

# Soviet Native herders seek autonomy

by David Lewis and Mimi George  
for the Tundra Times

*Editor's note: David Lewis and Mimi George are affiliate professors in anthropology at the University of Alaska Southeast. In August 1988, they took 11 Eskimos from Gambell in the schooner Cyrano to stay with their Soviet relatives at the Siberian Yupik village of Novoye Chaplino.*

*They returned to Chukotka in July 1989 with Roger Antogham of Gambell to share the subsistence and cultural activities of Soviet Eskimos and Chukchis for 11 months in villages, hunting camps and tundra yarangas.*

*Now back in Alaska, they are writing a book and making an educational video.*

*This is the second in a three-part series the pair has written for the Tundra Times on the life of reindeer herders in the Soviet North.*

This was our "holiday on the farm," the Neshkan Sovkhoz — state farm — to be precise. We had come down to the tundra base and the 5th, 2nd and 1st Brigade yarangas for a week to be introduced to reindeer herding. Weather had kept us there six weeks.

The term "farm," when applied to a *sovkhoz* is something of a misnomer. This medium-sized one covers 2,400 square miles of unfenced and roadless tundra, several huge lagoons teeming with fish and an 80-mile stretch of sea coast whose waters together with the gulf are prolific in seal and walrus.

It is a many sided enterprise, pasturing 16,000 reindeer (10 percent privately owned), 5,700 blue foxes, 17 milk cows, 1,100 pigs (1,000 of which are privately owned), a hunting brigade with seven motor whaleboats and privately owned dog teams and snow mobiles, a fishing collective, an ivory master carvers' workshop and a skin-sewing collective that makes the clothes so essential to herdsman and hunters.

The village of Neshkan — population 700 — is 90 percent Chukchi, with about 10 percent immigrant specialists from other parts of the Soviet Union and a few part-Eskimo families.

A goodly proportion are employed in the *sovkhoz*, perhaps 250 being more or less full-time herdsman on the tundra. The *sovkhoz* is a wonderfully efficient organization. Skilled people work together in democratically organized brigades, and their efforts bring in an income of several million



*Victor Yettul of the Eighth Brigade and his brother Misha load sleds before departing to the reindeer herds.*

rubles.

The snag is a strait jacket of restrictive regulations administered by Magadan and Moscow with a heavy hand that hamstring local initiative. This is especially evident in the key fields of buying equipment and spares, as well as prices and marketing, including trade with Alaska.

The absence of schools and culture centers in the tundra, forcing children into boarding schools far from their parents, and district boundaries that restrict free movement of deer are among the most burning issues. Re-opening forcibly closed down villages on the sea coast is another.

The key to everything, of course, is for Chukchis and Eskimos to be able to run their own affairs, a process that has gotten off to a rather shaky start after local elections last March.

All eight Neshkan reindeer brigades are housed in yarangas. The widely scattered distribution of the fodder thereabouts demands mobile dwellings to be shifted with the herds. These great pyramidal tents, with vertical side walls to shoulder height, are open at the apex where the poles come together and are mostly canvas covered. The eighth brigade yarangas

are an exception. Theirs are made of skin.

The main tent is unheated, floored by snow in winter, and it is here that all the cooking is done. On one side of the tent, the sled dogs find shelter in the worst weather. The inner rectangular tented room or *polog*, which can accommodate five adults comfortably, is made from some 20 reindeer skins and is floored with split walrus hide over a layer of tundra grasses and twigs.

The *polog* is lit by candles, and its only heating is a homemade kerosene wick lamp. Formerly the lamp was fueled by seal oil. Even in minus 40-degree weather this remarkable dwelling is warm and cozy.

How does this come about? The occupants' body heat is retained by the walls and roof, while their moist breath transpires through the pores of the reindeer skins to the outside, where it freezes. First thing every morning it falls to the lot of the woman of the house to soundly beat the ice crystals from the outside fur of the *polog* and the inside of the yaranga also.

The same principle of beating off snow and frozen moisture applies with equal force to the care of skin

garments. The needs of nature are catered for by chamber pots placed within reach outside the *polog*, with a large block of fresh snow to empty them into. In the morning, the block is carried out into the tundra.

"Just like an old-time Eskimo house — so quiet and warm!" said Roger Antogham of Gambell.

The Chukchi are extremely clean, and on one occasion this might have led to a tragedy. Around 1984 there was living in the 6th Brigade yaranga an old woman who was almost blind as well as deaf. One winter morning when a blizzard was raging she set out to empty a chamber pot well away from the dwelling.

In view of the weather, she was fully clad in double layers of fur clothing (inner combination suit with fur on the inside; outer layer with fur outside), fur socks and fur mukluks, fur mitts and fur hat.

Her task accomplished, she turned for home, but could not find it. She was helpless and nobody could find her. It was two days before the storm eased and revealed the yaranga not far off. The indomitable woman returned as if nothing had happened — still carrying her chamber pot.