

Brevig Mission herders drive reindeer to Grantley Harbor corral (Author's Choice)

Story and photos by Keith Conger
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Late Wednesday evening, reindeer herder Leonard "Sulook" Olanna sat waiting in his white-walled, fish camp tent on the north side of Grantley Harbor. He was working on a second, or third, cup of coffee when his younger brother Michael called on the cell phone.

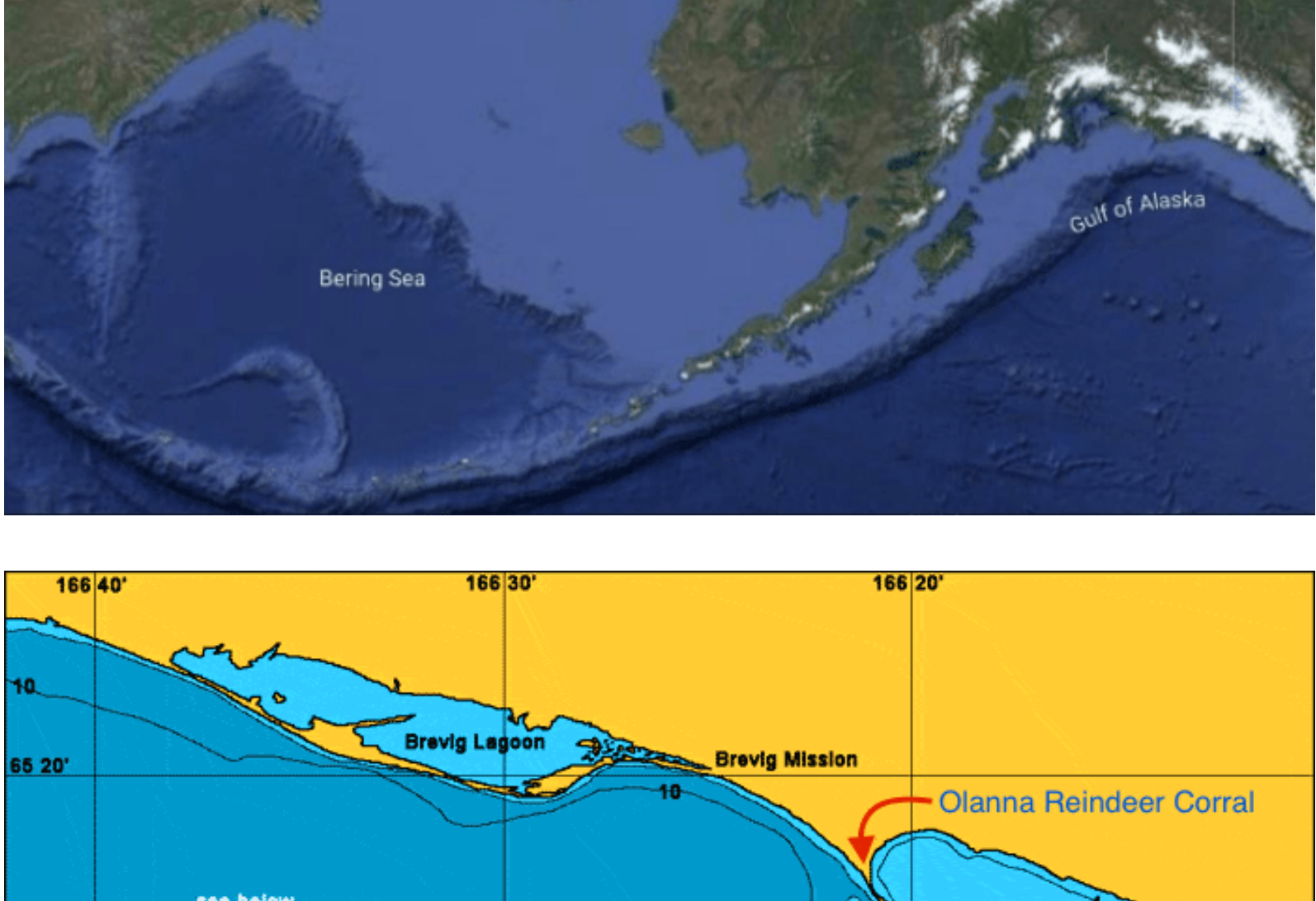
After a brief conversation, Sulook announced to the semi-circle of family members seated around the wood stove that his sibling was getting close. Michael and his two helpers had already driven the herd to Piktaruk, a lake just west of Brevig Mission, the Olanna's home village.

Pauline Olanna, Sulook's wife, offered the visitors another cup of her "cowboy coffee." She stated that although the crew was ahead of schedule, this would still be a late night.

Sulook sent his brother and two young nephews, James Olanna and Elmer Seetot III, out on ATVs at 3:00 that afternoon to round up his herd. He initially expected them to return about 7:00 or 8:00 the next morning. This latest update indicated they would arrive well before that.

Outside, thick, dark clouds made it look like autumn. Yet it was really less than two weeks past the summer solstice. Inside, Sulook waited patiently for Michael and remembered that when he was growing up, elders had predicted future weather patterns would change for the worse. Western Alaska has been experiencing much less favorable subsistence conditions during the summers since he was a boy, he said.

The cold, moist south winds coming across the water toward the Olanna camp were not so good for filling racks with dry fish. They were, however, perfect for "pushing" deer toward their reindeer corral on the north side of the channel that connects Grantley Harbor and Port Clarence. Reindeer like to work into the wind to combat mosquitoes, says Sulook.



The herd arrives.

The expectant herder began seeing headlights of three machines off in the distance around 1:00 a.m. Thursday morning as Michael moved the herd toward the thin peninsula that lies across from Teller. At about 1:30 a.m., Sulook received another call saying that one of the machines had suffered a flat tire, but that would not prevent them from arriving shortly.

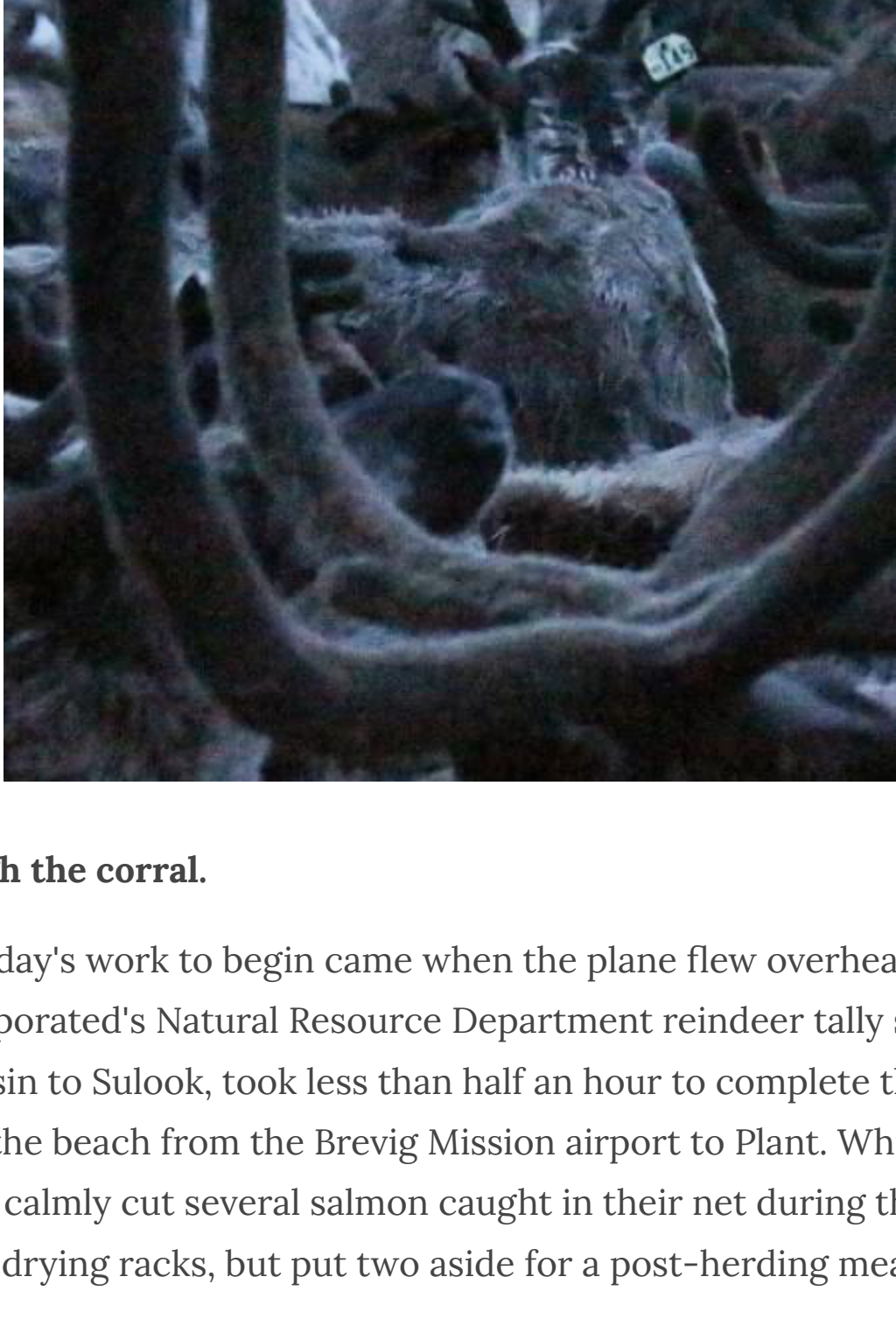
When the lights were a mile away, Sulook, Pauline, and their family members quietly crept out from several tent sites that line the steep beach near a row of abandoned buildings. These dilapidated structures are known as "Plant" because they once were part of the Loman reindeer processing business back in the 1920s and 30s.



Sulook and a few men headed stealthily toward the wire fence that serves as an outside border of the corral. Pauline led the women and children to the windowless and abandoned Loman cookhouse, where they would watch the action unfold.

Michael and his partners gradually maneuvered the herd south along the lake behind the camps and negotiated a tricky creek crossing. When the tightly-packed bunch entered the first wire-bound funnel, helpers ran out from their hiding places to move the deer deeper into their first holding pen. Sulook and a few of the men then moved fencing in behind them to create an enclosure.

By the time the reindeer rested in one of the steep-walled wooden "pockets" of the main corral, the herder's clocks read 3:15 a.m. There the deer would spend the night.



Moving deer through the corral.

The signal for Thursday's work to begin came when the plane flew overhead carrying Clarissa Eide, Kaverak Incorporated's Natural Resource Department reindeer tally supervisor. Eide, who is a distant cousin to Sulook, took less than half an hour to complete the nearly seven-mile ATV trip along the beach from the Brevig Mission airport to Plant. While Sulook and Pauline waited, they calmly cut several salmon caught in their net during the night. They placed most in their drying racks, but put two aside for a post-herding meal.

At approximately 12:30 p.m., reindeer assistant Johnny Seetot opened the outside corral door. As each deer moved into the narrow, V-shaped chute, it was temporarily restrained by members of the crew. Ownership was determined by observing the unique notching pattern cut into its ear, or by looking for color-coded proprietary tags. When each animal passed by, Sulook would yell "Olanna," for a white ear-tagged reindeer owned by his family. He would say "naverik" for each one previously unmarked.



Eide loudly echoed each call, marking her tally seconds before one of Sulook's reindeer handling team grabbed the animal and wrestled it to the ground. Men from the crew worked the adult deer, while teenaged boys grappled with the fawns. Unmarked reindeer would be tagged, and grown deer would have their antlers cut off for sale to Korean buyers, who use them for medicinal purposes.



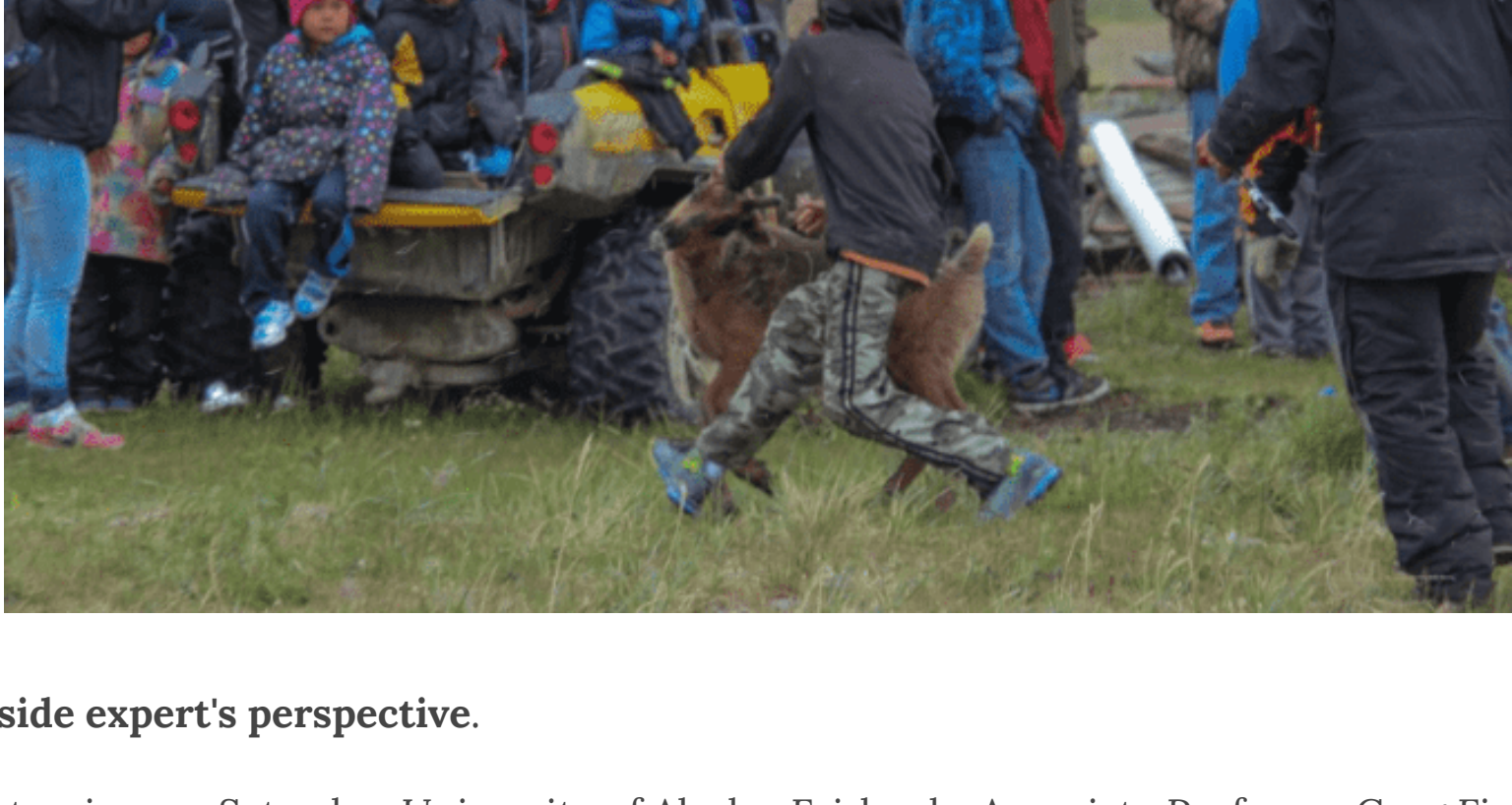
About an hour had elapsed between the first and last animal moving through the chute. Eide was impressed by the group's efficiency and organization. Her final tally showed 110 deer, which included one from the Kakaruk herd, and one from the Noyakuk herd. Thirty-three fawns received the white ear-tag of the Olanna herd.



After the event, the deer went back to the tundra, and a weary Michael Olanna sat resting in his family's tent. He looked forward to a well-earned meal of "guak" (boiled walrus skin and fat), and "ungimauq" (half-dried salmon) prepared by his wife, Bessie. Michael was glad to bring reindeer to the corral but lamented not fetching the entire herd. He explained that a large group split off as he and his helpers were pushing the deer across the Don River, some 20 miles west of Plant.

Sulook and his siblings grew up around reindeer, as their father Ward was once a herder. In 1994, about a decade after Ward's passing, Sulook was able to reestablish the Olanna herd through the help of Tom Gray of White Mountain, who lent him around 450 head.

Sulook recalled the challenges of bringing animals 30 miles a day through the tree-filled lands between White Mountain and his family's grazing areas north and west of Brevig Mission. This past winter, they received 180 animals from Teller's Kakaruk herd in exchange for the use of his corral. Sulook says that after 20 plus years, he is ready to turn the management of the operation over to Michael.

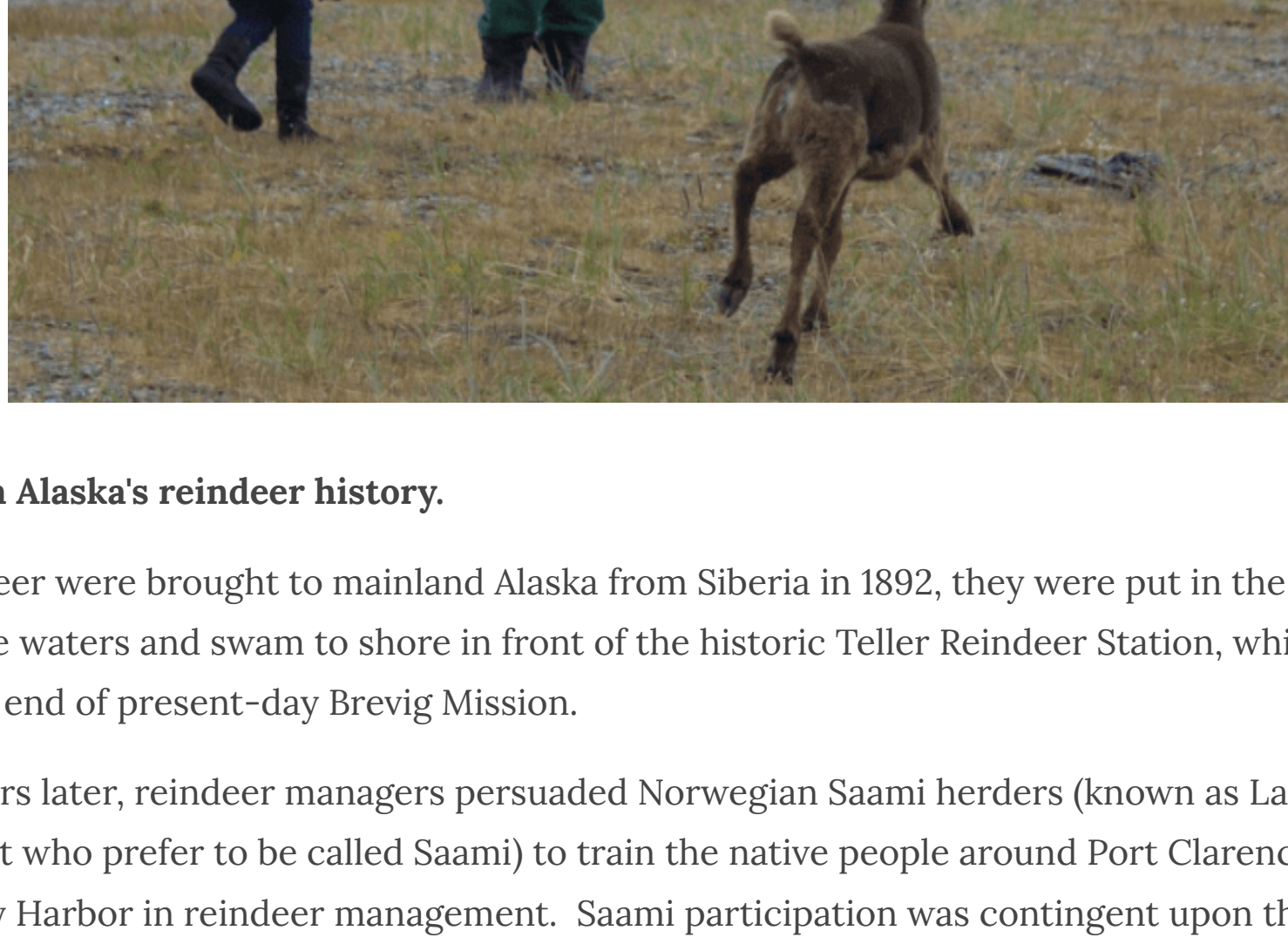


An outside expert's perspective.

In an interview on Saturday, University of Alaska, Fairbanks Associate Professor Greg Finstad sang high praises for Sulook and Michael's endeavors. Finstad is the Manager of the Reindeer Research Program, an affiliate of UAF's Northwest Campus in Nome, and has been working with reindeer in the region since 1982, a year after the program's inception. It's not easy for one herder to get deer from another, he explained, since females get used to, and return to, familiar calving grounds.

"These are the world's experts," said Finstad in recognizing the reindeer husbandry skills of the Olanna brothers and their team. "Leonard (Sulook) and his crew are good at it. It's like watching a dance. They make it look easy, but it is not. They are able to put large deer to the ground with little chance of injury to the animal or the person. They are the best in the world."

Finstad sees reindeer herding as a vehicle for progress in the village. "Herding builds a connection with the land," he says. "The pre-production is very compatible with the ecosystem. Socially, reindeer herding is very good. It builds excitement and is a good, positive experience."



Western Alaska's reindeer history.

When deer were brought to mainland Alaska from Siberia in 1892, they were put in the Port Clarence waters and swam to shore in front of the historic Teller Reindeer Station, which sat at the east end of present-day Brevig Mission.

Two years later, reindeer managers persuaded Norwegian Saami herders (known as Laplanders then, but who prefer to be called Saami) to train the native people around Port Clarence and Grantley Harbor in reindeer management. Saami participation was contingent upon the presence of a Norwegian Lutheran pastor. Tollef Larson "TL" Brevig was not only hired as a minister but served as one of the Reindeer Station's early superintendents.

The Teller Reindeer Station was the birthplace of reindeer herding across the state, as Brevig stated in his journal. "Port Clarence, the closest harbor to Siberia whence the Reindeer were acquired in 1892, has been the landing place for the reindeer, which year after year have been brought over by the U.S. Cutter Bear, captained by M.A. Healy. From Teller Reindeer Station for many succeeding winters, herds of reindeer have been sent across the frozen tundra to newly established reindeer stations in Alaska."

In 1903, Teller Reindeer Station was renamed Teller Mission to reflect Lutheran missionary efforts, which included an orphanage. Some years later the name was further revised to Brevig Mission to avoid US Postal Service confusion between the city of Teller on the south side of Grantley Harbor, and Teller Mission, six miles to the northwest.

At the time of this printing, Michael and his crew had located another 250-300 Olanna reindeer. They are planning another drive to bring them back to their Grantley Harbor corral.

