

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

WGM-17
Greenland - Hunting V
The Fur Auction

Åkandevvej 7
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Denmark
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Dear Dick,

The word "auction" always makes me smile. Upon hearing the word, I get a clear mental picture of the Boardwalk at Atlantic City, my friend Bob Binswanger, and jujubees. Bins and I as 8-year olds used to worm our way through SRO crowds at the very high-class auctions on the Boardwalk. We were usually equipped with a jujubee ration, no money, and a great fear lest some arm movement land us with a Chinese Ming vase or a cut-glass punch bowl of five-gallon capacity. We felt that somehow we were missing a fabulous chance at these auctions, almost as if the whole lot were being given away for nothing. When the jujubees were consumed and our interest flagged, we fearfully inched our way out again, arms motionless, eyes straight ahead.

Bins is now a professor at Harvard and probably doesn't chew jujubees anymore (if indeed anyone does), but I would love to take him to a fur auction in Copenhagen. Would he still feel the excitement?

In the past year or so I have taken up the old auction habit by attending, as an observer, the sale of Greenland furs. The 25-year hiatus since Atlantic City was broken only once and that was in London awhile back to pick up an umbrella at the sale of articles found on British Railways. That was out of dire need, the Greenland fur sales from pure interest.

Three times a year in Copenhagen furs from Greenland reach the world market. Sealskins are sold in the spring and autumn, polar bear and fox pelts together in early winter. The furs, as is customary elsewhere, are sold at auction; each auction lasts a scant two hours. The following brief description is a composite impression of the several fur auctions held during the past year. The photographs are from both the fox-polar bear and the sealskin sales.

Greenland furs are constantly being shipped south to Denmark, graded, made up into similar lots and stored to await the auctions. Three times each year they are brought for inspection and sale to the new quarters of the Danish Fur Sales (Danske Pelsauktioner) in the industrial suburb of Glostrup on the western outskirts of Copenhagen. The Danish Fur Sales is a building complex of over 13,000 square meters. It is probably the most modern fur auction facility in the world. Of the total area, huge sorting and inspection rooms take up 9,000 square meters. A large auction hall, restaurant, conference rooms, and a sauna take up most of the remaining space. But

there are also offices of the Danish Fur Breeders Association, Danish Chinchilla, Empress Chinchilla (USA), SAGA-mink (choice mink from Norway, Finland, and Denmark), and the Royal Greenland Trade Department. The latter office contains a desk and a chair and remains tomb-like for most of the year except during the three auction days in April, September, and November.

During the several days preceding each auction, the furs are laid out in the large inspection hall at Glostrup. Racks of blue or white fox pelts are rolled about the hall by helpers who deliver them to the inspection tables. The lots are carefully gone over by the fur buyers who look for size, color, and uniformity of each lot, plus other traits not apparent to the untrained eye. By a pull here and a tug there, the skillful buyer knows what the lot contains.

The last two fox skin auctions, in December of 1965 and 1966, offered 4,002 and 2,969 fox skins for sale. The pelts are from the Arctic fox, a dimorphic animal of two color phases: blue and white. Unlike Canada, Greenland usually produces blue foxes in a 2-to-1 ratio over the white form. In the 1966 fox pelt sales, 2,164 blues and 805 whites were sold. There is nothing blue about the pelts; the color brown would have sufficed as a description according to my eye. But the experts usually grade the pelts into eight color categories: Light silvery, Medium silvery, Dark silvery, Light, Medium, Dark, Pale, and Mixed. The white fox pelts are graded into six color groups: Clear white (the best color), Ivory, Yellow belly, Yellow, Glacier blue, and Mixed.

The pelts are graded by size as well. Each lot is usually made up of 10 or 20 pelts, although there may be as few as 4 or up to 30 pelts. The blue and white lots are each sold in 4 grade categories, with few in the prime first grade, most in grades 2 and 3.

All the lots (265 in the 1966 auction) are listed in a printed catalogue under each grade by lot number, number of skins in the lot, size, and color shade.

The few polar bear skins which are offered for sale follow at the end of each fox auction. They are also listed by lot number and size and are sold individually for anywhere from 800 to 3600 kroner (6.9 kroner = US \$1).

Sealskins are also divided into lots by type of seal (ringed, harp, and hooded) and grade. Usually from 20 to 150 skins make up a lot; over 300 lots are being offered in the 12 April auction. In all, 27,279 sealskins will be auctioned, nearly 25,000 of which are the ringed seal.

Because of the number of skins and the close inspection necessary, the auction itself is run without any furs (except polar bear) being displayed during the bidding. A buyer occasionally runs downstairs from the auction hall to the inspection rooms to get a better last look before making his bid. Each lot is announced by number, at which



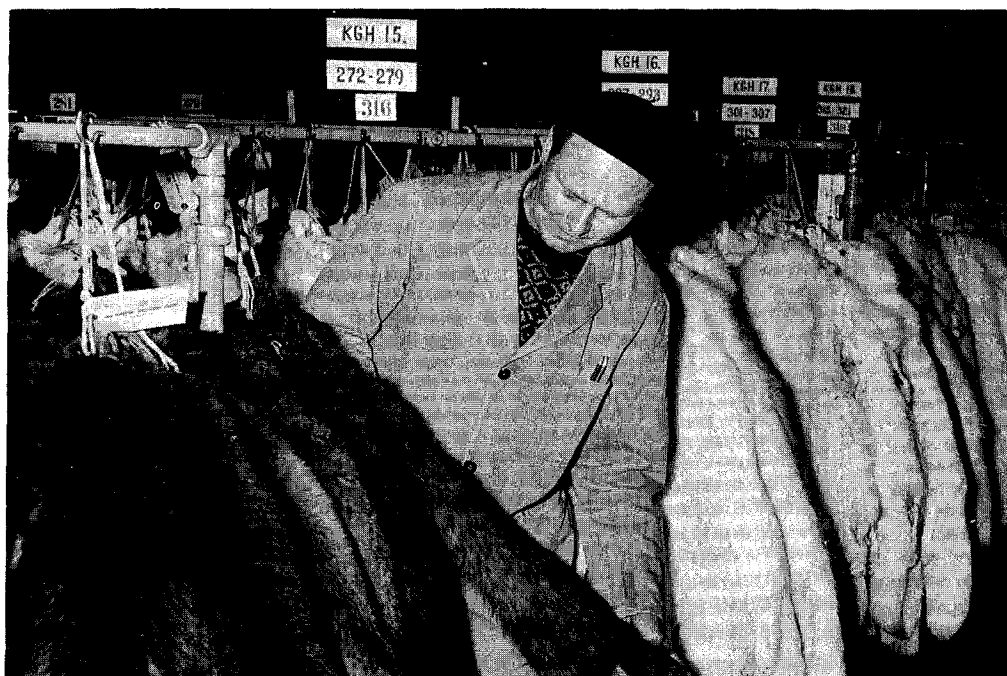
The Danish Fur Sales, Glostrup, Denmark



The inspection rooms on 10 April before the sealskin auction



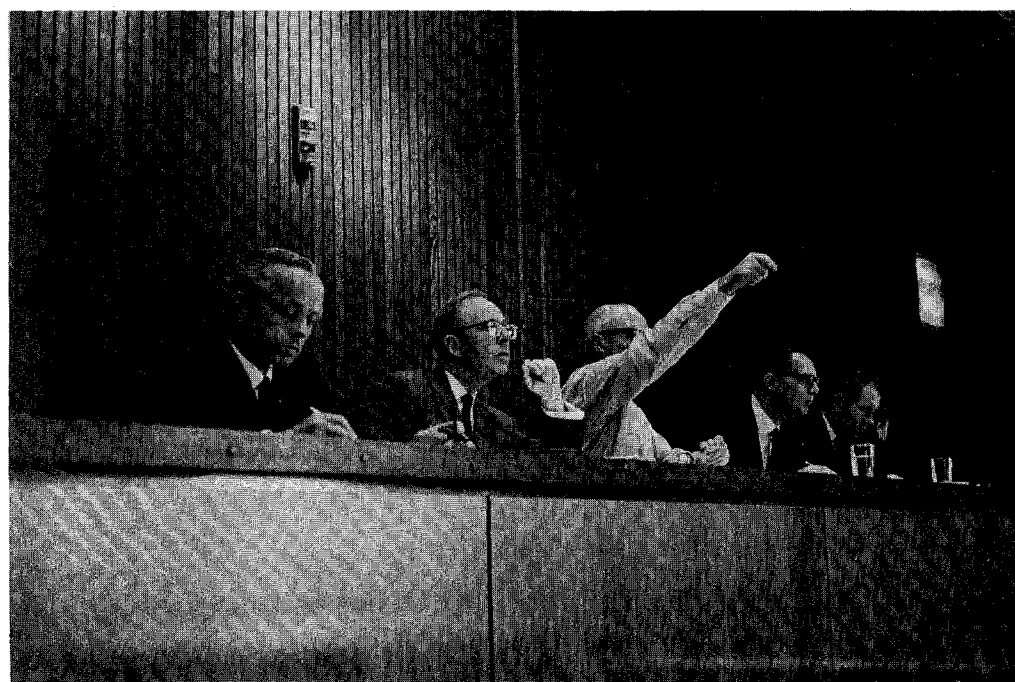
Fur-grader Christen Jensen of KGH with a Blueback sealskin



Jørgen Nilsson of KGH surrounded by blue and white fox skins



The auction underway - a view from the auctioneer's podium



(l-r) Director Hans C. Christiansen, fur sale chief P. Mønsted (both of KGH), and auctioneer H. E. Petersen (white shirt)



A flick of the pencil is all it takes.



A polar bear skin is sold.

time the same number flashes on the closed circuit TV screens throughout the building complex. A buyer in the restaurant or in the sauna downstairs, or the one making a phone call to New York knows exactly when he must appear to bid on the lots he wants to buy.

I was amazed how rapidly the lots were sold--an average 20 seconds per lot. The complete bidding in some of the sales I timed was as low as 5 seconds!

Some bidding was done by hand-waving similar to a schoolgirl trying to catch the teacher's attention, but more often a nod, a pencil flick, or a smile got the message through to Mr. Petersen, the auctioneer, up on the podium. A seating plan is rigorously kept; many buyers prefer to have the same location at each auction. One man I watched at several auctions had the same seat location and buyer's number and was plainly in the bidding until he lowered his eyes to his desk (shades of the Boardwalk!!). The auctioneer obviously earns his keep.

Mr. Petersen recites the bids in English (the numbers 50 and 60 often sounded alike to me) because many foreign buyers (USA, Germany, and Japan) flock to buy Greenland furs.

The photographs give a good idea of the auction hall and fur inspection rooms. The auction hall is slightly banked and of tasteful Scandinavian design.

The auctions provide a chance to talk with many fur buyers about their business and about Greenland furs in particular. Most of the buyers thought the fur trade a very tricky business, full of the peril of sudden ups and downs--what is "in" one year can be very "out" the next. As witness to this is the Arctic fox skin price: in December 1965, Grade 1 blues sold for an average 140 kroner. Last December they hovered around 75 kroner. Grade 2 whites brought between 140 and 210 kroner in 1965, but 112 and 138 in 1966. If the buyers call this risky, it is even more so for the Royal Greenland Trade Department (KGH) and their planners who attempt to keep these fluctuations from hitting the hunters in Greenland. There is more to it than the risk, however, because the farm foxes of Scandinavia, through scientific breeding and with uniform control can turn out pelts of much better quality than the wild foxes trapped in Greenland.

I have never been able to understand why fur farming has never caught on in Greenland. In 1914, a fox-raising attempt was started on the island Ikârissat, south of Godthåb. Here the foxes were provided food and were free to roam over the island. Little breeding control was possible, and every once in a while a few foxes would be able to slip away on a passing iceberg. Ten years later a more permanent farm was built near Godthåb at the former mission station "Ny Herrnhut". This farm was run with varying success up until the end of World War II. From its opening in 1926 until 1939, the total profit was calculated at about 30,000 kroner.

A small mink farm was built at the sheep raising station near Julianehåb in the late thirties, and a new mink farming attempt began in 1964 at Narssaq in the south. The possibilities seem to be there, but of course this is a strange occupation for the Greenlanders to pursue. The Narssaq operation is a joint Danish-Greenlandic effort; one half of the starting capital of 750,000 kroner was put up by several Danish interests, while KGH provided the other half. Some of KGH's shares have been sold locally in Greenland. The Narssaq farm (called "A/S Narssaq Pelsavl") began with 250 mink; the number had doubled by the end of the first year. Special feeding requirements are perhaps needed in Greenland. Fish waste, however, forms the basis of the mink's ration.

Fish waste is much cheaper in Greenland (10 øre/kg.--1.4¢/2.2 lb.) than in Denmark (50 øre/kg.); the other food requirements of dried milk, oats, and vitamins must be imported, but a possible food source from whales and seals is certainly there. I am convinced that fur farming has a future in Greenland. It would mesh beautifully with the fishing industry there by using the fish waste that is now thrown away.

Mink farming is a big industry in Denmark; the first mink was imported here only 35 years ago, but, by the 1965-66 season, 2.4 million Danish-produced mink skins were sold at Glostrup. On 19 April, 1,540,000 mink skins from both Denmark and Finland will be auctioned at Glostrup--possibly the largest single fur auction in the world. KGH first associated with the Danish Fur Sales at Glostrup in 1964. Furs from Greenland had previously been auctioned at the Stock Exchange (Børsen) and later at the Festival Hall of the National Museum. But a natural sales location appeared in 1964. In 1963, the Danish Fur Sales' complex was completed at Glostrup, and its aim now is to become Europe's fur trading headquarters, known as the "Copenhagen Fur Center". Furs from Greenland will have a welcome part in this growth and will benefit by association with the burgeoning mink and fox sales from Scandinavia. The exotic polar bear and sealskins offer some variety to the auction fare and will, hopefully, be much sought after for many years to come.

Although I took Joan to one fox and polar bear skin auction, I wanted also to show her how the mink and chinchilla were sold. But that would be far too risky--she would get high ideas about mink and things. And, after all, she doesn't have my old Atlantic City background and would probably make with the waving arm or the smile at the auctioneer, and then where would I be?

Sincerely,



W. G. Mattox

Received in New York May 29, 1967.