

NANA Corporation mixes business with pleasure

By MARGIE BAUMAN
RILEY WRECK, ALASKA—It was a company picnic to end all company picnics, complete with NANA employees and board members, 1,500 reindeer and no marshmallows.

Officially, of course, it was the second annual dehorning of NANA Regional Corp.'s growing reindeer herd, with the antlers slated for sale as aphrodisiacs in the Orient.

And in the final analysis, they used everything from herders on foot to light aircraft, to motorcycles and snowmachines on the tundra, in pursuit of the herd.

The regional Native corporation for Northwest Alaska chose to combine business with pleasure for its annual round-up, throwing in a picnic for a start and several days of camping out at Riley Wreck, near Kotzebue. They also

offered some practical instruction in reindeer herding for a few employees who had never before seen a reindeer.

It all began the evening of July 6, when the board of directors meeting broke up in Kotzebue at NANA's offices. Light planes piloted by Don Sheldon, Dwight Kramer and Roger Hordlum began ferrying the herders into camp. Massive chunks of ice floating around Riley Wreck made the half-hour trip by boat impossible.

The party included a number of NANA board members and spouses, plus staff from Kotzebue, Deadhorse, Anchorage and Fairbanks.

Tents went up along Riley Wreck's gravel beach and pots of coffee and tundra tea atop driftwood fire. Large cuts of fresh reindeer meat were soon cooking over a charcoal fire nearby.

The youngest herders, children

of staff, meanwhile played on the ice chunks near shore and dug into bags of potatoe chips and canned soda pop.

Winds that put temperatures in the mid-30s kept all the refreshments cool, though they made a game of Frisbee difficult. Music from a cassette tape recorder blended in with chatter around the campfire and winds across the beach.

The conversation centered around events of the coming morn, when the herd, grazing on the tundra about two miles away was to be herded into the corral.

But the herders relaxed, played a ball game called Norwegian and went for walks down the beach and over the tundra. There on the tundra, that delicious tea they were brewing grows rampant between bushes that later in the season will yield blackberries and blueberries. There are also

millions of tiny white, yellow and purple wildflowers in bloom.

In place of star-gazing, out of the question in the land of the midnight sun, there was sunlight enough for a late night game of Norwegian. Some picnic/herding participants said later that it was Norwegian that did them in, rather than bulldogging reindeer.

By midnight, to the west, the sky was blue, orange and gold. To the east, over the ice flow, the sky was pink and grey blue. The icy waters of Kotzebue Sound looked like pink lemonade.

Plans were to begin herding reindeer in early but fog intervened and it was not until mid-day that the reindeer could be seen stampeding down the beach. But the herd had other ideas and half of them took off over the tundra.

Finally, about 700 of them were herded into the corral and the dehorning began.

Reindeer hair flew and soon it looked like some herders had more reindeer than the reindeer.

There's work enough for all, no matter how many show up at the reindeer camp.

Bulldogging the reindeer coming out of the chute is generally left to the men, with women running a "band-aid

brigade." Once antlers are clipped, each stub gets a rubber band to halt bleeding.

Herder Johnson Stocker did much of the identifying for the counters, hollering out the sex and whose herd of each one. Mixed with the NANA herd were some from the Karmun herd at Deering.

Those not at work right around the corral kept busy making coffee, gathering driftwood for the fire, cooking or keeping reindeer headed in the right direction out of the chute.

It all took longer than anticipated.

On the third day, herders tried roundup of the rest of the reindeer with the aid of three light aircraft, two motorcycles and one snowmachine, to no avail.

Finally, they decided to work early into the morning rearranging part of the corral to provide entry from a different direction. Four days after they had arrived, the weather had warmed, the winds were down and they had clipped more than 2,000 pounds of reindeer horn for their efforts.

It all added up to a most unusual company picnic, a lot of potential love in the Orient and a good profit for NANA.



WHO SAYS POLITICIANS don't sit on the fence. State Sen. Frank Ferguson, D-Kotzebue, right, helped herd NANA reindeer through the corral with Willie Hensley, left, whom he succeeded in the legislature. Both are board members at-large of NANA Regional Corporation.



DWIGHT KRAMER, KOTZEBUE, holds down a nervous reindeer whose horns have just been clipped. Kramer, a pilot who helped ferrying herders to Riley Wreck, released the deer a moment later.



STANLEY CUSTER, SHUNGNAK, hauls fresh chunks of reindeer meat down to the campfire at Riley Wreck for a NANA company picnic in advance of the reindeer roundup.

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MAGGIE NEWLIN, WIFE OF NANA board chairman Robert Newlin, crosses the tundra toward the campfire, as a light plane that provided transportation to herders takes off behind.