

A presentation for Beringia Days 2007
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THE REINDEER BRIDGE OF BERINGIA

- **This presentation is about the Reindeer Bridge of Beringia, a Shared Beringian Heritage Project. My ancestors were Saami reindeer people. Since many of us here in the audience come from reindeer people, some of our ancestors may be part of the following story. Please remember that reindeer are not native to Alaska, but that they are native to Sápmi (Lapland) and Siberia.**
- **One hundred and ten years ago, a reindeer bridge was formed across the Bering Straits that linked the Saami and the Chukchi reindeer people with the Inupiaq and the Yup'ik — who became reindeer people.**
- **We four Arctic Peoples have much in common. We maintain a spiritual relationship with Nature; we live as extended families; we trade with each other and we eat the same Native foods. We hunt, trap, fish, and gather berries and greens. We also have been colonized and since the 1800s we have found ourselves living in two worlds.**
- **In Alaska the Inupiat and Yup'iks were colonized by Russia and America. Whalers and trappers from these countries slaughtered the animals needed for food and clothing and spread diseases that created epidemics.**
- **Christian missionaries then came into Alaska from the U.S. and attacked the Native spiritual beliefs. Children were placed in boarding schools where they were forbidden to speak their Mother tongue and trained to think and act like the colonizers.**

- Sheldon Jackson, an American missionary and the Director of General Education in Alaska, convinced the U.S. government that domesticated reindeer could solve the famine and change the Inupiat and Yup'ik way of life. The government gave him funding and he set out to establish missions as reindeer stations.

- Jackson knew that across the Bering Straits there were domesticated reindeer in Chukotka. In 1892 he hired four Chukchi herders to bring a few hundred of them across the Bering Sea from Chukotka to the Seward Peninsula by ship. This photo is of the arrival of the reindeer; Jackson is facing the camera.

- The working relationship between the Chukchi and the Inupiat was not good and so the Chukchi left the reindeer and returned to Chukotka.

- Jackson knew that on the other side of the Arctic Circle the Saami were also reindeer people. In 1894 he convinced the U. S. government to hire 13 herders from Sápmi (Lapland) to teach the Inupiat how to work with the reindeer from Chukotka.

- The Saami came as extended families and the first apprentices were orphans from the epidemic. Here they are at the first reindeer station in Teller.

- The working relationship between the Saami and the Inupiaq was good. After their two-year tours of duty were over, 5 of the Saami stayed.

- In 1898 137 more reindeer people from Sápmi were hired. They sailed by ship to New York, crossed the U.S. by train and sailed again from Seattle for Alaska.

- In the group were young families with little children and bachelors in their early twenties. A small number of Norwegian men also came as herders but soon joined the gold rush in Nome. They are in the top row of this photo taken in Seattle.

- **The Saami brought with them the equipment used in reindeer husbandry: skis, pulkas (Saami sleds), milking bowls, lassos and herd dogs. They also brought a number of castrated male reindeer that were used as draft animals in the gold rush.**
- **With the arrival of the Saami, herds were established wherever there were mission stations. This included Teller, Brevig, Shishmaref, and Wales. Nome, Golovin, Unalakleet and Kotzebue became centers for the reindeer herding operations. This map is from the early 1900s.**
- **The herding activities were concentrated in areas that today are served by Bering Land Bridge National Preserve and Western Arctic National Parklands.**
- **While developing reindeer husbandry in Alaska the Saami, the Inupiat and the Yup'iks learned each other's languages, exchanged goods and services, and often married into each other's families. More than eighty of the Saami chose to remain in Alaska. Many lost contacts with their families back home.**
- **This is the Nils Persen Sara family. This Saami family introduced reindeer to the St. Lawrence Island Yup'ik People in 1901. The Saras returned to Nome and took reindeer south to the Kuskokwim River east of Bethel.**
- **Reindeer made a positive contribution to the economy of Alaska. By the 1920s there were 600,000 reindeer in western Alaska. They contributed to the self-sufficiency of the Native villages by providing the families with food, clothing and the material from which to make tools. They also provided food for thousands of miners during the gold rush, and being excellent transport animals they hauled equipment and delivered U. S. mail.**
- **A growing market for reindeer meat was also developed in Canada and the U. S. since reindeer is sweet, delicious and healthy.**

• In the late 1920s, commercial and political forces almost destroyed the extended family system that is necessary for reindeer husbandry. But that's another story.

• The Reindeer Bridge of Beringia Project is collecting photographs and stories from this chapter of Alaska history that is often forgotten. It is hoped that this presentation will inspire others to add to this information. In this way we can inspire future generations to develop and promote reindeer husbandry as a sustainable way of life that will continue to link the Peoples of Beringia in the future.