had to gut and hang each fish for it to cure properly for winter storage. Raitto, my employer, told me the run could last up to two months. It started slowly, and became heaviest at the end. Even after the weather had forced us to pull our fishwheels from the Yukon in the last week of September, the fish continued their upriver run in the seething, freezing waterway.

At times I had to empty the fishwheels twice a day to keep up with the onslaught. I would wake at 6 a.m., build a fire in the small woodstove that heated my canvas wall tent, bundle up and head to the dog

yard. Ice skimmed the tops of the animal's water dishes. Pups howled for breakfast. I would light a fire beneath the blackened cookpot, an upturned 30 gallon drum, and begin boiling fish heads for their meal. Then I boarded the boat starting its engines and sailed downriver to the first wheel. I would empty both and return to camp about two hours later.

During the month-long run, I womaned the fish camp alone. Raitto made nightly trips back to his home south of Fairbanks to fill up the kennel freezers for winter, hauling several dogs home each night as well. I would empty the wheels in the morning, return to camp and feed the dogs, then sail upriver with the catch to meet Raitto at the Yukon River bridge at noon. There we set up drying racks - row after row of spruce poles held aloft by sawhorses -

and each day he and I would gut, head, and hang several hundred fish. Raitto had chosen a spot right near the access road, because when he retrieved this winter dog food in November, there would be several feet of snow on the ground.

I found cutting fish to be a good way to exercise aggression. First, it was off with the head in a single blow of the knife. On bigger salmon, a sawing motion was needed to sever the thick backbone. Next I would slice the dorsal fins and slit the belly. Egg sacs full of red salty bubbles would ooze from the females. Guts and eggs got ripped out and thrown in a pail since the dogs wouldn't eat these. Finally, I would puncture the salmon near the tail, and saw up the backbone. Bisected except for at the tail, the fish body would be hung to dry in the tundra wind.

My wrist muscles became so enlarged from this daily chore, they blocked circulation to my hands. I would lay awake nights with a terrible case of pins and needles in my hands.

We would finish cutting in the afternoon, sometimes not talking until all the salmon were cloven and hung, left to petrify in eternal dichotomy. Then, Raitto boated back to the camp with me to gather a few dogs, and back again to the bridge. Each night he would

drive nearly four hours back to Salcha, his home south of Fairbanks.

Each morning he would wake up and drive his one-ton diesel Ford back to the river and do it all over again. Maybe the long hours spent on the rutted dirt highway, a gauntlet of winding peaks and valleys devoid of radio signals, had something to do with Raitto's silence.

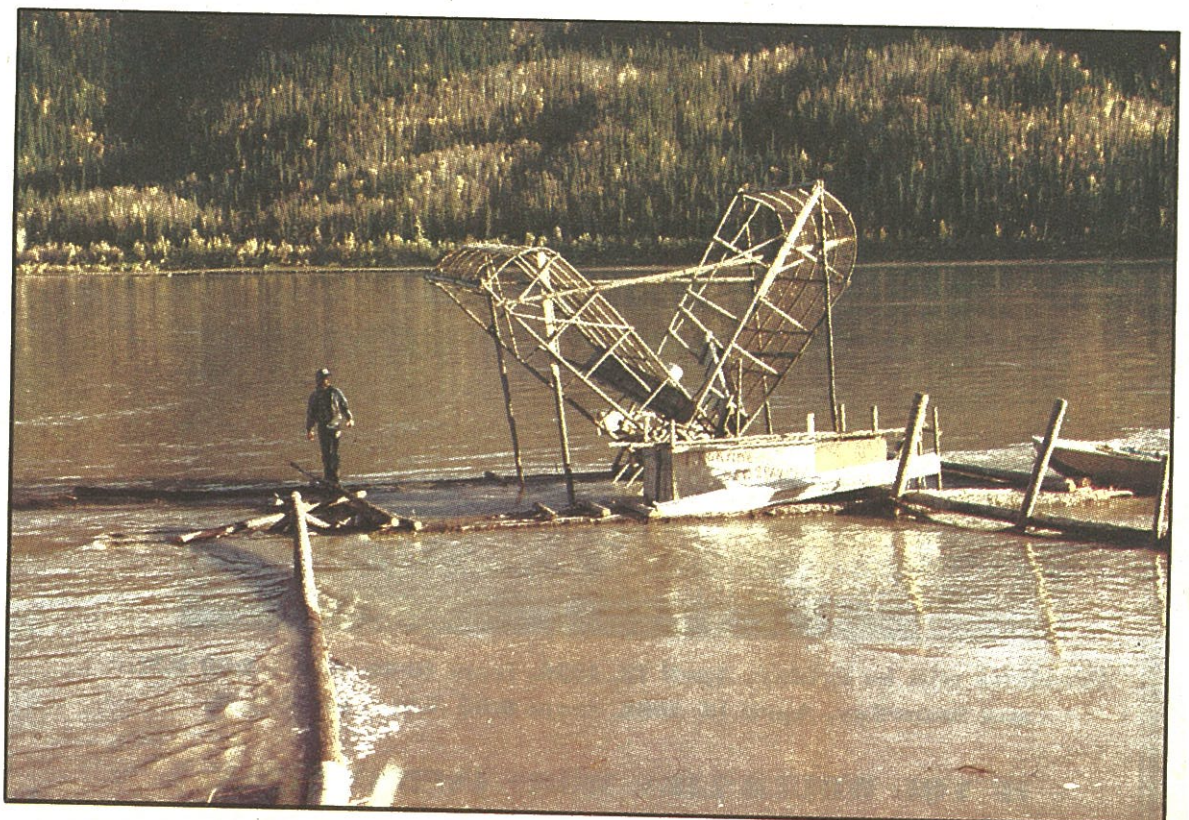
Whatever the reason, it was a quiet, grueling month, but the stark beauty of the Yukon always perked my tired, flagging spirits. Autumn ate up the river valley like a can of mixed vegetables, the treescape a side-order of color: pea-green conifers, corn yellow and carrot-orange leaves. The wild Yukon wind tore at hair and clothing, so unrelenting it would confuse my equilibrium and sometimes send me reeling.

These meddlesome gusts were the perfect ingredient for our operation - cut fish dried in a single day. In the few days of wet, still weather we experienced that fall the sea of salmon tail fins and spruce poles would emanate horrific odors before finally succumbing to Arctic aridity.

After dropping Raitto at the bridge, I would return to camp, finally alone except for dozens of sled dogs singing at the night sky. I would cook up another

meal for the animals and sometimes for myself. Salmon was readily available, but often I would skin several small whitefish and fry them in a pan, or concoct a salmon chowder with powdered milk. Raitto would sometimes bring me a treat, such as oreo cookies or a few beers, or some moose meat from the freezer.

Always for dessert, I would have a healthy helping of solitude. No matter how tired and weary I felt in my bones, I would walk down to the river's edge, either in total blackness or with a rising moon for light, and listen to the poetry of the Yukon. It whispered and slurped, gurgled and growled on its flurry to the ocean 1,000 miles away. If I listened long enough, I could hear the cries of gold diggers and fortune seekers, adventurers surely truer of heart than I, who had come to this river long ago. My job as a small town reporter seemed long ago and far away, but I had left New Hampshire six months before. Somehow, the Yukon had changed everything about me: my heart, my mind, and my body. The habits of those days - the waking, the working, the dreamless, exhausted sleep - dug deep into my soul, leaving behind a better understanding of the human spirit. Though drained and tired, I felt a peace and contentment I had never felt from



Watching the fish wheel doing its thing on the Yukon

any desk job. It was as if my body finally found out what it was supposed to be used for: work. But I still had much to learn about the Alaskan way of life.

A dog's life-and death

When I arrived in Alaska in May I had helped the nine new litters of sleddog pups. Each litter had a theme: Texas, Hawaii, Dakota, Utah; friends from home - Josie, Bruce, Lisa; rock stars - Bonnie, Elvis, Melissa, Lynrd; Shakespearean characters - Ophelia, Brutus, Hamlet, Delia. I knew every dog, despite similar coloring. Each had a distinct personality.

Poor Delia. She was the runt of her litter, the runt of the whole pack. Frail and faltering, she didn't grow and thrive like the other pups, usually opted for her mother's warmth over play or adventure. Her moon eyes glistened, sad and worldly. Her coat was mangy and without luster. I kept inquiring how I could help her. Raitto said Delia should be left alone. If she learned to fend for herself she might be okay. If not, she would have to be culled from the kennel.

I was horrified. I hadn't thought about this circumstance. What happened to less-than-perfect dogs? "They get killed," Raitto told me. "It's farming. The dogs are a herd. You can't allow weak ones to live. They shouldn't breed. And wild dogs are a big problem in the Interior, so you can't set them loose." Dale assured me Delia's only chance was not to have human contact.

Nevertheless, one cold night after checking the dogs, I found Delia huddled against a stump, shivering. I wrapped her in my arms and brought her in the wall tent. I made her powdered milk and fed her. She curled up, finally warm, underneath the stove.

The next morning, I guiltily shooed her outside. She seemed more lively and dallied with the other dogs, confirming I had done the right thing.

By now, winter had a foothold in the artic. The dogs' water was frozen solid every morning, and it had snowed twice. It was late September, and each morning, the glaze of ice on the fishwheels were slightly thicker, and more treacherous. As I pitched fish from the fishwheel box into the boat, I thought about the minute or so it would take for me to freeze to death if I slipped and fell in the rushing Yukon underfoot.

We continued to cut fish for a few more days. Bloody gloves froze to my fingers, curled around a knife. I knew we would be packing it in soon. Having lived for months without a mirror, running water, and good conversation, I was both eager and fearful to reenter civilization.

I knew better than to complain, but stinging sleet had greeted me several mornings, and I longed for solid walls around me. Finally, Raitto gave in: "One more rack, and we'll pack up and move back to town," he said.

The next day, we hauled the wheels out of the water and onto the river bank, Raitto's wife Mari had come along with another truck for the dogs. I drove the Ford laden with several hundred fish and another 10 dogs. My load was the heaviest, so I left the river last, and would arrive home several hours later. Dale and I would be back in a few days with his friend, Mark, to hunt for moose. But this was the last I would see of the river, alone, for a long time. I barely turned around to say goodbye, thankful a warm house was at the end of the road.

I ambled to the main house after sleeping late once back at the Raitto's homestead. I made coffee with real milk, and sat at a real kitchen table, so different from the hobbled bench on the river. I began writing a few letters home, stopping now and then to gaze out the window. It was bright, sunny and cold, but I was warm and snug inside. I watched as Dale set up the target and took some shots. I figured he was getting ready for our hunting trip. Then I followed his gaze, and saw he was putting down dogs. Delia was lying dead on the ground. Several others were chained to a tree awaiting their demise. I couldn't watch anymore, but I didn't cry. Dale was right. There wasn't room for weakness on the frontier. I wondered, if I was one of his dogs, would I be considered unfit? I didn't know the answer.

I didn't have my hunting license then, so I couldn't carry a gun, but Mark, Dale and I returned to the Yukon a few days later and stalked the woods along the river for two days without a moose sighting. We saw plenty of signs, and places they had tramped, but the many gangly animals I had seen all summer long were in hiding. The walking was the event - Dale showed Mark and I old traplines and boated us up



Raitto's herd of pups await their breakfast of bones.

tributaries and brought us close to a known peregrine falcon nest.

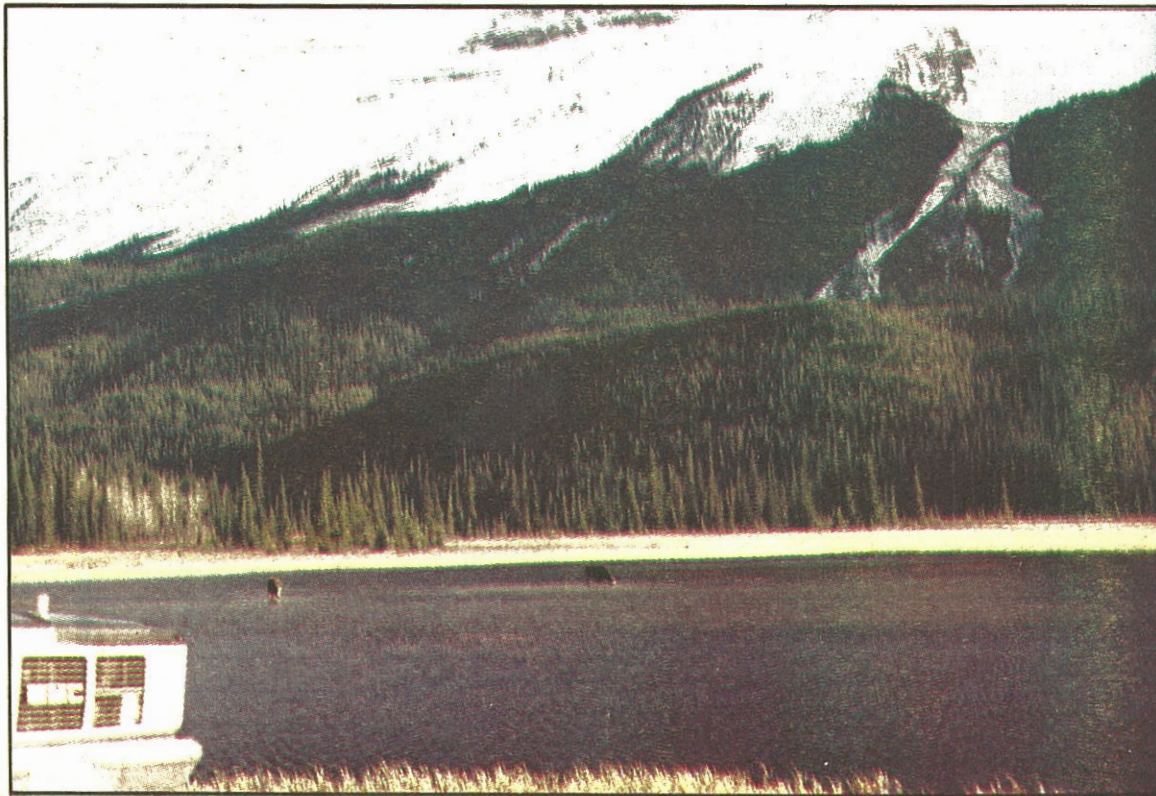
The lack of game wasn't much of a surprise because the quiet Yukon River bridge had turned into Grand Central Station as hunting parties departed downriver in huge boats. Some came in by plane, still others by truck. Mark and Dale weren't worried because both had a few hundred pounds of moose in their freezers from last year. For Alaskans, moose are more common than deer for

us in the east, and they don't view the hunt as a challenge so much as a necessity.

I was glad for the chance to say a proper goodbye to the Yukon. I took a break from packing up the rest of our camp on an outdoor couch of birch limbs suspended between two old spruce trees. Looking across the river at the opposite bank, I noticed the pockmarks in the tree cover: cookie-cutter vestiges of slapdash lumbering that fueled steamboats on their upriver trek for fifty years dur-

ing the gold rush. At the last turn of the century, such a vessel laden with mineral-crazed stampedees needed 120 cords of firewood to power it 1,200 miles upriver to Dawson City, where rumor had it the streets were paved with gold. The river was a virtual highway five months out of the year, up until the 1950's when air travel became feasible in the artic. Some of those men never made it to

See Yukon, pg.36



Moose graze in a field with a majestic mountain backdrop