

# Nome, Nome on the range

by Laura Kosell

What is shaggy in the winter-time and slick and shiny in the summertime?

Why, an Icelandic horse, of course!

In fact, five Icelandic horses quietly moved into Nome the evening of April 16th. They are on their way to work with Tom Gray and his reindeer herd located on the southern coast of the Seward Peninsula at Chiukak between Bluff and Rocky Point.

The money that bought two of the animals came about as a result of a grant written by Dr. Bill Collins of the Agricultural Experiment Station at the University of Alaska at Fairbanks. Tonashay, a reindeer herder employed by the UAF Agricultural Experiment Station, paid for three of the horses out of his own funds. Tonashay has been working with the Gray herd since last fall. They have been using border collies to assist in handling reindeer.

In early April, Collins and Tonashay traveled to Francoise Lake, British Columbia to purchase the five Icelandic horses from breeder Arnold Faber.

"Mr. Faber gave us a real good deal," explained Tonashay. "He not only put us up and fed us for two weeks, he also gave us a good deal on the horses. Icelandic horses can be rather expensive but they are well worth it. The purchase price can range between \$2,000 and \$4,000."

Icelandic horses are a unique breed indeed, according to a research paper entitled "The Introduction and Suitability of Icelandic Horses in Northwestern Alaska," by Dr. Bill Collins and John Brooks.

"About 1000 year ago, settlers from Scandinavian countries and the British Isles began arriving on

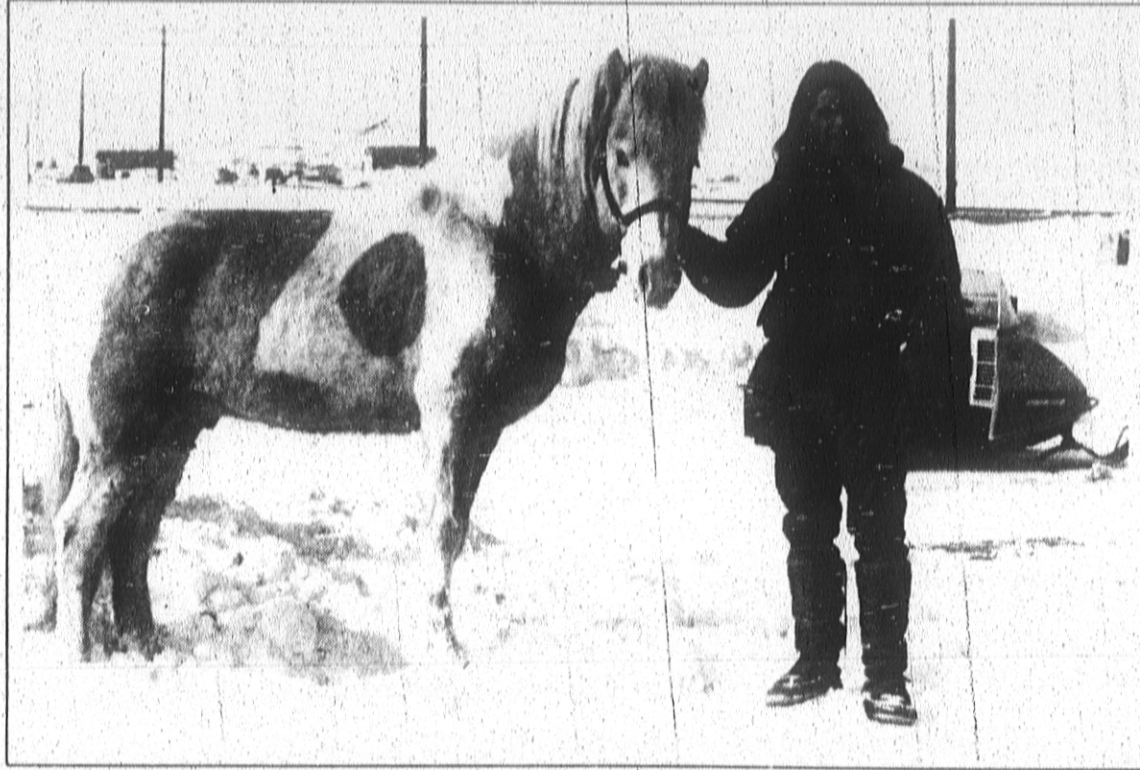
the volcanic island of Iceland. These Viking farmers had crossed the North Atlantic in open boats, bringing with them all that they thought essential for pioneering in their new, often harsh, environment. Perhaps the most enduring of their precious cargo were their horses. Their horses were relatively small (13-15 hands and 850-900 lbs.,) typical of European horses at that time. During the next 1000 years, Icelandic horses were to remain isolated from other horse populations. This was made possible when the Althing (the oldest parliament in the world) passed a law in 930 forbidding the importation of horses in order to maintain the purity of the breed."

Icelandic horses are extremely hardy animals. They are short, stocky and accustomed to severe weather conditions. Since the terrain of Iceland is similar to that of Alaska, these horses have few problems when traveling across the tundra.

The problem with American-bred horses in Arctic climates is that they are expensive to feed and care for. On the other hand, Icelandic horses feed off the tundra vegetation and grow thick hides that keep them warm during the long winter months.

According to herder Tonashay, an Apache Indian from Mexico, the horses will strengthen the quality of the reindeer herd. Throughout the winter months, herders keep track of their reindeer by using snowmachines. In recent years, herders do not stay with their herds from break-up to freeze-up. It is during these warmer months when predators such as brown bears and ravens

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*A hardy Icelandic horse is shown here with Tonashay, a reindeer herder with the UAF Agricultural Experiment Station. Photo by Laura Kosell, Kawerak, Inc.*

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take their toll on the unmonitored herd. Bears attack and kill the animals while ravens poke out the eyes of the fawns and subsequently cause great loss to the herd.

"Staying with your herd keeps them tame and easier to handle," Tonashay continues. "The horses will really come in handy in June when we have our roundup for dehorning. We will not have to use a helicopter to round up the herd. This will not only save a lot of money but will lower the stress placed on the reindeer. Stress definitely affects the quality of the meat."

Tonashay is interested in "keeping the old styles of living alive. We hope to set up some sort of program where high school kids can come out to our

camp and learn how to ride the horses, work with the dogs and handle reindeer."

Over the next several months, Dr. Bill Collins, Tonashay and herd owner Tom Gray plan to research the progress of the Icelandic horse, conduct feed studies on reindeer, study behavioral patterns and perform other research that will benefit the reindeer industry. Reindeer Herders' Association Director, Henry Ahgupuk, is excited about the Icelandic horse project. "It is a pilot project in our region that may eventually benefit the other herders."

After a few weeks rest in Nome, Tonashay will saddle up his gang of five horses and mosie on down the trail to the soon-to-be-green pastures of the Bering Sea coast.