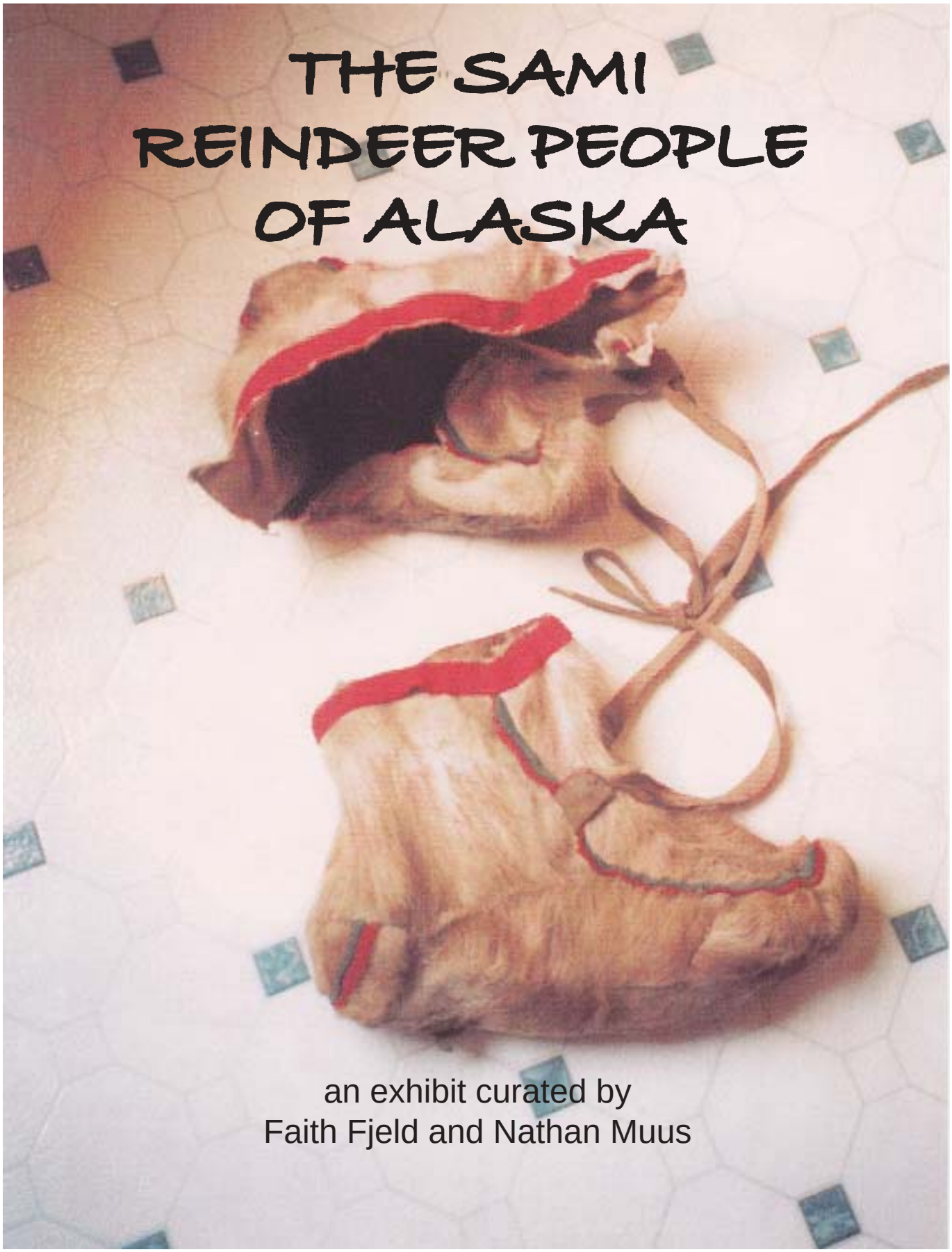
THE SAMI REINDEER PEOPLE OF ALASKA



an exhibit curated by
Faith Fjeld and Nathan Muus

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This catalogue is dedicated to
the hard working reindeer and herd dogs of
the historic U.S. Reindeer Project
and to the Sami, Inupiaq and Yup'ik herders
who worked beside them.

photo: William Hamilton

(above) 1894: The first group of Sami herders on the left and the Inupiaq apprentices on the right photographed at Teller Reindeer Station, Alaska. (facing page) 1898: Some of the second group of herders photographed at Woodland Park, Seattle on their way to Alaska.

STORIES AND PHOTOS FROM THE REINDEER PROJECT

photo: La Roche

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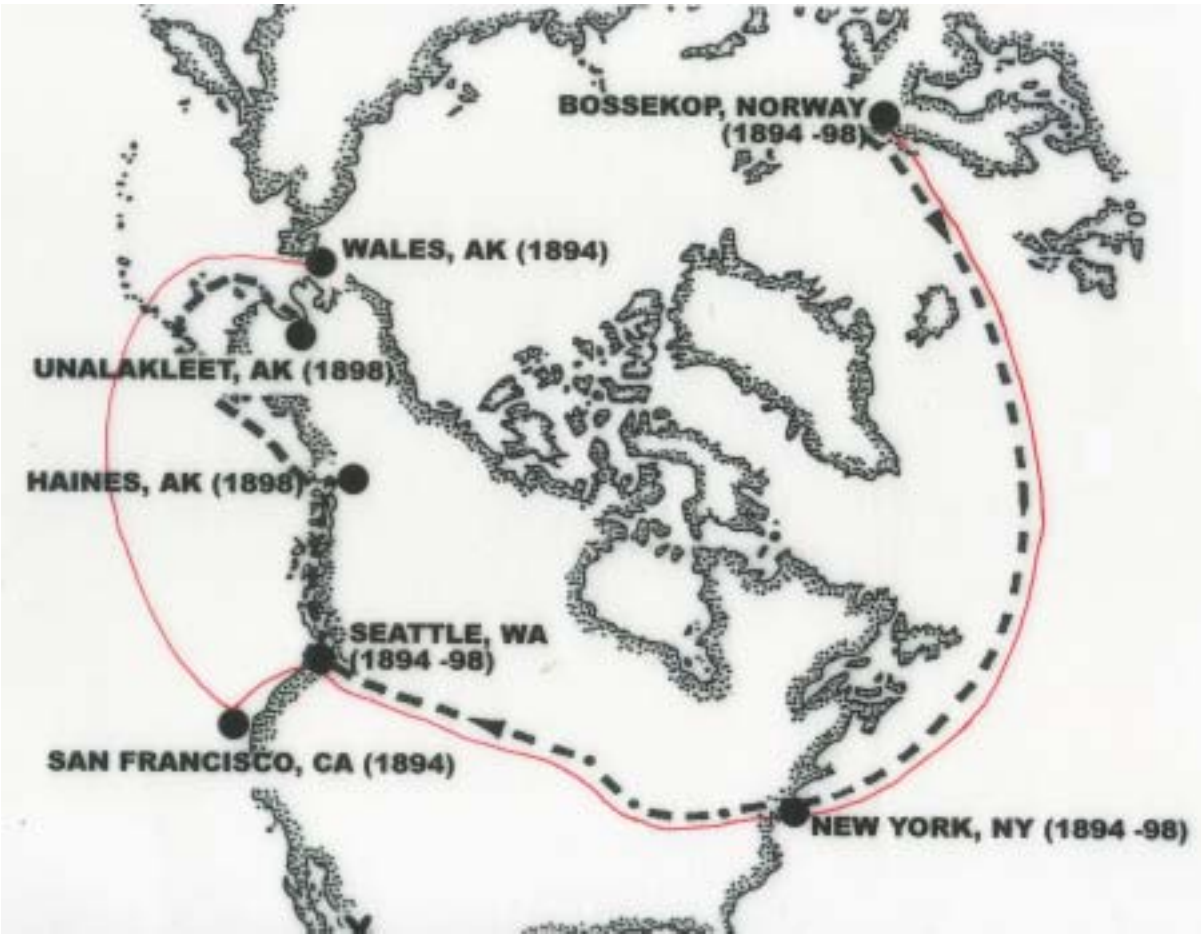


Route map of the Kjellman Expedition of 1894 (in red), and the Manitoba Expedition of 1898 (in black).Source: V.R Raush and D.L. Baldwin, editors, The Yukon Relief Expedition and the Journal of Carl Johan Sakariassen.

THE ALASKA SAMI
A REINDEER STORY

by faith fjeld

At the turn of the last century a dramatic story unfolded in western Alaska. The heroes of the story were reindeer and reindeer herders. Together they survived storms at sea, starvation on mountain passes, and thousand-mile trips by sled through blizzards. Along the way they encountered gold miners, missionaries and businessmen. Some of the herders joined the gold rush and got rich, and some of the reindeer teamed up with Santa Claus and became famous. None of this would have taken place without the Sami.

The Sami are the Indigenous People of Norway, Sweden, Finland and the Russian Kola Peninsula. They call their homeland Sápmi ("sahp-mee") which is also known as Lappland or Finnmark. They were brought to Alaska as teachers of reindeer husbandry to the Inuit. The Inuit have been called "Eskimos," and the Sami have been called "Lapps," but both names are inappropriate.

If you tilt the globe so that the North Pole is in the center, Sápmi, the homeland of the Sami People, is on the right, and Alaska, the homeland of the Inupiaq and the Yup'ik Inuit Peoples is on the left. The Sami, the Înupiaq, and the Yup'ik have much in common. They share an animistic spiritual relationship to Nature. Their physical survival in a tough climate has been based on maintaining this relationship, as evidenced by the ceremonial traditions that are still connected with fishing, hunting, gathering and herding. The images on the equipment they use, the pictographs on Sami *noiade* (shaman) drums, the Inuit dances and the Sami *yoiks* (Sami musical expression) express a common worldview that makes relatives of Arctic Peoples.

THE GREAT DEATH AND THE REINDEER PROJECT

During the 15th and 16th centuries trappers and traders came into Sápmi and began the slaughter of wild animals in order to capitalize on the growing European market for furs. The introduction of firearms among the Sami intensified the situation. This depleted the population of fur-bearing animals. With their subsistence resources at the point of extinction, the Sami began the domestication of wild reindeer and by the 17th century they were reindeer herders.

The Russian-held territory of Alaska became another target for commercial exploitation. During the 18th and 19th centuries, trappers, sealers and whalers slaughtered the fur-bearing animals and marine mammals along the coast of the Bering Sea. After the U.S. purchased Alaska in 1867, the slaughter continued in order to meet the growing American market for beaver hats and whalebone corsets. The Russians and Americans brought infectious diseases with them that developed into a tuberculosis epidemic known as "The Great Death." In many places the Native people who had not died were on the brink of starvation due to the lack of wild game.

The introduction of reindeer and reindeer herding to Alaska was called the Reindeer Project. Ostensibly it was a plan conceived by Sheldon Jackson to save the starving Inuit. Jackson was a Presbyterian missionary who also served as Alaska's General Agent for Education and so the plan came with political as well as humanitarian agendas. From the very beginning, Jackson kept control of the part that the Sami, the Inupiaq and the Yup'ik herders played in the Reindeer Project, distributing the herds among the various missions in return for feeding and clothing the herders. Alaska was being colonized by the U.S., and Jackson saw reindeer herding, as he put it, "the way to elevate a self-supporting race to become friends and auxiliaries of the white man" — in other words, the way to make the Indigenous Peoples dependent on their colonizers. The establishment of Christian missions was part of the colonial process and different areas were assigned to various denominations. The missionaries all too often disregarded the animistic worldview, and actively sought to transform it.

THE REINDEER AND THE SAMI ARE BROUGHT TO ALASKA

Reindeer are not native to Alaska. In 1891 the first 16 reindeer were brought to Amaknak Island in the Aleutian chain from Russian Chukotka as an experiment to see if they would survive in Alaska which they did. The following year 171 reindeer were brought to the newly-established Teller Reindeer Station at Port Clarence-Cape Prince of Wales, by Chukchi herders under U.S. contract. The Chukchi were long-time trade rivals of the Inupiaq and the working relationship was not good, so the Chukchi returned to their homeland, and left the reindeer at Port Clarence.

Next Jackson looked to Norwegian Finnmark ("Lapland") for experienced herders. In 1893 he advertised in the Scandinavian newspapers that were being published in North America. One of the respondents was a Norwegian

Kven named William Kjellman. He had grown up in Finnmark, worked as a reindeer herder and spoke the Sami language. Kjellman was put in charge of the Teller Reindeer Station and sent to Norway to recruit Sami herding families. Thirteen married couples, two small children, and a seventeen year-old traveling by himself, signed three-year contracts. The group, called "The Kjellman Expedition," sailed from Norway on April 10, 1894. They brought with them their herd dogs and some *pulkas* (boat-shaped sleds). The Kjellman Expedition arrived in New York Harbor on May 12 and *The New York Times* covered the story:

"A number of Laplanders who have been engaged by the United States government to instruct Alaskans in the art of driving and herding reindeer arrived here yesterday on board the steamship Island. They were all clad in their native costumes and excited much comment. The men wore tightly buttoned coats of reindeer hide and their feet were encased in moccasins. Their woolen trousers fit so tightly around the ankles that many wondered how the wearers managed to get into them. The caps were fashioned of a gaudy-hued material and shaped somewhat like a "mortar board." They are much smaller in stature than the average American. All have light blue eyes and high cheekbones. The women are not likely to take part in any beauty show."

The herders crossed the United States by train. Along the way they picked up William T. Lopp, another Presbyterian missionary who was already based at Cape Prince of Wales, and Tolef Brevig, a Norwegian missionary who had been hired to establish Lutheran churches on the Seward Peninsula. In his diary, Brevig writes that the train ride was uneventful until they encountered spring floods in northern Montana and were delayed at Kalispell. Brevig travel notes describe the historic encounter of the Sami with the Salish-Kootenai Indians of the Flathead Nation:

"As the train stopped at Kalispell we saw several Indians riding pell-mell out of town. But after a brief interval, Indians and more Indians came flocking around the station — some afoot, others mounted, most of them dressed in their feathered finery. Among them rode also their tribal chief dressed in full regalia. He and his warriors, all mounted on nimble western ponies, were a brilliant picture indeed. The chieftain with his braves dismounted and ascended the depot platform. They were silent, grave and very alert. The Lapps, dressed in their short jackets, bloused trousers and three cornered caps, all wearing long knives hanging from sturdy leather belts — these were the ones that aroused the Indians' curiosity. Was this perchance an unknown Indian tribe? The Lapps on their part were just as curious to know what kind of people the Indians were."

From there the group of herders proceeded to San Francisco and from there sailed north to Alaska. They arrived at Teller Reindeer Station on July 29, 1894. Many of their first apprentices were Inupiaq teenagers — some of whom had been orphaned in the Great Death. With Chukchi reindeer as breeding stock, the herd began to multiply. The Sami taught the apprentices the skills of reindeer husbandry: how to lasso and harness the reindeer, how to milk them and make cheese and how to make *skaller* (the curved-toe ski boots) from the heads, and glue from the hooves. Herders Mikkel Nakkila and Per Rist, along with William Kjellman, also proved the value of reindeer as draft animals by undertaking a 1,240-mile trial by sled that began and ended at Teller.

When their contracts ended in 1897, three of the Sami families returned to Finnmark, but the other two families and Fredrik Larsen, the teenager who had come by himself, stayed in Alaska. The success of the Kjellman Expedition made it possible for Jackson to raise funds to bring over a much larger group of herders.

STORMS AT SEA

On February 4, 1898 at Bossekop, a seaport on the north coast of Norway, an aging vessel called *The Manitoban* hoisted anchor bound for New York. The ship had most recently been used as a cattle carrier, but this time, just out of dry dock, the ship carried reindeer. The 539 reindeer on board were geldings purchased by the United States Army to serve as draft animals and a source of food for the gold miners who were pouring into the Klondike. The antlers of the reindeer had been sawed off to make room for them on the ship and to prevent them from injuring each other. The ship also carried 418 *pulkas*, 511 reindeer harnesses and 500 tons of moss to feed the reindeer during the trip. Besides the reindeer and the equipment there were 113 passengers on board. This included Sami herding families with their children and babies, adventurous bachelors, six young couples on their honeymoons, and a small number of Norwegians and Finns who also were herders or else served as cooks and in other capacities. Many of the Sami were related to each other. The group was called "The Manitoba Expedition."

Before embarking at Bossekop, the reindeer and their herders had struggled from various villages through a raging blizzard that escalated as *The Manitoban* set sail, with temperatures well below zero. That the Manitoba Expedition began in such foul weather did not bode well. There is a Sami proverb that states, "How it goes with the first day's travelling, so it will be with the rest of the journey."

It was a frightening voyage. Berntina Kvaame Venes of Bethel, Alaska, a first generation descendant of the Alaska Sami, has written down the stories she heard from her mother. Bernie's mother, Ellen Sara, was 15 when she crossed the Atlantic with her father and mother and her four brothers, aged two to twelve.

"They got underway, breaking all ties to their homeland. These hardy landlubbers then experienced an ocean storm for nine days with the storm increasing in violence every day. Captain Braes, with 42 years of experience at sea, said he had never encountered worse than that storm. The reindeer proved to be good travelers during the voyage, but the Laplanders were both homesick and seasick and having second thoughts about their venture into the unknown."

The Manitoba Expedition arrived in New York February 27 after twenty-three days at sea. Having unloaded the reindeer and the herders, *The Manitoban* turned back toward Norway and sank in New York Harbor.

They traveled west by train, the reindeer in cattle cars and the herders in Pullmans. "Mother told me how people crowded around the train to catch a glimpse of them," Bernie says. "The reindeer and the herders were a sensation wherever they were seen by the public."

Julia Sara Hansen, of San Jose, California, is another first generation descendant of the Alaska Sami herders. Her father, Mike Sara, was 13 when he came to Alaska with his father and mother, an uncle, his three brothers, and his sister.

"They crossed America to Seattle, which my father remembered as being a small village back then," Julia says. "The reindeer and the herders were taken to Woodland Park where there was a ten-day delay. Word quickly spread about the exotic 'Lapps' and their 'weird clothing' and thousands flocked to Woodland Park just to stare at them and see the reindeer."

STARVING REINDEER IN THE MOUNTAINS

The delay in Seattle proved catastrophic for the reindeer. Their supply of moss dwindled rapidly and they could not digest the grass where they were taken to graze. This segment of the Manitoba Expedition became an effort to save the reindeer. The reindeer began to starve and twelve died in Woodland Park. Leaving the women and the children at Fort Townsend, Washington, 57 of the men and the starving reindeer continued on by ship to Haines, Alaska. Haines was the seaport at the entry to Chilkoot Pass, the treacherous mountain route to the Klondike that they would have to cross. The starving reindeer were too weak to begin the ascent. The men went into the mountains to search for reindeer moss and came back with very little. Several more attempts did not prove successful and by the time moss was found, 387 reindeer had died and most of the men had gone back to rejoin the group at Fort Townsend, Washington.

In March, in the dead of winter, the 15 men who stayed with the surviving 140 reindeer started up the Chilkoot Trail. The Chilkoot Trail was the trade route for the Athabaskan Indian People. Charles Lone Wolf, who grew up in this area says that his grandfather would tell about the day when a group of Laplanders and some scrawny reindeer came staggering into their village in the middle of a snowstorm. The men were dying of scurvy. Their village fed the Sami Copper River salmon and saved their lives. When the reindeer and the men finally reached Circle City in the Klondike, the Army put the long-suffering reindeer to work as draft animals and most of the men left them and rejoined their group — nearly a year later.

The Manitoba Expedition set sail from Fort Townsend on three ships for their new home in Alaska. After five weeks at sea they arrived at Unalakleet on Norton Sound on July 27, 1898. Bernie writes:

"At long last, after nearly five months had gone by since they left Bossekop and their native soil, they were at their new homeland. We can imagine the relief that must have been to them for now they could begin what they had come all this distance and endured all the strange happenings to do. They could begin a new life in a new land."

THE GOLD RUSH IN NOME

Next to the coming of the Sami to Alaska, the most important event in 1898 was the discovery of gold at Anvil Creek on Norton Sound. During the following summer 40,000 men descended on the area hoping to strike it rich. Samuel Balto was one of them. He was famous. In 1888 he had accompanied the Norwegian explorer Fridtjof Nansen on the first non-Inuit expedition across Greenland and ten years later he had come to Alaska with the Manitoba Expedition. In a letter to Nansen from Anvil Creek, dated September 9, 1899, Balto shared some news about the gold rush and also some gossip:

"We came to Alaska July 27 to Unalakleet. We traveled seven miles upriver where we built Eaton Station: seven houses and a big three-story farmhouse where we could spend the winter. I was the master builder. Up to the time when we started building, we received, according to our contract, 'good and sufficient food.' In November the Superintendent (William Kjellman) began to sell our provisions to the Eskimos and he put the money in his own pocket. For us there was less and less each month. Finally there was hunger among us and many came down with scurvy.

"We have left the government service. Now we are all free men. We have traveled 200 miles westward from the Eaton Station to the place where there have been many gold finds, Anvil City [Nome]. We made the trip by reindeer at Christmas time. I staked three claims. One of these is pretty good I think. I have been up at Balto Creek and prospected my claim up there. An American named the creek after me. If I can sell all these claims I will return to Norway next fall. A lot of gold is found along the sea. One can wash up 'rockers,' getting up to $100.00 per day per man.

"Two of the Sami who traveled here five years ago (Mikkel and Isak Nakkila) were lucky. Between these two brothers there is millions in Norwegian money. One member of our expedition (Jafet Lindeberg) was the luckiest. He was supposed to travel to Siberia to buy more reindeer, but he refused to go. So our boss Sheldon Jackson got angry with him and he lost his job. Immediately he took a steamship north to Golovin Bay. There he and two Swedes (John Brynteson and Eric Lindblom) took a boat and came here to prospect. They found this place, Anvil Creek, which is very rich. They were able to get from $100.00 to $1800.00 a day by sluicing."

THE HEROES

In all, more than 600 Inupiaq and Yup'ik apprentices signed up to become herders. The number of reindeer in Alaska grew from a few hundred at the start of the Reindeer Project to 27,000 reindeer in 1910. The reindeer provided food for the Indigenous and Sami families and for the gold miners, and their fur was used to make parkys and boots. Reindeer served as draft animals for the mining operations and they revolutionized mail delivery. Many herders also became mail carriers. Stations were set up

along the routes and reindeer carrying 200 pounds of mail would run relays of 30 to 50 miles. They were better than dogs. A trip that had taken sixty days by dogsled took six days with *pulkas* drawn by reindeer, and while dog teams needed an expensive food supply, the reindeer ate moss along the way at no cost.

Lois Twitchell Stover of Kodiak, Alaska is the granddaughter of Ellen Sara. She remembers Ellen's stories about life in Alaska. The Saras were among the 81 herders who stayed when their contract with the Reindeer Project ended. In 1900, 17 year-old Ellen married 28 year-old Per Spein. Theirs was an arranged marriage, the first between Alaska Sami. Marriages like this were arranged by the parents with an eye on enlarging the family herd, or maintaining Sami heritage. Per Spein became the main herder at Eaton Station, Unalakleet, and his father-in-law, Nils Persen Sara, became the main herder at the reindeer station established at Savoonga on St. Lawrence Island. In 1903 both families drove their reindeer south from Nome over the mountains to the Moravian Mission on the Kuskokwim River to strengthen the herds there and to establish a home base for themselves.

Lois says that every member of the family herded.

"From birth on, the family's first priority was the herd and no matter what difficulties they faced, the family traveled and stayed together. Ellen watched the reindeer in the day and took care of her family at night. She sewed boots, made parkas, wove cloth and even made butter. She did band weaving using the strings she recycled from flour and sugar sacks. She'd hook one end of her loom to her belt and the other end to a door knob and make cradle straps, the webbing to hold pairs of mittens together, and the shoe bands that kept out the snow. She also trapped for small animals and fished for food. The men sewed and tanned and would sometimes care for the children. Daughters and sons inherited equally. The family was isolated for much of the time. Once a year the colony of Samis in along the Kuskokwim would meet for two weeks in Akiak. There would be dances, sewing parties and lots of gossip."

Julia Hansen, Lois' cousin, grew up in Akiak, another reindeer station on the Kuskokwim. She remembers eating dried reindeer meat all the time. The Samis and the Yup'iks got along very well, she says.

"They would dry the meat on racks outside in their njallas*, the storehouses that they built on thick tree trunks up off the ground. In the summer the Samis had great gardens. When I think of turnips, I think of Sami people because I never would have tasted them if it weren't for the Sami. They also grew cabbages, carrots, and rutabagas, but it was turnips that I would steal from my uncle's garden when I was a kid.*

"We lived along the banks of the Kuskokwim River, the Yup'iks in their log houses on one side and the Sami and Norwegians in wood houses on the other. They were painted white and trimmed with green. Sami kids would learn to speak Yup'ik and Yup'ik kids would learn to speak Sami. My father was fluent in Yup'ik, Sami and Norwegian but he always spoke English with an accent. I remember that kids would tease me about this and call me 'a dirty little Lapp.' But on the other side of the river they would call me 'a dirty little Eskimo' too. My father married twice. Both of his wives were Yup'ik and both died young in the tuberculosis epidemic. My big dream is to go to Norway to meet my father's family. I have so many questions about my Sami heritage. 'Always be proud of your heritage,' my father would say to me. I thought he was talking about being Yup'ik but he was talking about being Sami."

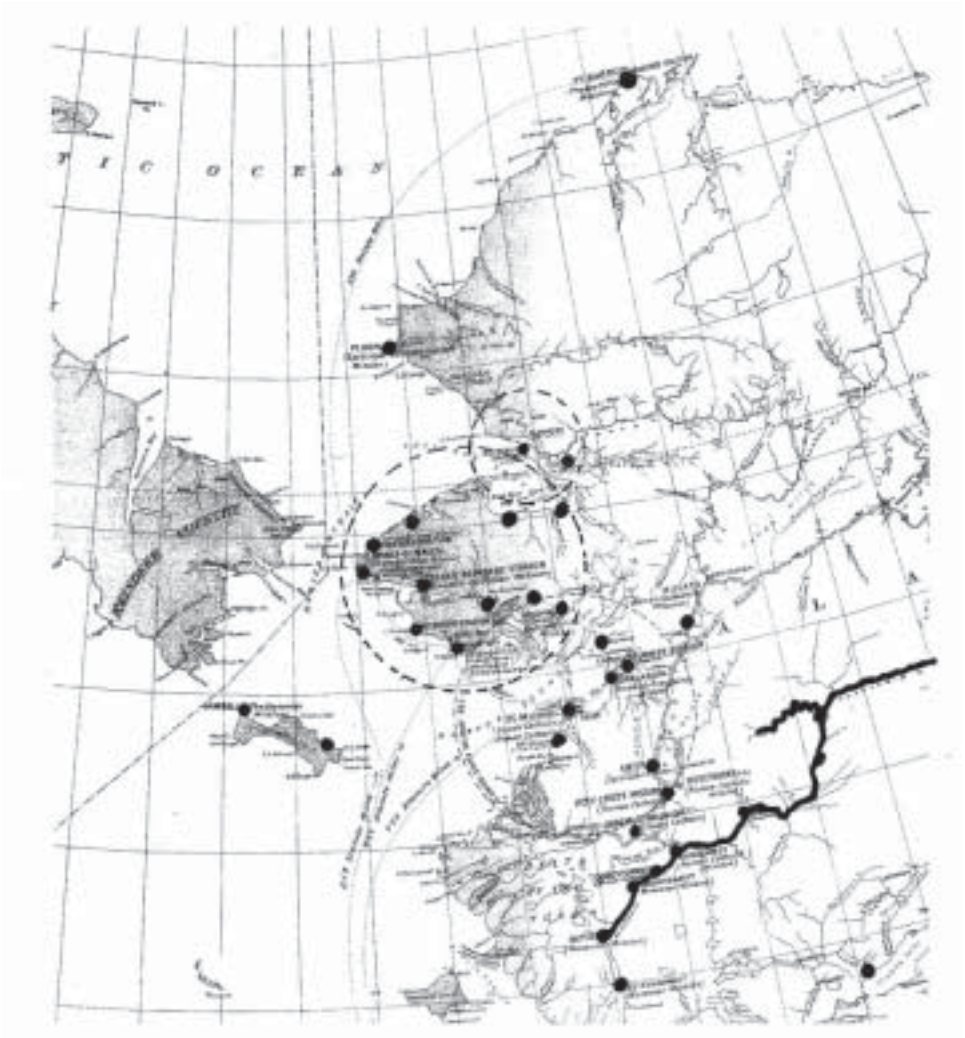
Due to the combined efforts of the Sami, Yup'ik and Inupiaq herders, by 1920 there were an estimated 600,000 reindeer in Alaska divided into 98 herds. Thirty-four active reindeer stations dotted the landscape from Point Barrow in the north to Lake Charles in the south including the major reindeer centers of Teller, Unalakleet, Nome, Golovin and Kotzebue, as well as St. Lawrence Island. The Sara family established a reindeer empire all along the Kuskokwim River east of Bethel that included Sami, Yup'ik, Norwegian herders and New England traders who had intermarried. Then things began to change.

SANTA CLAUS AND THE REINDEER ACT

Two Norwegian-American businessmen, Carl and Alfred Lomen from St. Paul, Minnesota, moved to Nome. They had previously visited Alaska as tourists and photographers but soon they became interested in marketing reindeer meat. In 1914, with gold money borrowed from Jafet Lindeberg, they formed Lomen and Company. They began to buy up reindeer from the Sami herders, and hire some of them to help with the expanding Lomen herds. They built cold storage plants and purchased cold storage ships so that reindeer meat could be shipped down to Seattle from Nome and distributed to the growing market for what they advertised as "The New Gourmet Delicacy from Alaska." They opened stores in Nome and Golovin that sold equipment and supplies to the herders. The Lomens also sold shares on the New York stock exchange and family members became politicians and applied to Congress for government funding. The number of reindeer owned by the Lomens increased rapidly. Within a relatively short period of time, reindeer herding became "The Meat Business."

In 1926, Santa Claus became part of their publicity. The Lomens collaborated with Macy's Department Stores to stage annual Christmas parades in cities coast to coast that featured Santa Claus, with teams of reindeer driven by Sami, Inupiaq and Yup'ik herders from Alaska. This helped to perpetuate the commercial side of the Christmas story.

By the end of the 1920s, conditions on the Lomen's pastures were chaotic and conflicts erupted among the herders as their reindeer intermingled. Many of the reindeer became wild and disappeared into caribou herds. Worse yet, the Depression of 1929 destroyed the U.S. market for reindeer meat. A Reindeer Council was appointed. It was made up of government representatives and Inuit herders, but did not include the Sami. Over the next few years the Reindeer Council attempted to re-organize and regulate the grazing areas in western Alaska. On September 29, 1937 Congress passed The Reindeer



Alaska reindeer stations in western Alaska, 1898. Source: Sheldon Jackson, Annual U.S. Reindeer Project Report.

Act. It granted Alaska Natives, and not whites, total ownership of the reindeer in Alaska. With its passage, the Lomens, who were white, were paid three dollars each for their reindeer. The Indigenous Sami, who were considered "white" by the U.S. government, were forced, with two weeks' notice, to sell their herds at a loss.

Disappointed and disheartened, some of the Sami families moved south to Poulsbo, Washington where there was a growing colony of former Alaska Sami herders. Some returned to Norway. But those who had married into Yup'ik and Inupiaq families remained in Alaska. The loss of the herds robbed the Sami of their livelihood and pride, but it did not destroy the emotional ties the herders felt towards the animals they guided and lived with. They would often visit their herds after they were sold.

THE LEGACY

In speaking of the Alaska Sami, the late Herbert Anungezuk, an Inupiaq cultural anthropologist from Wales, said,

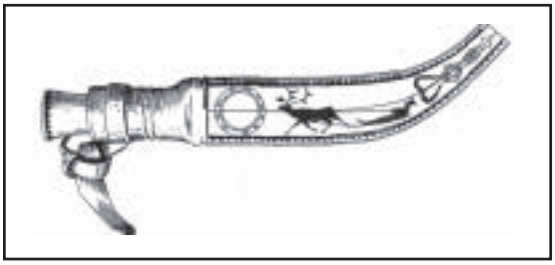
"The history of the start of reindeer herding is past, but not forgotten, and many families, my wife's included, bear Sami ancestry. The Sami not only taught and shared their herding skills with the Alaska Natives, but remnants of the culture can still be found today. The descendants of the Sami reindeer herders can be found throughout the state. You will find lawyers, legislators, doctors and many others in notable positions among them."

Frances Degnan, a Yup'ik/Inupiaq native of Unalakleet, and the author of "Under the Arctic Sun: the Life and Times of Frank and Ada Degnan," also has said good things about the Sami. *"It has not been that long ago that the Sami reindeer herders were brought over by the U.S. government to help our people. My parents and grandparents knew them well, as they were friends and neighbors. They were peace loving and industrious and they made their life work where they were placed. My father had this saying about the coming of the Sami and the reindeer. 'This is history and it is being lived'."*

photo: William Hamilton

Sami herding camp at Port Clarence, Alaska,on the Seward Peninsula, 1894. The Seward Peninsula has the longest historical record of reindeer herding in Arctic North America. Reindeer heralded in a new era.

REINDEER HERDING



"The future of the Indigenous Peoples of the North is to a large extent connected with the future of reindeer herding. It is the industry of Indigenous Peoples and small minorities. These groups flourished as reindeer herding developed. Reindeer herding Peoples have supported the establishment of other Indigenous Peoples as domestic reindeer herders. This has taken place in Alaska, Canada and Greenland."

– Johan Mathis Turi
The Sami Reindeer Herders Association of Norway
Kautokeino, Norway

photo: Wilse & Kirk

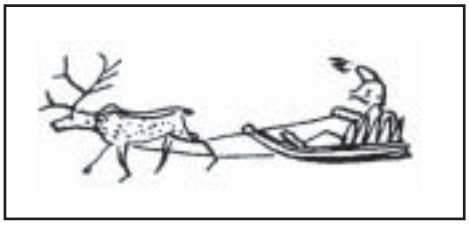
The Ole Olsen Bær family (also spelled Bahr) photographed in 1898 at Woodland Park, Seattle waiting for the ship that will take them to Eaton Station, Unalakleet. (l-r) Ole Olsen Bær, his cousin Anders Aslaksen Bær (known as Andy), Ole's three year-old daughter Inger Anna Oldsdatter Bær, and his wife Inger Clemetsdatter holding baby Klemet Olsen Bær in a gietka. The Bærs had six more children in Alaska.

A FAMILY AFFAIR

Reindeer need families with intelligence and endurance to care for them. In return the families benefit by getting cheese, butter and milk. At first, when the U.S. government was hiring herders for the Reindeer Project, they only talked to the men. But herding is a family affair and the men would not come without their families, or, as Nome elder Dan Karmun, a retired herder put it: “Everybody works together. That’s the secret of having food on the table.”

Pulkas in Alaska. The Sami herders brought 418 pulkas with them on The Manitoba.

PULKAS



A pulka is a unique Sami sled that is pulled by a reindeer. Pulkas are about seven feet long and two feet wide, pointed in front, square in the back and rounded underneath so they resemble a boat. They are designed to pull easily and they are shaped so that they do not sink into soft snow. The front half is covered with reindeer hide that is stretched over bows, creating a protected storage space where baggage can be placed. A partition in the pulka makes the space a closed box. The back half of the pulka consists of a low seat with a backrest and is upholstered with reindeer fur or other material. It takes practice to stay seated as the pulka rolls from side to side as the reindeer pulls it.

Samuel Johnson Kemi, Kirsten Persdatter Bals and their baby Samuel photographed on their way to Teller Reindeer Station, 1894.

THE CARD PEOPLE

One of the first features that the Inupiaq people picked up on was the distinctive Four Winds hats the men from Kautokeino and Karasjok wore. Their nickname for the Sami herders was “The Card People” because the hats reminded them of the stylized kings and jacks in a deck of playing cards. The Four Winds hats contained an inner drawstring pouch that was used to carry dried reindeer meat, money and other items. With additional stuffing of various kinds the hats also served as pillows.

(l-r) Marit Persdatter Biti, Anders Johanneson Balto, and their daughter Maria photographed in 1898.

THE BAG OF COINS

May Balto Huntington told about the Alaska arrival of her ancestors from Karasjok, Norway. They, and the other reindeer herding families from Lappland, were considered to be “exotic.” When they made stops at train stations and when they camped at Woodland Park in Seattle, crowds of local people would show up to take pictures of them. Maria, the little girl in the photo, is holding a bag full of the coins that she collected from the people in the crowds along the way. Maria was May’s grandmother.

This photo, discovered on eBay, was titled "Sami Woman from Golovin," but there are no such trees there. The landscape has been identified as White Mountain, near Nome, a central area for the domestication of reindeer and the Sami woman is thought to be a member of the Klemetsen family.

HOW TO TAME A REINDEER

"Reindeer herders were known by the areas they were at. We'd tie a reindeer to a stump with a long rope and shorten the rope gradually and begin to touch the reindeer on occasion. Then the reindeer got used to being touched. If they aren't trained, they'll kick like anything."

— Dan Karmun
Inupiaq-Evenk elder from
Nome

A few Sami and Inupiaq herders wearing lassos properly are about to demonstrate to Inupiaq apprentices from Kotzebue, Alaska the art of the lasso. This photo was probably taken in the early 1900s with the introduction of reindeer and reindeer husbandry to that area. The man at left in the front row has been identified as Sami herder Alfred Nilima.

THE NORTHERN PEOPLES' MOST IMPORTANT INVENTION

Anders Oskal, Director of the International Center for Reindeer Husbandry in Kautokeino, Norway, has called the lasso ring "the Northern Peoples' most important invention." He says it allows the human arm to be extended by 15 yards, which represents the difference between life and death in the north. The noose operates with the lasso ring acting as a slip knot. The rope is looped on the right hand while the rope end and slip knot are held in the left hand so that the rope can be thrown and the knot released simultaneously while the end is secure. The noose tightens as it is thrown and usually closes on the antler, neck or leg on the intended animal.

The Nils Persen Bals family on the revenue cutter Bear, *(l-r) Inga Bals, Nils Person Bals, and Ellen Marie Persdatter Rist Bals with Reindeer Project director Sheldon Jackson looking on. Inga is holding a leash for the family herding dog who admires her and is accompanied by her newborn puppy.*

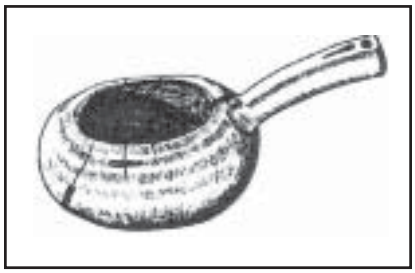
IN PRAISE OF THE HERD DOGS

Before snowmobiles, dogs were a mandatory part of reindeer herding and they came over with the herding families from Norway. Herd dogs were a special breed, *Lapinporo koira* in Finnish, also called in English “Lappland reindeer spitz.” The dogs would gather reindeer for round ups and keep the herds together when moving. They could stay outside in the cold and cover 40 to 50 miles a day, often in deep snow. When the contracts of the first group of Sami herders were up, Mikkel Nakkala asked that his dog be paid as well.

photo: E.A. Hogg

Marit Persdatter Biti and her husband Anders Johanneson Balto milking reindeer at Port Clarence, 1898. They eventually moved to Nome where Anders was killed in a mining accident. Marit supported her family by doing laundry for the gold miners.

MILKING REINDEER

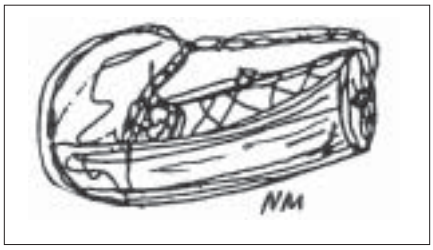


Reindeer milking is done by two people, one holding the antlers and one doing the milking. The milk is used for making cheese and butter. Reindeer milking bowls are called *nahp'pe* in the Sami language. They are made from the hollowed-out wood of the curly birch, a small tree that grows on the tundra. Nahp'pe are often inlaid with reindeer antler. The image of a nahp'pe is frequently used by artists to symbolize the Sami worldview.

photo: B. Dobbs

Ellen Sara holds her baby sister Berit in the Sara family cradle, called a gietka*. She stands between her brothers Morten (l) and Clemet (r). This gietka was used by four generations of the Sara family in Alaska but was much older than that when it was brought with them to Alaska in 1898 on* The Manitoba*. The original reindeer leather covering was eventually replaced by canvas and the Sara family gietka is on permanent display at the Anchorage Museum of History and Art.*

ALL LACED UP



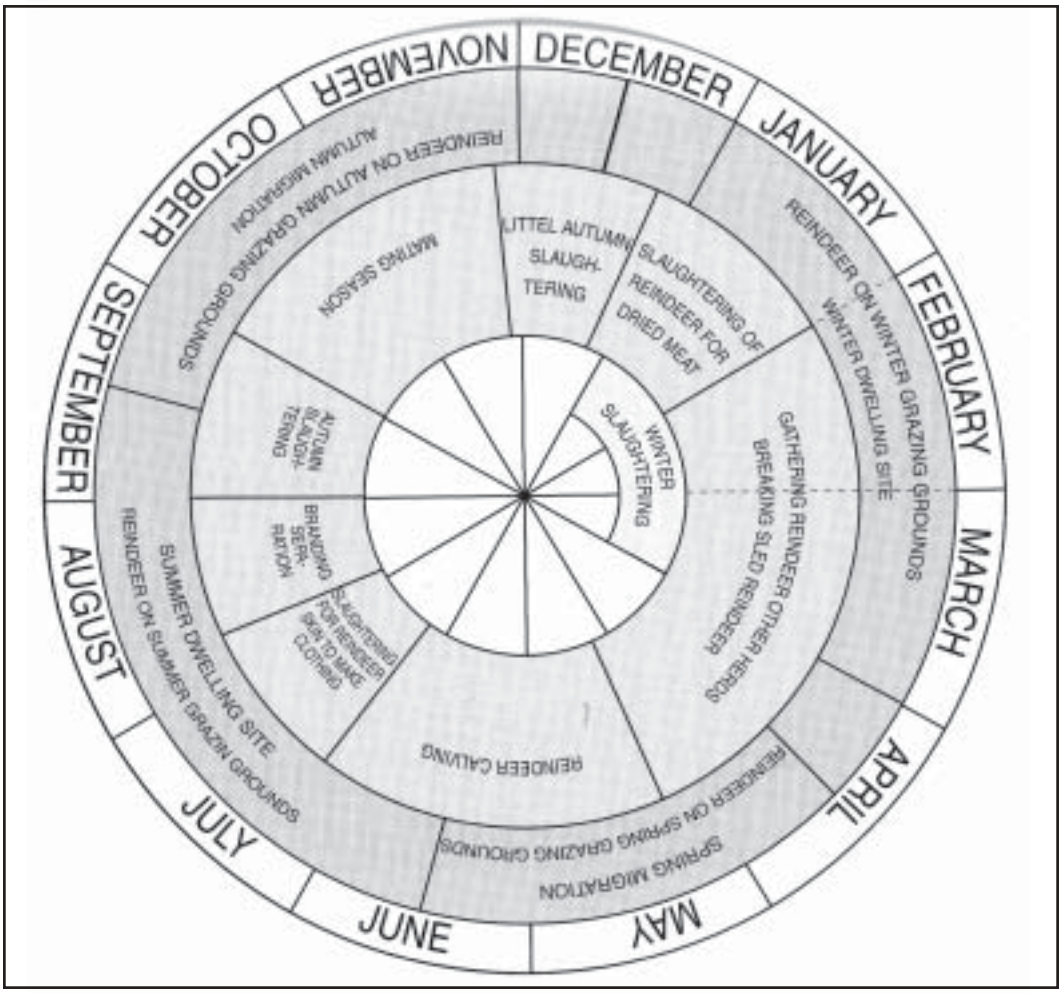
"The youngest child was wrapped up in a cradle that was made of a split birch log hollowed out. The head piece, a half round canopy, was fastened to the cradle and the whole thing was covered with a khaki material trimmed with hand-woven bands. The three bands that served as a carrying strap tied it to a sled. The bands also held mosquito netting over the cradle to keep those pests away. The baby was laced into this tiny bed, making a safe cocoon while traveling. The cradle was used at home and we all took our turns in it as babies, spending our first months of life all laced up."

— Berntina Kvamme Venes,
Ellen Sara's daughter

photo: Yukon Archives, White Horse

The Nils Persen Sara herding family stands in front of their log home on the Kiseralik River near Akiak. The two boys in front are (l-r) Clemet and Morten Sara. Standing (l-r) Inga Marie Mortenssdatter Sara, Ellen Sara Spein holding her baby Anna, Nils Persen Sara holding his baby Berit. One hundred years later, after a visit to her relatives in Kautokeino, Clemet's daughter Marita said, "They still are shaking their heads over Nils Sara uprooting his family like that. I guess they thought he'd come back." The family stayed in Alaska because it was by all accounts a herder's paradise.

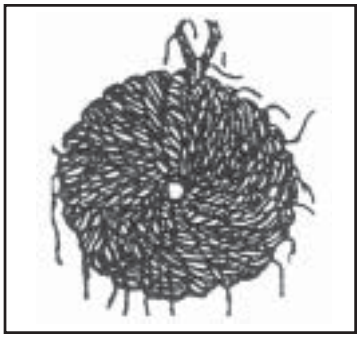
THE YEAR WITH REINDEER



Reindeer have always connected their herders to the cycles of Nature. Source of diagram: Odd Mathis Hætta, *The Sami People*, 1990.

James Nillima, son of Sami herder Alfred Nilima and his Inupiaq wife Alice Fruhling of Kotzebue. He is holding a pair of the skis that were used in herding activities in Alaska.

SKIS AND *SKALLER*

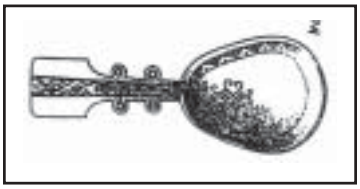


Since 4000 BC skis have been part of Sami subsistence activities, and so have the ski boots called *skaller* because they make hunting and herding with skis possible. When wooden skis were used, the upturned toe of each skaller was hooked into the ski's strap that was easily slipped off when following a lasso to harvest a reindeer. On the cover of this catalogue you will see a pair made by Inupiaq Native Elvira Kimoayuk from Golovin, Alaska. Her Sami husband Ole Olsen taught her how to make them in the 1920s. Although skis have changed, skaller are still in use today. They are still the very best way to keep from slipping on snow and ice and to protect the foot from freezing.

The sole is divided into two pieces, the toe piece with the hair running backward and the heel piece with the hair running forward to give traction. The curve in the toe is made from the skull of a reindeer. The fur body of the boot is made from leg skins. Colorful woven shoe bands are tightly wrapped around the tops of the skaller to keep snow out. No inner foot covering is necessary. Shoe grass is gathered, braided into the shape of a large doughnut, dried and stored, and when skaller are worn, the grass is stuffed inside, surrounding the whole foot with warmth. Yet another example of timeless Indigenous ingenuity.

The spring hunting camp at Cripple Creek near Aniak. Here they trapped muskrats and beaver and set snares for ptarmigan.

PTARMIGAN SOUP



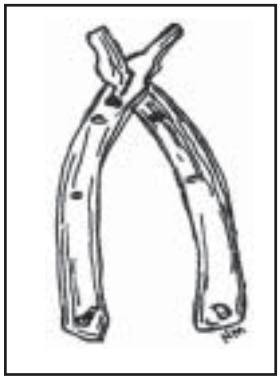
Lois Stover's grandfather Adam Hollis Twitchell was a trader from Vermont, and her grandmother Ireena Kochak was a Yup'ik woman from Nelson Island. Their little boy Tim was Lois' father. The Twitchells learned herding skills from their Sami friends and neighbors on the Kuskokwim River around Akiak so then they also became herders. Our story takes place at their spring camp.

When Tim was four years old, another Twitchell baby was on the way and it was arranged for Ireena's mother to come from Nelson Island to take care of him and to help with the delivery. One day Ireena said to her mother, "Oh, I am so hungry for ptarmigan soup! *I just want some ptarmigan soup*!" She went on and on about wanting ptarmigan soup. Finally her mother put on warm clothing, bundled up little Tim, and out they went in the freezing cold to check the ptarmigan snares. By the time they returned with ptarmigan, Ireena had given birth, cleaned herself up, set the camp in order, and Tim Twitchell had a baby sister. It should also be noted that they all enjoyed some ptarmigan soup.

photocopy: James H. Barker

(l-r) Matthew Spein, Clemet Sara, and Matthew's father Per Spein. This photo was taken by Clemet Sara opening the shutter with a string. His photographs are valuable records of the reindeer herding activities of the Nils Persen Sara extended family who first established reindeer herding on St. Laurence Island and then moved a herd south from Nome to the Kuskokwim River.

ON THE KISERALIK



Many of Clemet Sara's photos were taken along the Kiseralik, a tributary of the Kuskokwim River which is the seventh largest river in the world. Some of the biggest reindeer herds in Alaska were located in this area. Here there were no reindeer stations run by missionaries, but instead, Sami, Yup'ik, and Norwegian herders and New England traders intermarried and worked together to establish a reindeer empire that stretched from Bethel 700 miles east to Takotna in the Alaskan Interior.

photocopy: James H. Barker

Clemet Sara and his brother Morten having lunch. Morten holds the shutter string. In herding, Morten never used a dog because he ran so fast he could keep up with the reindeer.

THE TUNDRA FOR LUNCH

Taking pause from gazing at a photo of
my father and his brother
in their parkys on the tundra
having lunch, relaxing, smiling
in their kingly winter gowns;
sip of coffee, read the label,
pull upon the string that runs
up to shutter freezing seconds
up to clear, unblinking lens
up to clear sky not withholding
all of nature's deep blue secrets
all the warmest from the mother
all the kindliest amends;
all the portents of the riot
fought against the dark descent
battles fought to dark dominions,
protests to untimely ends;
drink the springtime earth delight.

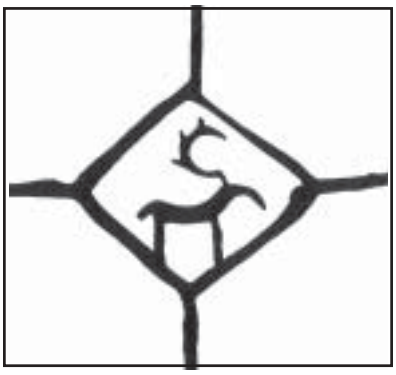
fresh air sky and timid fire
nodding to the blackened pot defying
eye of ember, air dividing
into flying spark, inviting
all beginnings into ends;
deep blue sky and melting snow
peaks still white and shining over
rivers just about to go
roaring crunching spring hello
waved to cranes in soaring flight
fragile lifting spread of feathers
greeted by the icy might,
kissing fleeting joy of daylight
slipping softly into night,
weaving webs of starlit darkness
far flung singing wingless flight,
smiling, drink the warming coffee

— Nils P. Sara, Clemet's son

photo: from the collection of Pete Larsen, Jr, Nome.

The average reindeer weighs between 180 to 260 pounds and can pull twice its own weigh. In this photo Fred Larsen, Sr, stands on Front Street in downtown Nome in the 1920s with reindeer loaded down with U.S. Mail. Fred had come to Alaska by himself in 1894 as a member of the Kjellman Expedition. His sons and his grandsons all became herders.

IN PRAISE OF REINDEER



We have much to learn from reindeer. Reindeer herding is a circumpolar phenomenon. It supports a nomadic way of life and is a model for the sustainable management of barren areas. Reindeer find the best pastures and seek out the right food. They face into the wind to get rid of mosquitos. They know where their home is located and run with their heads held up. They get along with people. When herder Andy Bær left Norway for Alaska, his uncle said, "*If all else fails, Andrew, stick to reindeer*."

Anna Spein, the daughter of Ellen Sara and Per Spein, the mother of Lois Twitchell Stover, stands in her bedroom in Akiak. Lois says "I can remember what Mother had on her dresser — a big blue jar of Phillips Milk of Magnesia, 3-H Linament, rubbing alcohol, Vaseline and Murine. The apron means she was probably baking bread."

REINDEER BRAIN BREAD: BETTER THAN A BAGEL

This recipe is from Mary Eyman, the oldest of Anna Spein Twitchell's daughters. Mary says that brain bread makes you smart. "Place one reindeer brain in a bowl. A moose brain can be substituted if reindeer is not available. Look for bone fragments and pick them out. Add some lukewarm salted water, handfuls of white and rye flour, a teaspoon of baking soda, and a teaspoon of salt to the brain. You can also add flax seed. Mix together til it's like pizza dough. Roll out one inch thick and sixteen inches wide, and bake. When moving with the herds, reindeer bread is good hot or cold — like sausage."

photo: Elias Venes

Per Spein in front of his cabin in Akiak.

PER SPEIN

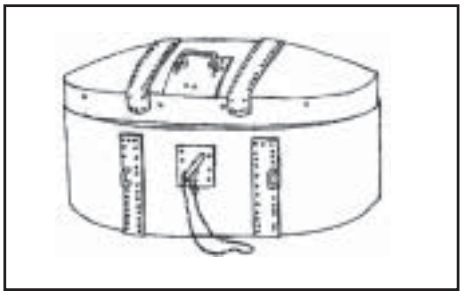
Many stories are told about Per Spein. People remember his piercing blue eyes, his ability to fell trees by himself using a two-man saw, and that children loved him. Clemet Sara's daughter Marita recalls, "We always hung out at Per Spein's cabin because he would let us do anything we wanted." Elias Venes of Bethel remembers, "We'd row until we got to the place I called 'Old Spein Slough' on the Kuskokwim River above Akiak. He used to take us kids fishing there with him and to hunt birds in the fall."

Per Spein was a Sami shaman, a *noiade* ("noy-dee"). His relatives on both sides of the Atlantic are certain that when he came to Alaska on *The Manitoba* he brought along a Sami Drum. "They were coming half way around the world and were afraid and of course they needed such things to strengthen them," they say. Spein Mountain in the Kilbuck Range 46 miles southeast of Bethel was named after him. He is buried there next to his father-in-law Nils Persen Sara and it is reasonable to believe that his Drum is buried somewhere nearby.

photo: Ashel Curtis

Young Sami herders photographed in Seattle on their way to Alaska. It is thought that the couple on the left were newly-weds.

IN HONOR OF THE HERDERS



They were young, they were brave, and they came by ship and train from one side of the Arctic Circle to the other. With the help of their hardworking reindeer and trusty herd dogs, they made history. Many stayed on to blend with Inupiaq, Yup'ik and Norwegian families and their descendants live there still. Western Alaska will never be the same! It is said that wherever reindeer are introduced, people come together in a good way.

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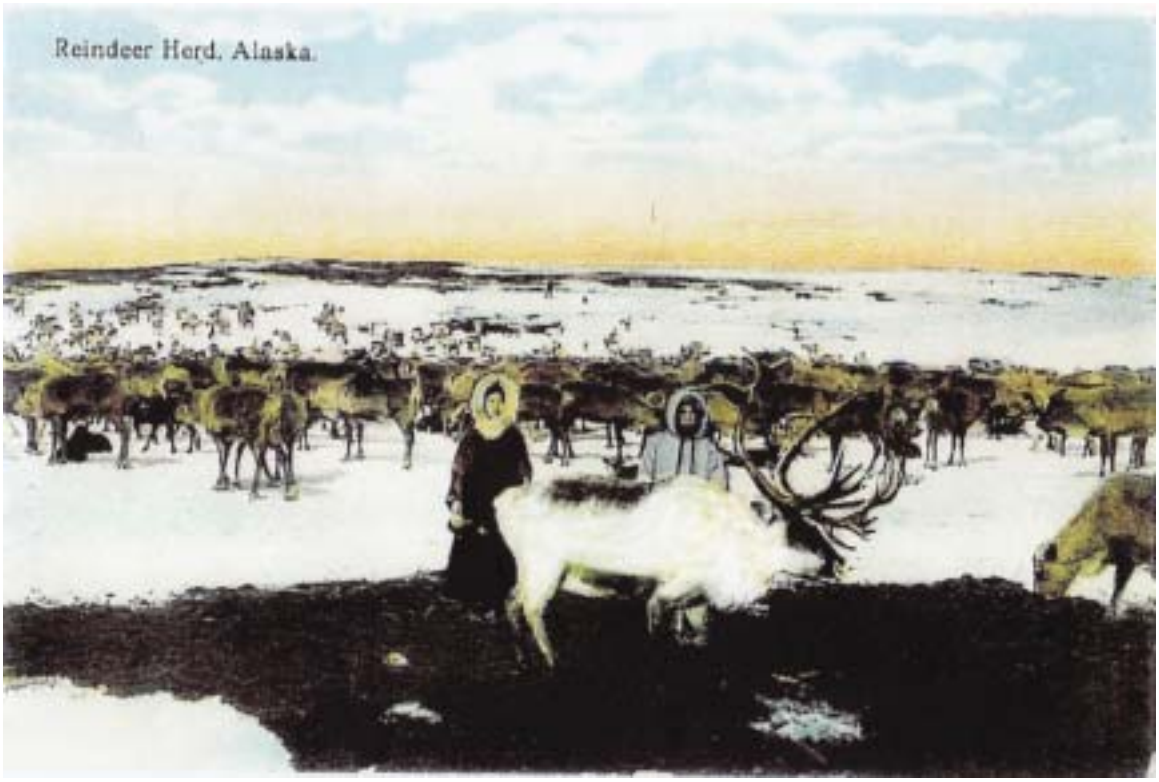
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS



Hand-tinted postcard from the collection of Nathan Muus for Saami Báiki. Uncredited photos in this catalogue are part of the Saami Báiki archives, and are exhibited with permission of the families involved.

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