

Presentation by Johnson Stalker
to the
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Guest Elder – Johnson Stalker, Kotzebue (verbatim, editor's notes in italics)

Chair Roy Ashenfelter: We'll have our guest speaker. I really appreciate him coming, sharing what he has with us today. And welcome to the Working Group, Johnson. Thanks so much for coming.

Johnson Stalker: Thanks for welcoming me here. This is the first time I didn't even sleep once. I'm nervous or something.

What I'm supposed to talk about is reindeer and caribou. Something that I know about. The first thing I want to say, all my life, ever since I was a young boy with my dad and my uncle I have to be with the reindeer. I didn't even go to school at all. All my life was about reindeer. All my life mostly, in a camp, in a tent with the reindeer.

It was 1940s when I first see caribou in the reindeer. I went to check on the reindeer and I see two different, maybe there was about a thousand reindeer, but there was two of them a lot different. First time I see. And one looked like it had a mark on its ear. I was so scared and I wondered 'cause this is the first time I ever see a caribou in the reindeer. You could notice them though, they are bigger. And after I saw it I was scared of my uncle, I didn't know what to say. Finally I told him. This one had just like ear marks; that was a frozen ear. Sometimes they're born in this cold and the ears freeze and come off, even on a reindeer. That's the first time I see a caribou. It was 1949, I think; two caribou.

My dad tried to get me books so I could learn how to read. But the principal didn't give my dad a book. So they just told my dad, show him how to be a carpenter or something. They just teach me how to be a reindeer herder, and I was a reindeer herder for all my life. And I learned to train sled deer and use them for moving camp, that kind of stuff.

When I first tried making sled deer it was a fawn because I was young, young boy. If I could do it, I'd try. I'd start trying and taught it to wear a halter. From there, they showed me how to castrate the bulls. I learned from my uncle Ross Stalker and my dad. Reindeer herding is a life, you know. I could recognize them when they first made the horns, when they first make the horns, they always make the same way until they get big you know. Some of them were made like this, and they still grow the same way.

When they teach me how to do it. I walked [while herding]. I'm 77 years old now. Sometimes they laugh, they say, "Johnson you don't look like you're 77 years old." I always think that was my life, the walking, the staying with the reindeer. Sometimes I sleep with the reindeer. When

you have the reindeer you have to take care of them. You've got other people 24 hours and then they take over. Reindeer when they sleep, even caribou, when they lay down, the most they'll sleep, two and a half hours. That's all. And they get up and start eating and sometimes I'll sleep with them right on the ground.

How many bulls can take care of a female? They told me one bull can take care of maybe 15 females. And you tally them. And then they showed me how to castrate, they showed me how to do it. That's a really important thing you got to know about. You have to know how to cut it. Make sure you cut it right. It's not a bull no more. If it goes through the castrating, that's a steer. In the tally book, that's a steer. It's not a bull no more. It's for dog meat or for butchering for sale.

They showed me how to make a sled deer. My hands used to be blistered right here. Rope, rope, all the time you have a rope. Carry ropes. Even when you check on the reindeer they want you to take a rope. Sometimes they'll tangle up and you know they can't just come off. [*Reindeer*] could even die from being stuck with their horns. And that's why they used to call me Dr. Stalker because I castrated in the Nome area and I travel to the other herders. They used me as a castrator.

I could recognize some reindeer. You study them when you drive reindeer. When you drive, long, long, long ways, you make sure you look at that way over there. You don't have to go like this you know because reindeer, they can tire real easy. When I have a herder train them, when we driving, you push them a little bit, push them. Sometimes they push them a little too much and then you know, sometimes there's a bad winter when it's rain and your reindeers can't dig through the snow you know and they get weak.

I was teaching at Nome, young boys how to be a reindeer herder. One from Wales. I think they still got few reindeers at Wales. Six months you have to go to school to be a reindeer herder. I showed him how to work on the reindeer. And then he took 500 reindeer to Wales.

Let me tell you how I made a sled deer. You pull the rope short so you won't break its neck. That reindeer don't know what's going on. He's tired and he won't eat all night. He'll be mad while he's tied and grumpy. And when they get mad they put their nose up and down. But my dad and them said, "Don't let them win. You have to win." Get light reindeer if you're gonna make a sled deer. Don't get heavy ones. Get yearling or something and train it.

When you train a sled deer you save those two good ones for an emergency. I used an emergency one time to go Kotzebue because my wife was pregnant and we were in a camp, just me and my wife, and another guy. And so, we have emergency sled deers. We don't use them to go get wood, to get ice, or anything. You just save them for emergency. And I did use these two of them – their names was Monday and Honeycomb. You know your sled deers have names, you name them – Honeycomb, Hopper-ho, Sweetheart. And when you are reindeer herders when you want your sled deer you say the name and we'll know, and we'll rope it.

When for my first wife, I have to go Kotzebue with those two sled deers, emergency, they didn't want to go across the bay for awhile, but you have to use your rope, hit 'em once in awhile. But

when I get to Kotzebue I tie them on top the bank and run to town, and get a plane, Super Cub, Nelson Walker's plane and pickup my wife. And that other guy said, "Oh you go Kotzebue." "Yeh, look you see me, I'm here."

If you do reindeer herding you have to take...that's how I was trained. Not just me there's other herders up north like Raymond Brown, but he's gone, and those guys.

When you train 'em, they'll pull have, they'll just go like this, but don't let 'em win. You have to gently, calmly go forward. Pretty soon the tail will start going up like this. That means he's hurting. And some of them they won't even get up, they'll just lay down. And when the tail starts going up, that's how my uncle and dad showed me how when I was young boy. And when the tail goes up like this now it's hurting. Pretty soon it will start follow that, you know. And then pet 'em, pet 'em, just pet 'em all over. He'll be difficult, he may want to fight you and everything. And make it [*the rope*] a little longer, next day make it a little longer. Finally in three days it'll start eating. Pretty soon you will put on harness, just harness, and just let it run. After that you got a sled deer and you will want to name it. Some other guys will name their's you know some (*name unclear*) or anything like that you know (*name unclear*), you know some of them.

When the caribou start coming, I made a sled deer with caribou. Over at Buckland. And I put harness on it and there was another guy watching me. That was Jimmy Deering. He watched me put harness and I take off and he would say, "I wonder how he goes, now he comes back, now he goes?"

When you make a sled deer you have to work it from one side, always from one side.

There at Buckland, we don't have dog teams, just separate dogs you know, and a sled deer to move the tent, move firewood, get ice.

When I start going to Nome, I drive reindeer all the way from Kotzebue to Nome with two other guys. Me and Raymond Lee mostly walked. We have dog team you know. Drive all the way to Nome when they want to start model herd reindeer. I couldn't understand. They keep asking me for one year or so, they want to have model herd reindeer at Nome. BIA. So that's how we drive the reindeer by foot and dog team all the way from Kotzebue to Nome.

Sometimes you will go and there's no moss. Sometimes you have to. They're not like the dogs, they got lots of appetite, reindeer.

Any questions?

Q. How long did it take from Kotzebue to Nome?

A. It take, we have to stop at [*Cape*] Espenberg to get more deer. When we start out from Kotzebue we have to get to Espenberg to get more deer. It take us almost a month because we try to get two weeks you know to try to get more deer, Point Good Hope reindeer paid back to Golovin. Drive 'em. Take us about a month.

Q. What made your father and uncle interested in reindeer herding?

A. I am adopted to Stalkers. John Stalker is my dad and uncle Ross Stalker. At Noatak he had a corral there and he got a loan from the government in the 1940s and he brought them [*reindeer*] to Noatak. And they trained me how to be a reindeer herder. And sometimes wintertime...we didn't have caribou then, just reindeer you know. We usually put light on our reindeer. Do you know why we put the light up? (*can't hear response or next question*)

Dog team. Raymond Brown and Jacob Stalker were the dog team drivers. They made us breakfast in the morning. They would give us coffee and breakfast. We would just go out and drive reindeer. And they would take the tent and stuff. And then they catch us when it's time for reindeer for lunch and give them lunch, put our little tent. Let them rest when we find a good feed, let them eat there, let them rest and then go again.

Long ago we don't have no snow machines so my uncle Ross put a red lantern inside something and put a stick way up. That's for the wolf. Sometimes wolf come around you know. They see that big red thing. I think it works. And then you go turn it off in the morning and go put it on nighttime.

One time we had a wolf, real smart, they go when it gets stormy, they will hunt the reindeer. Sometimes they just eat their [*reindeer*] tongues.

One time I went to Fairbanks getting my reindeer rights. 1962. Flight was on Wien Airlines. I stayed two weeks there getting my reindeer rights. When we fly, when they put [*reindeer*] in the jet plane they were standing, and I stayed by the pilot and looked at them once in a while. We didn't tie them or anything you know. Not even cage or anything. All they do is just standing. And I was there with them. And then when we land to Fairbanks, we put them in a pickup truck and I stand with them, while we bring them to Griffin Park. And I had reindeer moss from Kotzebue.

Q. Have you noticed any changes in the weather?

A. Yeh, bad weather sometimes too, you know. (*unclear sentence*) Yeh, the weather, sometimes it will be bad. We don't have big herd. We have maybe up to 800, up to a thousand, and we use them, butcher for sale. Not try to grow them or anything, just use them. And they were real tame. They were tame you know.

Q. What was the biggest group of caribou you saw and what happened, did you have a problem?

A. Thousands and thousands. One time when we had a meeting at Nome they asked me, "Johnson, would you recognize if one caribou got in with the reindeer?" I think that was one of the herders from Teller. He said, "we never seen a caribou live before." That's what they tell me you know. Even if he had 1,000 reindeer, or more than that, "Yes I could tell one caribou."

He said, “How?” “Just like Eskimo and white people.” [*Laughter*]. Reindeer act just like Eskimos. Shorter, you know. They didn’t want to believe me for a while. Because you can know it, because they [*caribou*] are bigger. Yeh, long legs, long tail, even from the reindeer. But right now they are half-breeds. They are all mixed up with all the other reindeer herds, mixed up with caribou.

Q. [*Weather*]?

A. Long time ago you asked how the weather used to be. It would always be real cold too you know but I really don’t know, I can’t answer that question. Maybe somebody know about that.

But in the summertime when it gets hot, real hot, the bugs bother reindeer. They try to go against the wind or go down a mountain or on a snowbank or when you’re down on the beach in the ocean side. In the morning when I wake up they told me, put your finger outside and go like this [*wet a finger*], see which way the wind’s blowing, then you go back to sleep and in the morning the reindeers will come down themselves. Sometimes it never works and I have to have an extra walk you know [*to get the stray reindeer*]. But sometimes it works.

Just long ago reindeer herders say they even before my time they race with their reindeer.

When I was up north we had sled deer at Christmas right in town you know, Christmas tree(?) Two of them. [*Ended thought.*]

They’re good when you train ‘em right. They know their names too, just like a dog. When you name them. They’re smart. They’re real smart. When you try to drive them into a corral, they know. They know the leaders are...You have to know what you are doing when you drive them with the people. Sometimes you have lots of people to drive the reindeer in the corral. And reindeer go around one way. They go around this way [*gestures counter-clockwise*]. You have them in a tight pocket they go around one way. And when I go to Nunivak Island – they sent me down to Nunivak Island – they couldn’t get their reindeer into a corral. And they sent me down there with my dog, because the North Star was there and they have to butcher. They sent me down there and I found out those reindeer was opposite. They go around the other way [*clockwise*]. I think it’s the weather or something.

When you are around this area they go around one way. And when they get tight, the farther they go in the corral, they get real tight. That means you’re gonna get ‘em. They’re ready to go in.

When I go to Nunivak Island they said, “Johnson, do it the way you do it,” the BIA boss.

-“I don’t know the people there. They might don’t like what I’m gonna do. I don’t know their reindeer.”

-“They tried it enough. You do it the way you do it.”

So they had a little meeting and they listened to me. We brought about 800 reindeer in a corral and the corral is all the way to town, slaughterhouse. They start butchering. They even cancelled

Sunday church because they have to butcher for the North Star. And after I did that [they said], “Johnson you did it.” It was my dog. The [*reindeer*] never see a dog before. I had reindeer dog. They said, “Gee, you got good dog.” It wasn’t good dog; they were so scared of that dog that they start going around. And I know when they do that we’re gonna get ‘em. We’re gonna get ‘em in. After you get them in there you can push them all the way in to the slaughterhouse, where they slaughter them.

Q. Any experience or stories about bears and wolves? How did you protect your reindeer?

A. Yes. We have problems with bears and wolves. We do. We have problems with them. But we have to really take turns and take care of them – fawning time especially. We take care of the reindeer. Females sometimes they drop a little dead fawn too and we will try to save the mother. And we will save the mother with rope you know. Not all the time. We have problem with bears when they first go out, baby fawns you know. But we always will try to take the bulls off from the females when they have fawns, keep them away. You know when they first have fawns it will be, one might be one week I had one fawn, when you stare at the deer all the time. And pretty soon they’ll start to get black, right there. (*unclear*) from the foxes, even crows too. Those crows when their mamas is trying to eat babies are not happy, they make a hole on the baby fawns [*side*], and the foxes, so we take turns and take care of them. They all kill quite a few. And we look for the hawks.

You know when you gonna go drive across a river after they have fawns, they mill around and lots of fawns will get left behind, you know how they find their fawns, when they look all same? Would you guess how they find their fawns? [*Pause, no answer*]. I’ll explain it. You know when they holler, make lots of noise looking for their fawns, they just smell it, smell it from the rear. And they smell it – “oh that’s not right” – and they go to the fawn at other place. And they smell it – “Oh, that’s mine right here.” That’s how they find their fawns. Cause they all look the same, but through the smell.

Q. (*Question can’t be heard*)

A. One time at Nome there’s reindeers up in the mountains, in a snowbank I try to gather the missing so I followed them up there. While I was walking, there was a bear, mosquitoes around his ears, stomach going up and down, sleeping. And I go backwards, go backwards; he didn’t know that I was a little ways. Sometimes it’s scary.

I walk with Jim Dau when I first met him in Nome. [Dau – “He was a good walker.”]

Right now, I don’t know how much reindeer is right now. They’re around the area. Nome area someplace.

Up north they see some reindeer in the caribou. Sometimes, once in a while, you know many caribous mixed up to reindeer and then they usually try to go home. When I first bring reindeer to Nome from Kotzebue, two years they try to go home. And they really get smart. Maybe 20, 30, a bunch of them try to go up north. Pretty tough. They want to go home. They know which

way to go home to. And after I was at Nome for eleven years, I brought those reindeer back to Kotzebue. That was for NANA. And I never walked; used snow machines.

At Nome there were a lot of herd reindeer, experimental reindeer, I took care of as a chief herder. I would take care of them alone, but there was other guys too you know, and I was a chief herder.

I went to Birmingham, Alabama for being outstanding young farmer. One time they send me down there; I met all kinds of farmers.

Q. How long have you been a reindeer herder?

A. Long time [*laughter*]. I tried to get mad at my dad and my uncle one time 'cause they didn't let me go to school. But now I understand. They teach me right way to be a reindeer herder. And I could recognize the reindeer. When I had reindeer herds and there were reindeer herders there – Nathan, (*unclear name*) and those guys, they called themselves a reindeer herder, they found out they were not reindeer herders when I go there. They never take care of them when they fawn, you know, fawning time. That's the main reason to take care of them when they are having fawns. From those bears, and wolves, and fox.

Q. (*Question can't be heard*)

A. Yeh. When you have a reindeer dog you have to train that dog in the house, "move, move", and when you drive reindeer you run them good. And when he learn you'll say "left side, right side", he'll keep the reindeers together. Even when you try to rope a sled deer and you couldn't get it, and my reindeer dog, he knows that when I try to get it, he will start going after it. Nobody won't touch if I butcher(?) stranger. That dog will. And they will take care of you from bears too. One time bear tried to go after me at Nome and I had a dog, the dog would chase 'em, chase 'em away. It's good to have reindeer dog. And you train 'em.

When you try to get the reindeer out from the caribou, they will get left behind. You might be lucky and get them back; sometimes, not all the time. There's lots of herders lose their [*stock*] mixed up with the caribou. (*Name unclear*), long ago, those guys. Lars Gray. Everybody up north.

Chair Ashenfelter: Okay, thank you very much. Really a great presentation by elder speaker Johnson Stalker. Thank you very much.