

NPS funds Reindeer Bridge project

By Laurie McNicholas

When Faith Fjeld learned as an adult that her father was a full-blooded Saami (also spelled Sami), she began an identity quest that eventually placed her at the center of a cultural revival among people of Saami ancestry in North America. Some of them are descendants of reindeer herders who brought their families from Norway, Sweden and Finland to western Alaska beginning in the 1890s to participate in the Alaska Reindeer Project. Saami herders taught herding skills to Yup'ik and Inupiat apprentices in exchange for monthly salaries, food, clothing and shelter. Saami, often called Lapps, are the indigenous people of Sapmi (Lapland), a region without borders encompassing northern parts of Norway, Sweden and Finland and northwestern Russia's Kola Peninsula.

The Alaska Reindeer Project began in 1891 when 14 deer from the Chukchi Peninsula in eastern Siberia arrived at Teller Reindeer Station. The next year four Chukchi herders brought 171 reindeer to Teller. The herders were to teach reindeer husbandry to Inupiat apprentices, but before long they returned home to Chukotka. Saami herders who were hired to replace the Chukchis came to Alaska from Norway in 1894 and 1898. More deer were imported to Alaska from Siberia, and herds gradually spread throughout western and northern

Alaska. Some Saami remained in Alaska and married into Yup'ik and Inupiat families.

Last month Faith launched a three-year project to interview elders in villages that were sites of reindeer stations in Alaska. The cultural information and oral history research program is called "The Reindeer Bridge," in recognition of the historic link between reindeer people of Chukotka, western Alaska and Sapmi. Faith brings to the project a large collection of historic photos and stories about The Reindeer Project. Gathered from Alaska Saami descendants in the past 15 years, the collection was developed into a traveling exhibit, "The Sami: Reindeer People of Alaska." The exhibit has appeared in Nome and eight other Alaska communities and Seattle in the past three years.

Currently the exhibit is housed in the Reindeer Bridge Library on the second floor of the Sitnasuak Building, 214 Front St. in Nome. The library includes a chronology of the Alaska Reindeer Project and biographical and genealogical profiles of the Saami who participated in the project. The library is open to the public by appointment through August. To make an appointment, call Faith at her office, 443-6122. Her mailing address is PO Box 220 Nome, AK 99762. Her email address is faithfjeld@alaska.net and the program's web site address is www.baiki.org



Photo courtesy of Pete Larsen, Jr.

SAAMI IN NOME— Saami herder Fred Larsen is shown in downtown Nome with a reindeer ready to deliver U. S Mail. Fred Larsen was Pete Larsen, Jr.'s grandfather.

"Saami invented skis," Faith asserts; "they were recorded as moving around on slats of wood in A.D. 90. Saami introduced skiing with herding in Alaska, and their pointed toe ski boots were used by the Inupiat." While Faith is not among descendants of Saami who came to Alaska, she shares their hunger for knowledge of their heritage. "We all have this issue," she explains: "Who are we? Where are we from?" My father's mother and father immigrated to the United States during times when Saami in Norway and Sweden had lost their reindeer. The Swedish government came in and colonized the area where my grandparents lived, decided that Saami should become farmers, took away their reindeer and told them they were no longer Saami. Kids were taken to boarding school, punished for speaking their own language and told they were now Swedes. The process was called Swedification in Sweden and Norwegianization in Norway.

Dad's parents migrated to central Minnesota and never referred to the past.

"My grandfather's name was Frederik Nilsson Fjeld," Faith continued. "Fjeld means mountain Saami people who originally herded reindeer. My grandmother's maiden name was Kari Nordfjell." Faith's grandparents raised 16 children on a farm in Fergus Falls, MN. Their youngest children were Faith's father, Laurence N. Field, and his twin sister Agnes. Lawrence Field became a prominent Lutheran minister, serving as pastor of churches in Williston, ND and Kalispell, MT, and as president of the church's Rocky Mountain District in Great Falls, MT. In 1953 he took a position as professor at the seminary where he had trained for the ministry, Luther Theological Seminary in St. Paul.

"Across the street from my parents home in St. Paul was the house where Alaska missionaries used to come for rest and recreation," Faith

recalled. She said her father knew all of the missionaries of his time who served at Brevig Mission, including Helen Frost whose biography, *Frost among the Eskimos: The Memoirs of Helen Frost, Missionary in Alaska 1926-1961*, describes her work at the mission. "Her brother Gerhard held me when I was baptized in Whitefish, a town near Kalispell where Gerhard served as pastor," Faith notes.

In 1957 Faith graduated from St. Olaf College in Northfield, MN, with a bachelor's degree in art education and art history. She earned a Master of Arts degree in American Indian Symbolism at San Francisco State University in 1989. She began to search for other Saami descendants while a student San Francisco. Twelve years ago Faith used an inheritance to start a periodical, *Baiki, the International Sámi Journal*, which she still co-edits. "Baiki [pronounced bah-h'kee] has

done a lot to connect Saami to each other," she said. "Baiki is the reindeer herding word for the cultural identity that migrates with nomads."

The Barbro Osher Pro Suecia (Sweden) Foundation provides funding to operate the Saami Baiki office in Alaska. The Reindeer Bridge Project is sponsored by a cooperative agreement between the Shared Beringian Heritage Project, Bering Land Bridge National Preserve, and the nonprofit center for Environmental Economic Development.

This summer Faith is a Volunteer in the Parks for the National Park Service. She hopes to begin to pursue a PhD in indigenous studies this fall at University of Alaska Fairbanks. Her work will focus on reclaiming indigenous identity. She also will continue to work on The Reindeer Bridge project by conducting interviews in Seward Peninsula communities. "I like Nome and I hope to come back," she said. "It's full of stories, and I always feel like writing here."



Photo courtesy of Faith Fjeld

HEAD RESEARCHER— Faith Fjeld is pictured after speaking to an audience at the New York Mills, MN Cultural Center. New York Mills has a large Saami population.