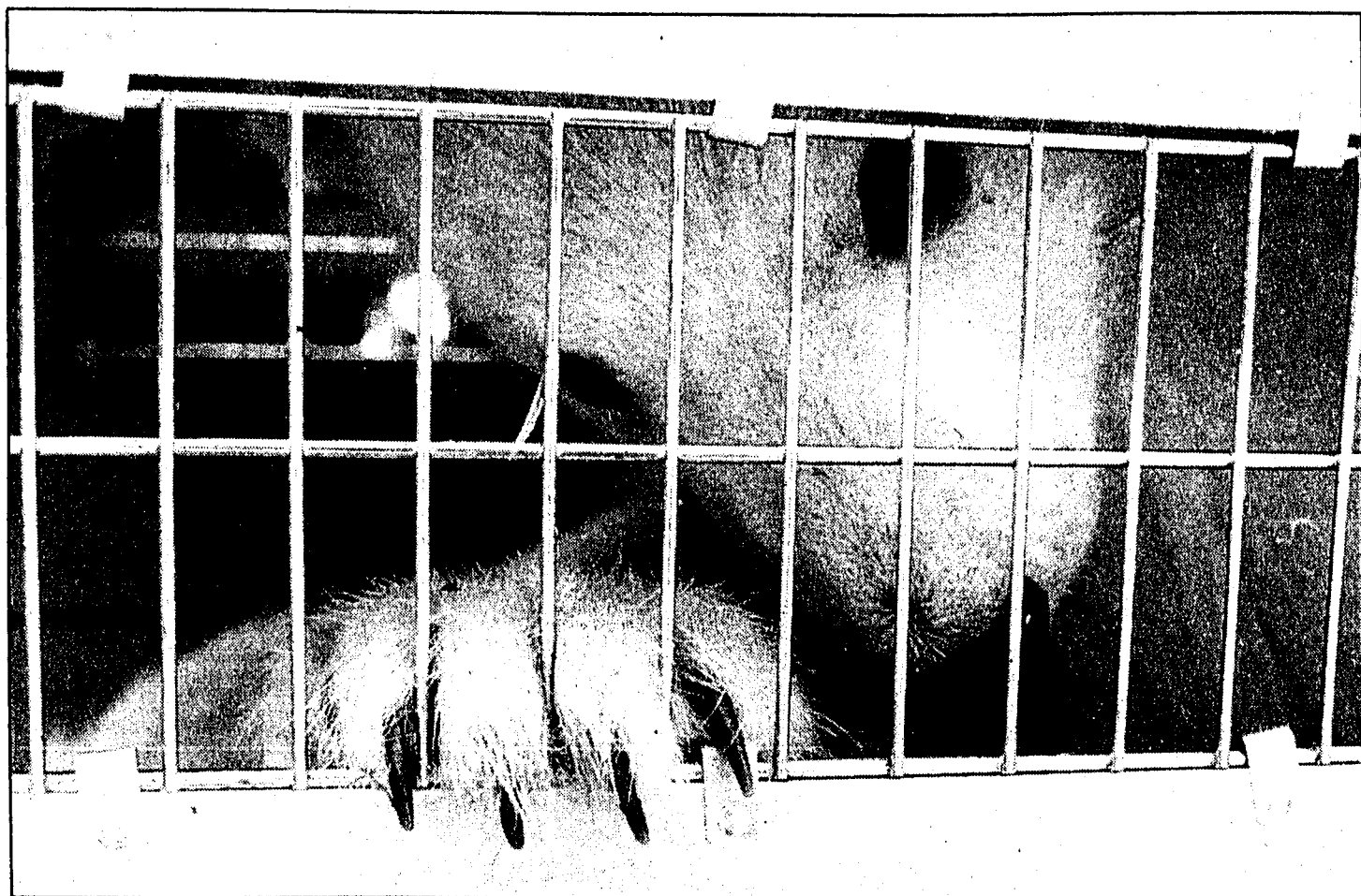




State Journal photos/SCOTT SEID

Above, Kjersten Bakke, 4, DeForest, strains for a look at polar bears, while one of the cubs peeks at a new and strange world, right.



New den to call home



State Journal photo/STEVE HOPKINS

Bear cubs are loaded at International Airport in Anchorage Thursday for trip to Madison.



State Journal photo/SCOTT SEID

Vilas Zoo Supervisor Dick Walter, right, parades cubs past crowd at Madison airport.

By Steve Hopkins
Wisconsin State Journal

Thursday afternoon, after a 2,700-mile flight from Anchorage, Alaska, two polar bear cubs were busy exploring their new home in the Henry Vilas Zoo in Madison.

Zoo officials have been readying it for their arrival. The inside den, in which the cubs will remain until they are acclimated and adjusted to their new environment, has been air-conditioned. The floor of a 16-foot-deep moat around the outside viewing area has been temporarily raised so the bears would not be hurt should they tumble into it.

The cubs temporarily have been named Nanook (the Eskimo name for polar bear) and Norton (for Norton Sound, near which they were found). Two unrelated incidents brought them from their Arctic Circle home to Madison 5,000 miles away.

On March 13, a Madison policeman shot and killed Chief, the zoo's resident polar bear for 13½ years, while he was mauling a mentally ill man who had climbed into his cage. The man survived. Zoo director David Hall and his staff began looking for a replacement bear.

On March 26, Gene Agnabogok, an Eskimo hunter, fell through the snow and into a bear den about 18 miles from his home village of Wales, Alaska.

"He just sort of broke through a ledge and stumbled into it," said Bruce Batten, a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service public information officer in Anchorage. "He scrambled back out and started pursuing." Batten said, "and managed to shoot the mother bear while he was being chased."

"When he realized he had orphaned the cubs," Batten said, "he went back and got them and took them on his sled back to the village where he turned them over to Toby Anungazuk, a Fish and Wildlife hunt monitor stationed at Wales." Under Marine Mammal Protection Act of 1972 only natives of the Alaska coast are allowed to hunt polar bears.

A couple of days after the incident, the cubs, then about two months old and weighing less than 20 pounds each, were put in a dog cage and flown to Nome in a Bering Air bush plane, and then to Fish and Wildlife regional headquarters in Anchorage in a jet airliner. They

had flown 1,200 miles.

Until early Thursday they were cared for at the Alaska Zoo where they were put on a high-protein polar bear diet, a dry food similar to dog food. General curator Tom Kilbane said they have been in good health and that they have been the stars of the Alaska Zoo.

The Eskimo village of Wales is the westernmost point of land on the North American continent. It is on the Bering Strait and would have been the Alaska end of the Bering Land Bridge between Alaska and Siberia. The Bering Sea is just south of it, the Arctic Circle and the Chukchi Sea just north of it.

This would have been home for the cubs had not the fates altered their destinies.

"They would have been out of the den by the end of March and for the next two years they would have been with the mother bear who patiently would have taught them to hunt and to defend themselves," Batten said.

The cubs, for the first two years, would have been known to wildlife biologists as "dependents." By the end of the first year they would have weighed 200 to 300 pounds. Into the third year, big enough to survive on their own, they would have left the mother bear.

For the rest of their natural lives they would have stayed with the ice pack, following it north to the Arctic Ocean in the spring and back again in the fall. The normal lifespan for a polar bear in the wild is 25 to 30 years. They have lived up to 41 years in captivity.

"The polar bear is the top of the Arctic food chain," Batten said, "a totally carnivorous animal that feeds almost entirely on seals." Its main diet is the bearded seal (called oogrük by the Eskimos, Batten said). It feeds also on harp and bladder-nose seals and on seal and walrus carcasses. It takes seals with one swipe of a paw when they pop up through holes in the ice.

The polar bear is a silent and skillful hunter and will stalk anything that appears to be edible. Many claim it is the only bear that will stalk and kill and eat man, and many a polar bear hunter has discovered to his dismay that he is not the hunter, but the hunted.

"Some dispute this," Batten

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