

GUIDE TO URBAN REINDEER



Kate
Partridge

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#89

ESSAY PRESS GROUNDLOOP SERIES

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Introduction

Guide to Urban Reindeer is a lyric prose sequence, an excerpt from a longer project that responds to photographs from the construction of the Alaska Railroad during the 1910s. Part ekphrasis and part archive, this project layers the federal experiments of settler life and agriculture in the North against life in contemporary Anchorage. The essay's scope pulls in baby beauty contests and Alaskan carrots, as well as soundscapes and engineering. Of course, there is also a celebrity reindeer.

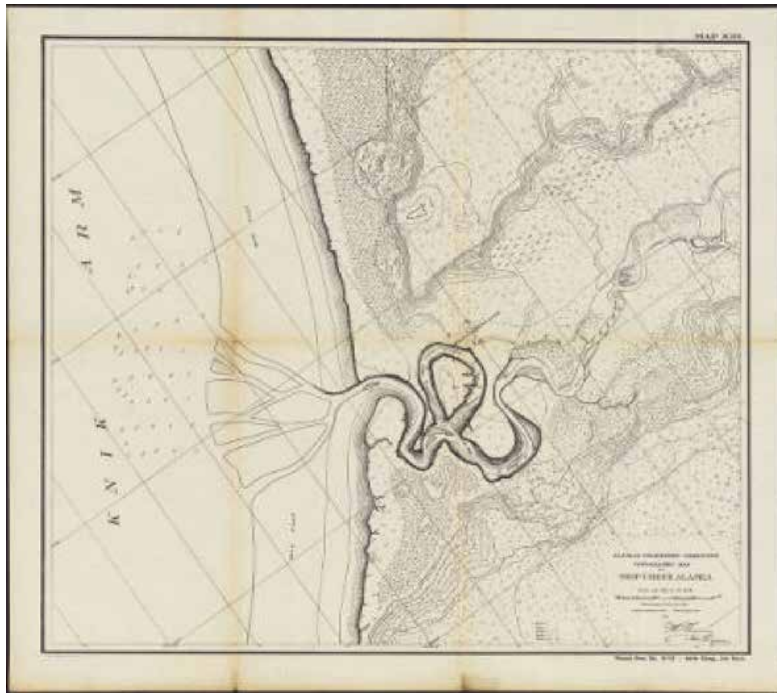
GUIDE TO URBAN REINDEER



1. *Flag Drill, July Fourth, 1916.* On the ball field, a group of boys in a square formation performs an asynchronous dance. They have come to no particular consensus regarding the wearing of ties or the tucking of shirts.
2. On a pallet, propped between two canoes, 30 sheep waver. The canoes are large, but one sheep is already in the water. Another man rows close.

(I do not envy his options.)

3. From our shared alley, I observe neighborhood projects: huts to keep snow off garbage cans, fenced compost bins, greenhouses, a coop.



4. One afternoon, I am rounding a corner on 16th when two chickens jaywalk in front of me, crossing the sidewalk toward the park.
5. Murray Schafer's study of soundscape proposes a positive approach to the acoustics of place. *Which sounds do we want to preserve, encourage, multiply?* All may be considered musical.
6. Augusta/Alberta Pyatt captures the last sprint of the Ladies' Dog Team Race down 4th Avenue, now full and busy as a city street. Along both sides, people in overcoats have staked their territory to watch.

(Mrs. Casy Jones passes the general store, real estate office, and news depot with her extended team of dogs—a blurry delight, as though she is pulled by a string of pleased and furry ghosts.)

7. Unlike photographic or cartographic evidence, it is impossible to produce an *instantaneous impression* of sound.
8. The men stick their necks out into the street to observe the finish of Miss Genevive Pechetti, Second Place. They form a little peak of interest with their heads.
9. During the summers, my mother worked in the steel mill with her father, shoveling in a heat-protective suit. My association between industry and warmth dismantles quickly in Alaska.

10. Four horses stand in *A Matanuska Valley Scene* in the low brush, facing away from each other in an odd cocktail party.

(One horse seems to have five legs and a rear that twists around to a 90-degree angle. From this I determine his condition is either a mid-hip sway or that he, in fact, contains two horses.)

11. Sled dogs about to run—or thinking about running—produce the loudest sounds I've heard not made by a machine.
12. Four men on the rails of a bridge, toes sticking out like a row of birds. Below, several men in the marsh swing axes at barrels.

In the two consecutive photos, the men continue hacking down the barrels, and the number of onlookers increases to nearly 20.

(*U.S. Deputy Marshals Destroying Confiscated Liquor*. Is it a slip to substitute the idea of distillation with destruction?)

13. I'm not sure I could locate the farm myself at this point, though I once marked the signs closely from the reverse seat of the station wagon: two conical towers expressing steam by the Ohio, the barns steadying their own positions beside the winding roads, the farm where my mother always remarks on the draft horses.
14. The ship *S.S. Turret Crown* arrives in Anchorage from the Panama Canal on April 26, 1917. It is stacked with materials, and, of course, three men standing on top of them.
15. The keynote sounds of a landscape are those created by its animals, birds, climate, weather, geographic features: starting points. The sounds that intervene—say, a train whistle—these are signals.

(This is not to say that the background sounds don't also affect behavior and mood, just that signals make these changes requisite.)

16. One of the first things I learn about Alaskan produce: the carrots are notably sweet. J brings some of hers by my office to sample.
17. In the Mat-Su Valley, as large as West Virginia, an experimental nursery boasts of *peoneys, gooseberries, everbearing raspberries, lilac bushes, maple trees, black walnuts, and apple trees, all doing extra well.*
18. I encounter a ptarmigan following a trail along the glacier, a re-assuring omen after a black bear lolling in the grass along the same route (the reason I turned back). The bird, untroubled, ambles on. The bear, untroubled, displays his berry-swollen stomach.



19. The depth of rich soil is measured by putting a man beside it. A single black and white cow stands in an open field, wilderness towering over her, even at a great distance back.

20. Dogs unloaded from their trucks (like a horse trailer, but with much smaller compartments) are tied immediately to a towline for safe-holding. A thousand dogs on 4th, barking for the signal to start.

(The signal is: *I want to run.*)

(Once they run, breathing.)

(Schafer would call this scenario a *soundmark*: a sound exclusive to a particular location that merits preservation.)

21. Numerous psychological theories propose why people love to be on top of things: climbing appeals to risk-taking personalities; it offsets the relative safety of modern life; it re-frames the view.

22. I show my mother, once, the James Wright poem about *autumn* in her home. I'm not sure it has any resonance for her, in my college textbook, although she tells me these exact words in her own stories as we pass each building—she walks that field in the Tiltonsville marching band, she works that furnace.

23. The first boat built in the harbor is the *Progress of Ship Creek*. Sydney Laurence, the photographer, observes its movement, horse-drawn, across the mudflats.

24. Pyatt calls this one *Jack and the Bean Stork*: Laurence has mounted a tall, spindly tripod in the middle of 4th, 10 feet above the street going on as usual.

25. Boxes of glass and aluminum figure the book on Northern architecture.

(The fact of living indoors is a human inconvenience that should present only the slightest visual impediment.)

26. At 10th and I, Star the Reindeer can see the Park Strip from her enclosure.

(She is on my running route, not because it is convenient.)

27. Sydney Laurence seated, furrowed.

(He is wearing a suit—uncomfortable? He is in a stiff-backed chair, trying to convey an expression of great seriousness. He sits next to the corner of an enormous painting in an elegant frame.)

28. It is well known that Whitman habitually watched trains from his home in Camden.
29. Pyatt's nose is almost exactly straight, aside from a little wobble as though taking a corner too fast while holding a cup of coffee.
30. At G. Martin's farm, the progress of a *potatoe digger* is demonstrated. It has a foot lever (like a thigh press) to scoop up earth from beneath.

31. Star has an array of punching and sharpening objects suspended from the roof like meats in a smokehouse: PVC pipe, ribbed tubing, an orange bag.

In summer she feeds at the trough. In winter I find her standing stock still, watching her breath congeal in the air.

32. Students serve as summer announcers on the train, directing cameras towards the best vantage points to view moose, mountains, a miner's cabin submerged into muck, an abandoned wilderness lodge. Despite their stated instructions, I spend more than 20 minutes at a time in the elevated viewing car on the way to Fairbanks.

(This is reprehensible, as it is unfair to other tourists who intend to take pictures.)

33. This particular Star, I learn at the fur festival, is one of a series.

34. On 4th Avenue, in front of the Empress Theatre, Hardware, Ice Cream, and New Method Cleaners, a row of cars is parked at an angle in the snow—somewhere between seven and nine. *We got all the cars together. 1918.*
35. It is about this time that H. G. Kaiser replaces Laurence as the official railroad photographer.
36. Caribou are native to the Alaskan tundra. The state Department of Fish and Game estimates a population of 750,000, not including domesticated reindeer.

37. What I want to know is whether only the *sons* are driven to *gallop terribly*, or if I've come to that impulse in another way.
38. The humans in Alaska number about 735,600.
39. *D. W. Jones Standing Among His Peas, Peters Creek* has no head—a white shirt and jacket, with the pea patch up to his chest. Behind him, land cleared for planting, a little cabin, a patch of gigantic cabbages covering the hill.

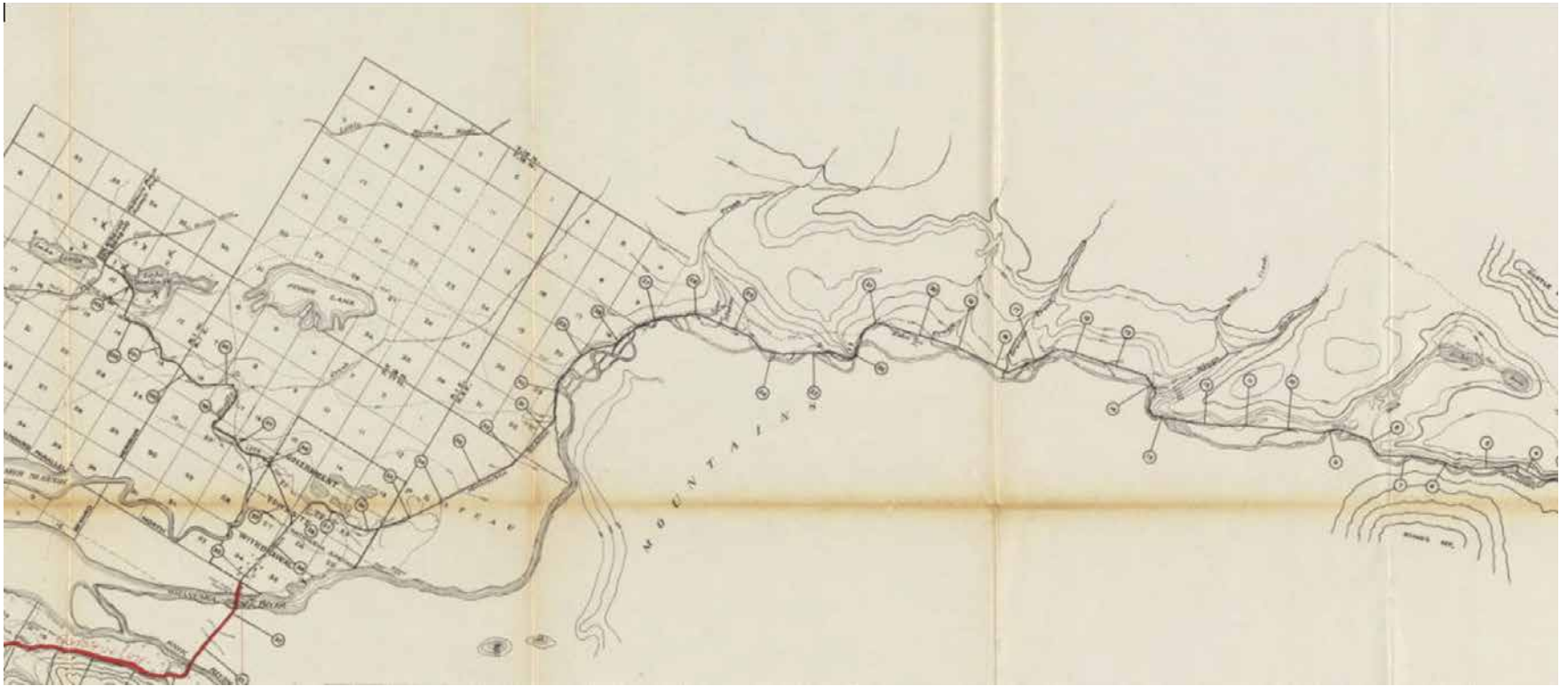


Figure 3

40. Both male and female caribou have antlers.

41. A notable distinction is that the necks of males swell prior to their rutting season in the fall. Bull caribou *control a space around themselves, and prevent other bulls from breeding females within their space.*

42. A new opportunity for industry in the steel region is the barn wedding trend—\$5,000 for an afternoon in a field with old machinery in the background.

43. I do not particularly want to control anyone, but I do like to control a space around myself.

44. The railroad's *electric thawing machine* is featured in several poses by the tracks and in front of the employment office.

45. At the *First Annual Alaska Agricultural Fair*, the Mat-Su Valley displays freakishly large root vegetables.

(Their size is attributed not to exceptional soil, but to the long hours of summer daylight.)

46. Men in hats have stepped off the tracks at Chickaloon to demonstrate *growth of native grass*.
47. As the train approaches Fairbanks, it passes the pens of reindeer at the university. Nearby, a graduate cares for the official group of Santa's, named accordingly, in the town of North Pole.
48. On a Sunday morning, I discover Star walking on a leash across the Park Strip.

(It is worth noting that this morning happens to be Easter, and that I am highly susceptible to interpreting ordinary events as auspicious.)



49. In private photos, the ingenuity of individuals takes center stage. Someone has built a baby sled out of a tea crate and an umbrella. Men have put up roadhouses along the route. A husky appears as a pack animal, carrying a sack, pails, and a frying pan strapped over his back and sides. His expression indicates complete seriousness regarding the task.

50. Also at the first Anchorage Fair: a symmetrical-headed infant labeled Fred Stanley Parsons has won first prize in the baby-growing competition.

(It is unclear whether this practice is experimental.)

51. A unique feature of auditory perception is that it is very difficult to turn off.

52. I begin my gardening project with lettuce, squash, and carrots. I am in luck, as it is an especially warm summer. The weather service issues a heat advisory when it reaches 80 degrees in Anchorage.

53. The beds are located in a side yard where I frequently observe moose throughout the year.

54. The Norwegian Wild Reindeer Center Pavilion shares the glass wall strategy: it's a small, remote structure (think shipping container) with seats on the non-window side. That's it.

55. Caribou cows produce a sound called huffing, like a startled grunt. They grunt at their calves, who grunt back—and then less frequently as they grow older.
56. *Experiment rows of peerless barley, oats, and rye, Saidon Ranch* [S in Saidon reversed]. A man chest-deep in a field of grain.
57. The Talkeetna River Bridge has completely lost its middle in the spring flood. The pilings lean; their thin timber roof dips into the water like a child dipping one toe first into the pool.



58. Showered and biking to work, I pass a moose chewing on some creekside growth. I almost don't hear it over the bicycle wheels, but it's just distinctive enough.
59. The reindeer container firm is also responsible for the Norwegian National Opera and Ballet, where a sloping roof walkway gives the illusion of climbing an isolated peak above the Oslo Fjord.
60. *Happy Alaska Ranchers* proclaims the photo of a booming garden containing three people.

(Two of the three clutch kittens to their chests.)



61. *Carnation Milk, the Alaska Cow* arrives by barge at the Anchorage docks.
62. Delightfully, an old barge named *Sperm* appears periodically in the photos.
63. The article I'm reading about the Norwegian architects is actually focused on their successful bid to re-vamp Times Square, intended to re-open the space for use by residents and limit the impact of surging crowds of tourists.

64. Spelling remains highly irregular throughout the new camps. The mines at Chic(k)aloon, particularly, evade agreement.
65. G371 *Town of Wacilla looking of the Knik Wagon Road*
G396 *The new town of Wassilla*
G472 *Temporary town of Wassila, Alaska*
66. *Palin grew up in the small town of Wasilla, about 40 miles north of Anchorage.*

67. The constant release of tour buses in the summer is a bizarre phenomenon.

(Control: one evening in winter I sit with J and A by the window of a bar off 5th. The wind is so cold this night that people are sprinting down the sidewalks in ice cleats like startled deer.)

(With the snow whipped up into the air, they seem to emerge from nowhere.)

68. A series of arrows and notes re-create the scene of a contractor's blast. Left, the contractor runs for safety. Right, three men are injured, one killed by *a shot that hung-fire*.

(At each position, a still-living man is standing for scale.)

69. *Hurricane Camp*. Snowy mountain peaks blush into clouds, a plane of low growth emerges. Men with little tents, little sacks, little horses. Around them, width.

Image Sources

Title Page

Pyatt, Alberta. “Jack and the Bean Stork.” *Alaska’s Digital Archives*, Alaskan Engineering Commission. AMRC-b83-146-93A. AMRC, Pyatt Original Negatives Collection. Anchorage Museum at Rasmuson Center, Anchorage.

Figure 1

Alaskan Engineering Commission. “Topographic Map of Ship Creek Alaska.” *Alaska’s Digital Archives*. UAF-M0371. Rare Maps Collection, Alaska & Polar Regions Collections. Elmer E. Rasmuson Library, University of Alaska Fairbanks, Fairbanks.

Figure 2

Hunt, P.S. “Experimental Nursery, A.W. Walters Ranch.” *Alaska’s Digital Archives*, Alaskan Engineering Commission. AMRC-b70-x—2-46. AMRC, General Photograph File. Anchorage Museum at Rasmuson Center, Anchorage.

Figure 3

Alaskan Engineering Commission. “Map of Adopted Railway Route. Anchorage to Chickaloon (Matanuska Coal Fields): Showing Constructed Line, Anchorage to Matanuska River.” *Alaska’s Digital Archives*. UAF-M0374. Rare Maps Collection, Alaska & Polar Regions Collections. Elmer E. Rasmuson Library, University of Alaska Fairbanks, Fairbanks.

Figure 4

Kaiser, H.G. “Mile 8, Chickaloon Branch, Gov[ernmen]t R[ail]road, Oct. 9, 1918.” *Alaska’s Digital Archives*, Alaskan Engineering Commission. AMRC-aec-g992. Alaska Engineering Commission Collection. Anchorage Museum at Rasmuson Center, Anchorage.

Figure 5

Hunt, P.S. “Experiment Rows of Peerless Barley, Oats, and Rye. [Saidon?] Ranch.” *Alaska’s Digital Archives*, Alaskan Engineering Commission. UAF-2013-159-9. Frank W. Mondell’s Alaska Engineering Commission Photograph Album, Alaska and Polar Regions Collections. Elmer E. Rasmuson Library, University of Alaska Fairbanks, Fairbanks.

Figure 6

Hunt, P.S. “Happy Alaska Ranchers, G.H. Saindon’s Ranch, Matanuska Branch, A.E.C. R[ailwa]y.” *Alaska’s Digital Archives*, Alaskan Engineering Commission. AMRC-aec-g737. Alaska Engineering Commission Collection. Anchorage Museum at Rasmuson Center, Anchorage.

Notes

This work responds to images from the following collections held by the Anchorage Museum:

B1957.005 – Jack H. Floyd Collection
B1965.003 – Fred B. Wood Collection
B1967.011 – Anchorage Townsite Records
B1967.019 – CIHS Isaacs Collection
B1971.071 – Alice Butler Collection
B1979.001 – FIC Collection
B1979.002 – Alaska Railroad/A.E.C. Collection
[B1983.146](#) – Pyatt-Laurence Collection
B1989.011 – Donald V. Johnson Collection
B1998.010 – Panorama
[B2009.057](#) – Pyatt Negatives B2009.057
B2010.022 – Anchorage Assessment Records
[B2011.008](#) – Annabelle Ward Photographs
Map 7/7, Plat of Anchorage Townsite; Department of the Interior, General Land Office.

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James Wright, “Autumn Begins in Martins Ferry, Ohio”

Author Bio



Kate Partridge is the author of *Ends of the Earth*. She is a graduate fellow at the University of Southern California.



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