

Notes on the Economy
and Population Shifts of the
Eskimos of
Southampton Island

by
J.W. VanStone

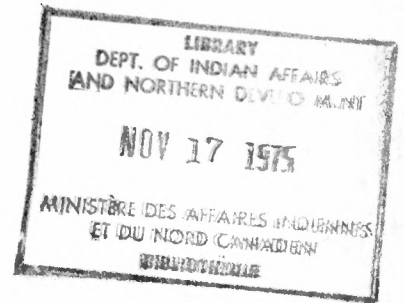
Northern Research and
Co-ordination Centre,
Department of Northern Affairs
and National Resources.
January, 1960.

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Introduction

Southampton Island, the largest island in Hudson Bay, is roughly triangular in shape and has an area of approximately 17,000 square miles, making it comparable in size to Nova Scotia or about half the area of the state of Pennsylvania. Although the island lies just south of the Arctic Circle, it is surrounded by ice for eight months of the year and chilled by low clouds and fog during much of the short summer.

The southeastern part of Southampton Island is only fifty miles west of the ancient trade route of Hudson Strait, but the island remained virtually unknown until the last decades of the 19th century when whalers of many nationalities began to frequent the area. Probably the first European to see Southampton Island was Thomas Button. He passed through Hudson Strait during the summer of 1612 and after spending the winter on the southwest side of Hudson Bay, sailed north and entered Roes Welcome Sound, sighting Southampton Island on July 29, 1613. Bylot and Baffin saw the island in 1615 but the only other 17th century explorer to do so was Luke Foxe in 1631.¹

The search for the northwest passage through Hudson Bay was renewed in the middle of the 18th century and continued until 1836 when H.M.S. Terror under the command of Captain Back was the last naval vessel to search for the passage in this area. During this time, various explorers, among them Middleton, Parry and Lyon, landed on Southampton Island and gradually charted its outline. Nevertheless, although the island was known to be separated from the

mainland, maps still showed Coats Island joined to the main island. After 1860 whaling ships were attracted to Roes Welcome Sound but few landed on Southampton Island because good harbours were lacking and approach difficult. It was not until 1864 that the first recorded incident of a ship sailing through the strait between Coats and Southampton Islands took place. As Bird has pointed out, knowledge of the separation of the two islands did not become general on published maps of the area until after 1873.²

The influx of whalers into the Southampton Island area after 1860 brought about the first contact with the Eskimo inhabitants of the island from whom the whalers obtained food and clothing, assistance with the whaling activities, and with whom they carried on small scale trading. The inhabitants of Southampton Island at the time of first contact were the Sadlermiut, who died out, presumably as the result of some disease introduced by the whaling ships, during the winter of 1902-03. The islanders of today are Aivilik who were brought in from Repulse and Wager Bays by the whalers around 1908. In 1924 the Hudson's Bay Company on Coats Island, which has been established in 1919, was closed and reestablished at Coral Harbour on Southampton Island. At that time the Okomiut, who had been taken to Coats Island from southern Baffin Island, were brought to Southampton Island.

Population Past and Present

At the present time, the distribution of the Eskimo population on Southampton Island shows a concentration in four settlements, all on the south side of the island in the South Bay Area. The largest and most important settlement is at Coral Harbour. Small settlements are situated at the mouth of the Kirchoffer River and at Munn's Bay. Close to Munn's Bay is the community known as SNAFU, so named because a

derelict military landing barge of that name is beached in the vicinity.

The community of Coral Harbour is the focus for the Eskimo population of the island. The Hudson's Bay Company opened a post there in 1924 and shortly afterward churches were established by the Roman Catholic and Anglican missions. An air field was constructed approximately seven miles west of Coral Harbour toward the close of the Second World War, and since the war time forces left, a permanent Department of Transport detachment of from twenty to thirty men has continued to maintain the field. The establishment of a federal school at Coral Harbour in 1950 has further tended to increase the importance of that village.³

In June, 1959, the population of Southampton Island was distributed as follows:

<u>Village Name</u>	<u>No. of Dwellings</u>	<u>Population</u>
Coral Harbour	13	92
SNAFU	4	39
Munn's Bay	3	18
Kirchoffer	<u>3</u>	<u>38</u>
Total	25	Total 215

The list below indicates the birthplaces of the family heads (man and wife) in each of the four settlements to the extent that such information could be determined from census records compiled by the federal school teacher.

<u>Coral Harbour</u>	<u>SNAFU</u>	<u>Kirchoffer</u>
Southampton Island -16	Port Burwell -6	Southampton Island -5
Lyon Inlet -1	Lake Harbour -1	Resolution Island -1
Repulse Bay -3	Southampton Island-3	Sugluk -2
Wakeham Bay -1	Wolstenholme -1	Port Burwell -4
Cape Dorset -2	Marble Island -1	George River -3
Wager Bay -2	Wager Bay -1	Nottingham Island -1
Arctic Bay -1	Frobisher Bay -1	Lake Harbour -2
Lake Harbour -2	Sugluk -1	Frobisher Bay -1
Amadjuak -1		
Ottawa Island -1		

Coral Harbour

Marble Island -1
Frobisher Bay -2
Igloolik -1
Cape Fullerton -1
Payne Bay -1
Sugluk -1
Chesterfield Inlet -1

Munn's Bay

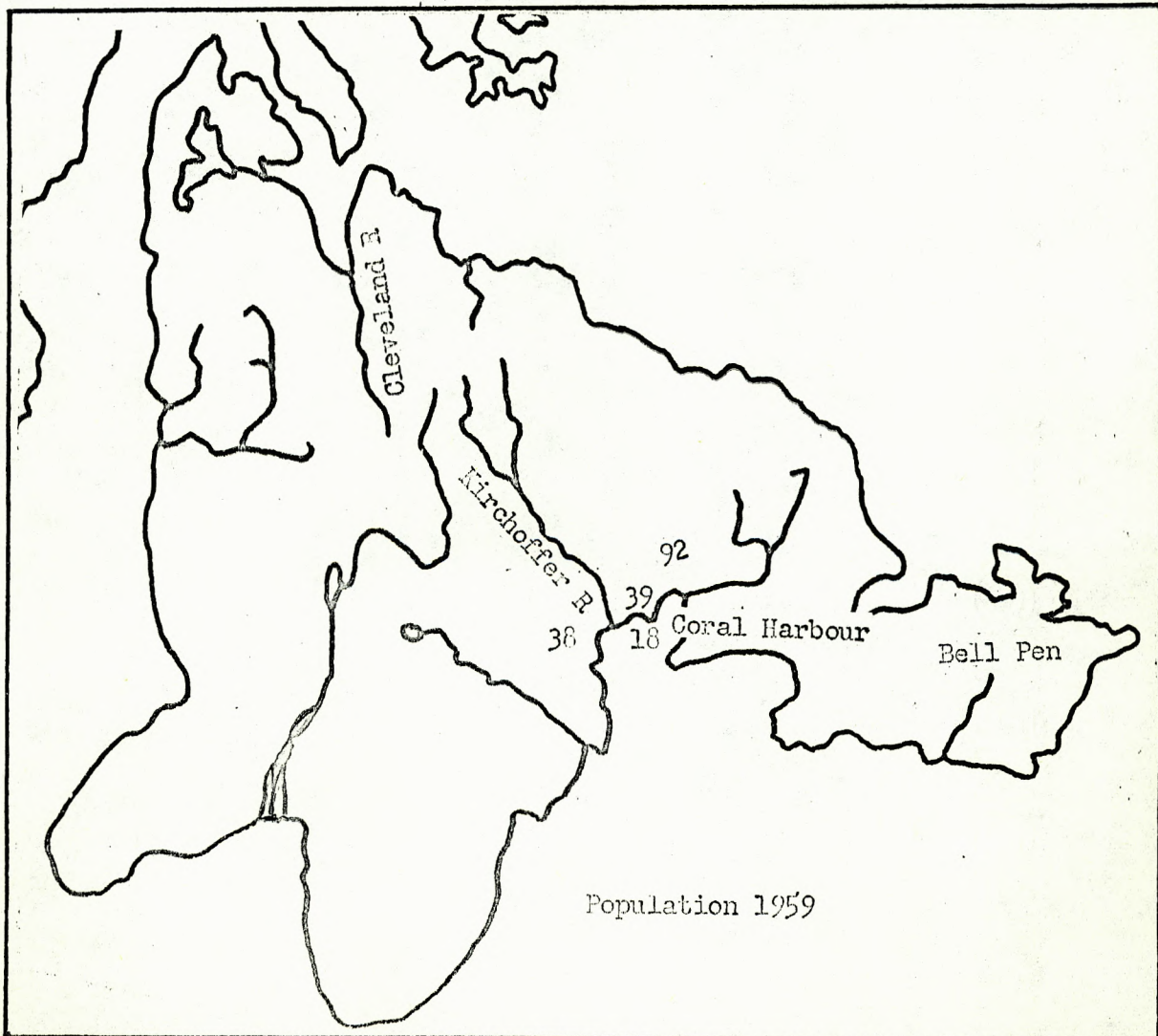
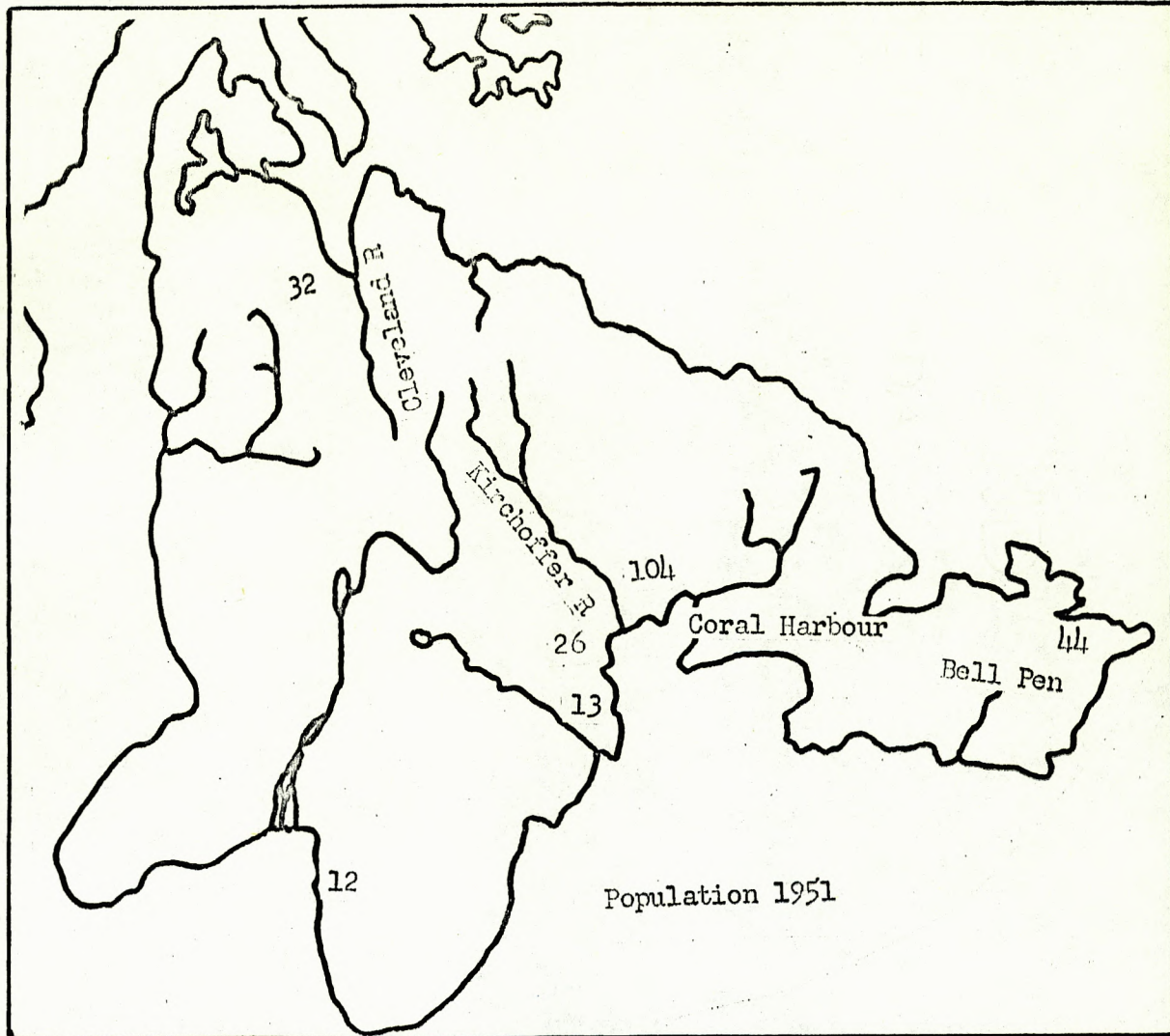
Wakeham Bay -2
Nottingham Island -2
Sugluk - 1

It will be noted that the adult population of Munn's Bay and Kirchoffer consist, with the exception of those born on Southampton Island, exclusively of individuals who were born on southern Baffin Island or northern Labrador, and the same is very nearly true for SNAFU. Coral Harbour, on the other hand is largely inhabited by individuals born on the Keewatin mainland to the west.

It is doubtless true that ever since the establishment of the Hudson's Bay post at Coral Harbour, that settlement has grown at the expense of all others. However, as late as 1951, the people were more extensively distributed around the island than they are at present. In addition to settlements at Coral Harbour and Munn's Bay, there was a village at the mouth of the Cleveland River in Duke of York Bay, one on Bay of God's Mercy east of the mouth of the Boas River, two on the west coast of South Bay and one on the eastern tip of Bell Peninsula (Bird, 1953, p. 56). Figure 1 shows the population distribution in 1951 compared with that of 1959. Today all the Eskimos live within a few hours journey of the Hudson's Bay post while in 1951 only three-fifths lived within a day's journey of Coral Harbour. In fact, the people resident at Duke of York Bay occasionally traded at the Repulse Bay post on the Keewatin mainland.⁴ The reasons for this population contraction will be seen to be closely tied to economic changes.

The Economic Basis of Village Life

Yearly Cycle -- Spring -- The best hunting of the year is in



Southampton Island
Population Distribution

the spring when seals are hunted as they bask on the ice beside their holes. The hunter stalks the seal slowly with the aid of simulated seal noises and usually shoots the animal with a high powered rifle at a distance of twenty-five to fifty yards. Occasionally a pad of polar bear skin is worn over one arm and one leg so that the hunter can slide himself toward the seal. In this position, resting upon one arm, he looks very much like a seal. While stalking seals in this manner, it is not unusual to see as many as twenty or thirty animals on the ice at one time and good hunters usually get six or seven in one day, sometimes more.

Seals are also hunted in the open water from floes. For this type of hunting canvas canoes purchased from the Hudson's Bay Company are used. The canoes are hauled up on the ice and seals are shot as they rise to the surface near the edge of the floe. In late spring the Eskimos move into tents and many families leave the village to camp in areas that are close to open water. The places chosen by the present day Eskimos for their spring camps are in many cases the same places where extensive archaeological remains are to be found. Coral Harbour, located as it is at the head of a shallow bay, is not a good location for the permanent village of a sea mammal hunting people.

During the spring, Southampton Island is the breeding ground for many species of birds, and the Eskimos hunt various kinds of ducks and geese and gather large quantities of eggs. The most extensive breeding grounds are on Bell Peninsula and many families combine egg gathering with seal hunting in that area. Arctic char are also speared through holes in the ice in inland lakes.

Summer -- Seals, walrus and belugas are hunted from canoes and Peterhead boats with auxiliary engines. In hunting belugas, canoes are used once the animals have been sighted.

The animals are first harpooned and then shot, unless the water is very shallow, in which case they are simply shot and retrieved. A Peterhead crew hunting seals may get as many as twenty in a day as well as four or five belugas. Arctic char are caught in nets put out from shore. Beluga and seal meat, as well as fish, is dried during the summer for dog food and human consumption.

Fall -- This is the time of the year when most of the walrus hunting is done. These animals are hunted from Peterhead boats and also on Coats Island where they haul up on the beaches. The use of power boats in this way is doubtless uneconomical but it gives the people considerable mobility for hunting and helps to make up for the fact that they are more sedentary now than they once were. As many as 200 walrus are sometimes taken during a summer and fall season and the meat is stored under rocks as a winter supply of dog food.

Winter -- Trapping takes most of the time during the winter months but there is some seal hunting from floe ice if dog food is short. Polar bears are also killed on the ice and along the shore. The men go out on the trap lines for one or two weeks, depending on the weather, after which they return to the village to dry the skins and trade before taking off again; their families remain in the villages. The fox season extends from November 15th to April 15th.

Economic Opportunity on the Island

In recent years many factors have combined to draw the Eskimos into a money economy and wants have been created for the satisfaction of which a cash income is required. Since 1924 the inhabitants of Southampton Island have obtained food and items of European manufacture by the trapping of white foxes for trade to the Hudson's Bay Company. Although trapping might appear to represent a relatively steady form of

income for the islanders, the fact is that the number of foxes trapped varies greatly from year to year as does the value of the pelts. In 1956/57, for instance, the number of fox pelts traded was 621 and the total value of the fur collection amounted to \$9,338. A year later, 1,621 fox pelts were offered to the Company with a total value of \$25,743. The accompanying chart indicates the number and value of the foxes and polar bears taken in by the Hudson's Bay Company from 1949 and clearly shows the extensive fluctuation from year to year, not only in the number of foxes and bears taken, but also in the price received.⁵

<u>Year</u>	<u>No. of Fox Skins</u>	<u>Polar Bear Skins</u>	<u>Value</u>
1949/50	3,017	36	\$12,297
1950/51	2,762	15	25,727
1951/52	1,240	15	7,982
1952/53	1,023	14	7,886
1953/54	2,842		23,530
1954/55	2,395		21,989
1955/56	1,072		10,052
1956/57	621		9,338
1957/58	1,621	30	25,743
1958/59	1,192	63	21,832

It should be remembered that income from trapping is in the form of credit at the Hudson's Bay Company and not cash. Opportunities for earning cash on the island are limited and confined entirely to the summer months.

During the Second World War, the United States Air Force constructed an air field north of SNAFU and most of the adult Eskimos on the island were employed. Since then there has been additional construction and a certain amount of local employment for maintenance and other unskilled work. The residents of SNAFU usually have first choice at such work because of their location close to the air field.

During the later summer and early fall when supply ships visit the island, employment is available when supplies

are lightered from ship to shore. Ships of the Hudson's Bay Company, the Department of Northern Affairs and National Resources, Department of Transport and the RCAF call at the island every summer and there are perhaps fifteen to twenty days of work altogether in unloading them. The rate of pay ranges from \$1.30 to \$1.50 per hour, although, the Hudson's Bay Company pays by the landed ton. The RCAF maintains a fueling station at the air field and many drums of aviation gas are lightered in each summer.

In July of 1959, construction was begun on nine buildings at Coral Harbour for the Department of Northern Affairs and National Resources. These included a new school, quarters for an additional teacher, offices and living quarters for a Northern Service Officer and other auxiliary buildings. All of the skilled labor required in the construction of these buildings was brought in from outside. From four to six Eskimos were employed at various times as unskilled laborers at approximately \$1.50 per hour, the individuals so employed being chosen by the school teacher on the basis of need.

The present school teacher at Coral Harbour has attempted to encourage the development of local crafts as a source of income, particularly for older people. Ivory and soapstone carvings and kayak models are collected and shipped to the rehabilitation center at Frobisher Bay where they are sold to military personnel and others. This is handled on a non-profit basis so that the carvers get the full amount for which the carvings are sold. Soapstone does not occur locally and a supply is shipped in for the local carvers to use. Department of Transport employees also occasionally purchase craft objects and skin clothing.

The three Peterhead boats owned by residents of Coral

Harbour are occasionally chartered to outside groups, thus providing employment for their owners. Each boat is owned by three individuals and arrangements for charters are usually handled through the Hudson's Bay Company. There are not many charters during the short summer season. During the summer of 1959, for instance, one boat made a trip to Rankin Inlet on the west coast of Hudson Bay under a charter to the Department of Northern Affairs and National Resources, while another was attached to an archaeological expedition for one month.

The Eskimos of Southampton Island benefit from a certain amount of unearned income, the most important of which is the family allowance that is payable to all citizens of Canada. A family receives \$6 per month for each child until it reaches ten years and then \$8 per month until the child is sixteen years old. The family allowance is the only completely predictable cash income that the Eskimos have and the payments to Southampton Island families average approximately \$700 per month. Old people who are not eligible to receive old age security payments are occasionally assisted by the Department of Northern Affairs and National Resources to the extent of about \$12 per month. This includes staple foods and a fuel issue. Others eligible for such assistance are families where the family head is in the hospital. In the summer of 1959, three individuals were receiving such aid, two of which were women whose husbands were in hospitals.

Nearly all families on the island have received relief rations at one time or another. This usually takes the form of food, equipment or fuel ration and is sponsored by the Department of Northern Affairs and National Resources at the discretion of the federal school teacher.

In the summer of 1959, there were no individuals re-

ceiving any form of relief for disabilities.

Outside Economic Opportunities

Within the past two years, twelve men with their families have left the island to work at various stations on the DEW line. Occasionally they return for brief vacations and it is apparent that a considerable amount of DEW line money comes to the island in one way or another. Eskimos with relatives working on the DEW line write asking for money and occasionally it is sent. When the workers return for vacations, they often bring with them considerable money saved up for the occasion. This is apparent from the fact that in 1957/58 the Hudson's Bay Company store had total sales to the amount of \$91,627, while the value of the fur collection was only \$21,832. Local employment would not be sufficient to account for this difference. The Hudson's Bay Company store is much better stocked, particularly with regard to food items, than is usually the case with northern stores.

Further indications of employment opportunities off the island and the increasing tendency of the Eskimos to take advantage of them is reflected in the fact that between February 1st and June 1st, 1959, five individuals representing two families moved to Churchill to seek employment, while twenty-seven individuals representing six families and two single men moved to Rankin Inlet to work in the nickel mine.

Summary and Conclusions

It will be noted that the inhabitants of Southampton Island, even since 1951, have increasingly tended to group themselves in the vicinity of the trading post at Coral Harbour and the air field. The desire to be close to the source of possible wage employment has been the reason for this tendency. It may well be that the economic intrusions

of the past fifteen years have resulted in the incomplete exploitation of the natural resources of an area which is, from this standpoint, one of the best in the Canadian Arctic. It is undoubtedly true that Southampton Island could support a much larger population and that those now living there could make much fuller use of the resources than is presently the case. The shift to partial wage economy is resulting in a gradual disintegration of the aboriginal economic base, and as yet there is nothing to indicate that the new wage base is stable enough to fulfil the needs and wants of the inhabitants.

NOTES

1. Burpee, 1935, Vol. 1, pp. 42-44, 46, 50
2. Bird, 1953, pp. 4-5
3. The information upon which this paper is based was collected while the author was a member of the University of Wisconsin archaeological and physical anthropological field party. The assistance of Dr. Chester S. Chard of the Department of Anthropology at the University of Wisconsin, Mr. and Mrs. T. Crawford of the Hudson's Bay Company at Coral Harbour and Mr. Barry Gunn, federal school teacher on Southampton Island, is gratefully acknowledged.
4. Bird, 1953, p. 55
5. These statistics were made available to the author through the courtesy of Mr. N. Ross and Mr. F. B. Walker of the Hudson's Bay Company in Winnipeg.

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