



YOUNG ON THE WAY—The University of Alaska Musk Ox herd will increase in 1967 with the birth of calves to the University herd. Breeding has just been completed. The musk ox is an old resident of Alaska that has returned. The animal was killed off in the early 19th century, but was imported back into the state in the 1930's. A herd now exists on Nunivak Island in the Bering Sea, and at the experimental farm at the University of Alaska. The animals are valuable as a meat producer, but more so for the quality of their hair for weaving.

Musk Ox Selective Breeding Completed at University

The first selective breeding program in a long-range project to domesticate musk oxen has been completed at the University of Alaska.

The six-week program was aimed at increasing the size of a present 32-animal herd and at developing an animal that will be more docile and produce more wool.

The project is aided by a grant from the Kellogg Foundation. A herd of approximately 100 musk oxen is the project's goal — the first step in creating a wool industry for Alaskan native people.

The musk oxen produce a fine, soft underwool, called qiviut. It is acknowledged by textile experts to be one of the finest fibers in the world and is valued at about \$50 per pound.

A full-grown musk ox sheds from three to six pounds of qiviut annually. Since the animals are native to the arctic and require only minimal care, the qiviut could supply a steady income with very little outlay, project officials note.

Once the project is completed and the herd is up to desired size, native groups would be able to borrow breeding stock to establish their own herds.

They later would repay the loan with a like number of calves. The operation would be similar to the system used to develop the reindeer in-

dustry in northern Alaska.

John Teal, musk ox project supervisor, lists these desirable characteristics of a domestic musk ox: high wool production, early maturity, large size and favorable temperament.

For the breeding program, two bulls were selected for size and temperament. No quantitative figures were available for wool production. Each bull was given a harem of six cows and each group then was put in a special pen. Previously, the bulls and cows had been kept separated.

Herdsmen Terry Hall reported that when the normally easily-handled bulls acquired their harems, they underwent a marked personality change.

The bulls immediately became protective and were not as easily handled. The herding technique, which previously had consisted of merely getting behind the animals and shooting them along, had to be revised, Hall said.

The bulls would not allow anyone to approach their harems and vehicles had to be used for herding.

This behavior, according to Hall, is completely normal. He explained that any bull from a domestic breed of cattle acts the same way.

"As a matter of fact," he remarked, "one of our other bulls managed to open a gate and get in a pen with one of the harems. He defeated the bull of the harem, took over

control and within a matter of hours became very protective. When we returned him to his pen, he switched back to his normal behavior."

At the conclusion of the breeding program, the bulls and cows again were separated. The reunion with their comrades, according to Hall, was not exactly joyful.

Both the bulls and the cows waged fights for group "leadership."

For the bulls, the fighting was a ritual ceremony of butting heads. The bulls would back off, facing one another and shaking their heads.

When the distance between them was about 20 feet, they would charge full speed and butt heads. This ritual would continue until one bull would give up and go away.

The cows, Hall said, displayed more temper in their fighting. One cow would butt another behind the shoulders and push the other 20 or 30 feet. The combat would go back and forth until one cow gave up the pushing.

However, everything is now back to normal at the musk ox farm.

The animals will be watched throughout the winter and project officials hope that next spring the herd will show a sizable increase.