



**Different perspectives  
of the 1919 Reindeers  
brought to Baie-de  
Rochers, Labrador  
(Now know as St.  
Augustine)**

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*Troupeau de Rennes, Baie-des-Rochers,  
Labrador Canadien, 1919.*

*Photo J.E. Bernier*



# How?

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- Early Introductions: Small numbers of reindeer were brought to Canada (including Labrador) in 1919, mainly for experimental purposes.
- Larger-Scale Projects: The most significant introduction occurred in the 1920s and 1930s. The Canadian government, along with missionaries and other organizations, aimed to establish large-scale reindeer herding operations. Reindeer were imported from Norway (specifically from the Sami people, who were experienced herders).



## 300 Lapland reindeer

A medical missionary to Newfoundland and Labrador, Wilfred Grenfell, introduced 300 Lapland reindeer meaning they were coming from Lapland, and three herder families to the north coast of Canada. Until then, the people of Labrador were reliant on harp seals for food and savage dogs for draught animals. The rapid extermination of harp seals had left little food available, and the draught dogs were so savage they had been known to kill Inuits and whole flocks of sheep. Grenfell wanted to help the people of Labrador and believed by importing reindeer, a sustainable source of meat, milk, clothes and bedding could be provided. The reindeer could also be used as draught animals, meaning people no longer had to rely on the vicious dogs.

# The Great Reindeer Experiment:

A significant experiment in Newfoundland, involving the import of reindeer from Norway, eventually led to some success, but it also faced challenges like parasite infestations.

Legacy and Current Status:

- While the initial large-scale reindeer herding programs in Labrador did not become widespread or sustainable, they did leave a lasting impact on the region's culture and economy.
- Some Inuit communities continue to engage with reindeer herding, particularly in the Northwest Territories, where a herd established over a century ago still exists.
- The story of reindeer herding in Canada is a complex one, reflecting both the challenges and successes of adapting to changing environmental conditions and economic realities.
- In 1919, reindeer herding in Labrador, Canada, was introduced with the goal of supplementing the Inuit diet and improving their livelihoods. The project, spearheaded by figures like Dr. William Grenfell, involved bringing reindeer from Scandinavia and establishing herding practices among the Inuit. While the project had initial successes, it faced challenges and was eventually discontinued.



# William Grenfell and the Reindeer Project:



- Dr. William Grenfell, a missionary and medical doctor working in Labrador, was a key figure in promoting the reindeer herding project. He saw it as a way to address the Inuit's food shortages and encourage a more sustainable way of life.

- The project involved bringing reindeer from Scandinavia to Labrador, where they were introduced to the Inuit population. The initial herd included a mix of reindeer from Norway and other Scandinavian countries.
- The introduction of reindeer initially showed promise. Reindeer adapted well to the environment, and the Inuit learned about reindeer herding from the imported Sami herders. However, the project also faced challenges, including the cold climate and the herders' difficulty adapting to the environment.
- The Canadian government aimed for Inuit to eventually take ownership of the reindeer herds, but the project encountered setbacks and was gradually phased out.

Image found:

[https://www.google.com/url?sa=i&url=https%3A%2F%2Fen.wikipedia.org%2Fwiki%2FWilliam\\_Grenfell%2C\\_1st\\_Baron\\_Desborough&psig=AOvVaw2W67dZpyQngBlp\\_HF\\_3Qz5&ust=1753186855797000&source=images&cd=vfe&opi=89978449&ved=0CBUQjRxqFwoTCJDSg5P4zY4DFQAAAAAABAE](https://www.google.com/url?sa=i&url=https%3A%2F%2Fen.wikipedia.org%2Fwiki%2FWilliam_Grenfell%2C_1st_Baron_Desborough&psig=AOvVaw2W67dZpyQngBlp_HF_3Qz5&ust=1753186855797000&source=images&cd=vfe&opi=89978449&ved=0CBUQjRxqFwoTCJDSg5P4zY4DFQAAAAAABAE)

# What?



- Initial Success: Some early reindeer herding projects showed promise. The reindeer adapted to the environment, and the Sami herders shared their knowledge and techniques with Indigenous communities.
- Challenges:
- Disease: Outbreaks of disease affected reindeer populations.
- Predation: Wolves and other predators preyed on the reindeer.
- Management Issues: Difficulties in managing the herds, including preventing them from interbreeding with wild caribou, and maintaining consistent herding practices.
- Cultural Factors: The transition to reindeer herding was not always culturally smooth. Traditional hunting practices and social structures sometimes clashed with the demands of reindeer herding.
- Decline: Many of the large-scale reindeer herding projects eventually declined or were abandoned.

# Why?

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- Declining Caribou: Caribou populations were fluctuating and declining in some areas, causing food shortages for Indigenous peoples.
- Adaptability: Reindeer are well-suited to Arctic and subarctic environments, similar to caribou.
- Herding Potential: Reindeer can be herded and managed, providing a more controlled and predictable food supply compared to wild caribou hunting.

de rennes,  
Baie-des-Rochers,  
Arct. Canadien, 1919.  
Dr. J. E. Bernier



# Winter struggles

Bahr, his men, and the large herd of reindeer would spend the next five years on the trail toiling through some of the most rugged terrain on the continent. They would endure wildly fluctuating temperatures, from sweltering humidity to bone-chilling polar gales; they would struggle through snow up to their waist and wade through stagnant swamps; they would suffer from lack of food, inadequate clothing and supplies; and, perhaps worst of all, they would be paid rather poorly.

Nevertheless, they plodded on each winter as blizzards lashed them piteously and wolves circled the herd driving the reindeer into a frenzy. “We were always looking for wolves,” recalled Matthias Hatta, one of the Lap herders. “They would come around in the dark and when it was stormy. You couldn’t see them. You would just fire into the air and scare them away ... they were mostly white wolves, like the snow ... there were sometimes twenty in one bunch.”

# Did it work out ?

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**Mixed Results:** The overall outcome was mixed. While some communities benefited from reindeer herding for a time, the projects largely failed to achieve their long-term goals of providing a sustainable food source and economic base for Indigenous communities across Labrador and other parts of Canada.

**Legacy:** The reindeer introduction had lasting impacts on the ecology and culture of the regions where they were introduced. In some areas, reindeer populations persisted, sometimes interbreeding with caribou. The experience also highlighted the complexities of introducing non-native species and the importance of considering cultural and ecological factors in development projects.

**Present Day:** Reindeer herding is not a widespread practice in Labrador today. Some smaller-scale operations may exist, but they are not as significant as the large projects of the early 20th century.

# Story from Edgar Fequet

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My father was put in charge of the herd with 3 more men hired from the place. The reindeer were landed at a place 12 miles west of Old Fort. It was a point of land between Lobster Bay and Bay de Roche River. The point of land consisted in area about 5 miles long and 1 mile wide. They had a wire fence to keep them from going too far north. They also had two herding dogs to bring them back to the corral if any should stray. I remember the one my father had, his name as Jinx. I can remember him well because we had him for about 12 years after the herd was taken away. He was a black male, weighing about 25 lbs. The other was a female given to Mr. Jack Belvin, called Lady. My father told me she was not like the male. She was very timid of the deer. So, when a few would scatter from the herd, it was Jinx's job to go find them. My father told me he was good. He would never come back without them. They kept them for about 3 years. The people, like my father, had no experience about deer. Breeding time in May, the doe's used to wander away from the herd to fawn by themselves and may return again in a day or two. But my father and the other guys used to hunt them with the dogs, find them and bring the fawn back to the herd in their arms. But after they had it back, the doe's used to kill it. In the year 1918, they brought 3 Eskimos from down around Rigolet on the Labrador. One was George Bloomfield who was spoken very highly and received of. Another was Nath Gear. Those men had good experience with the caribou herds in Labrador. In the year 1920 they put them on an island. After that, they had cowboys from out west came and tied them and put them on board of a boat called the Cluth. My father told me he never knew where they took them. Some people say they landed them at Anticosti Island and others say they put them at Newfoundland Northern Pennusula around Flowers cove. I think that is correct because there is some small deer on Newfoundland that resembles the reindeer.



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