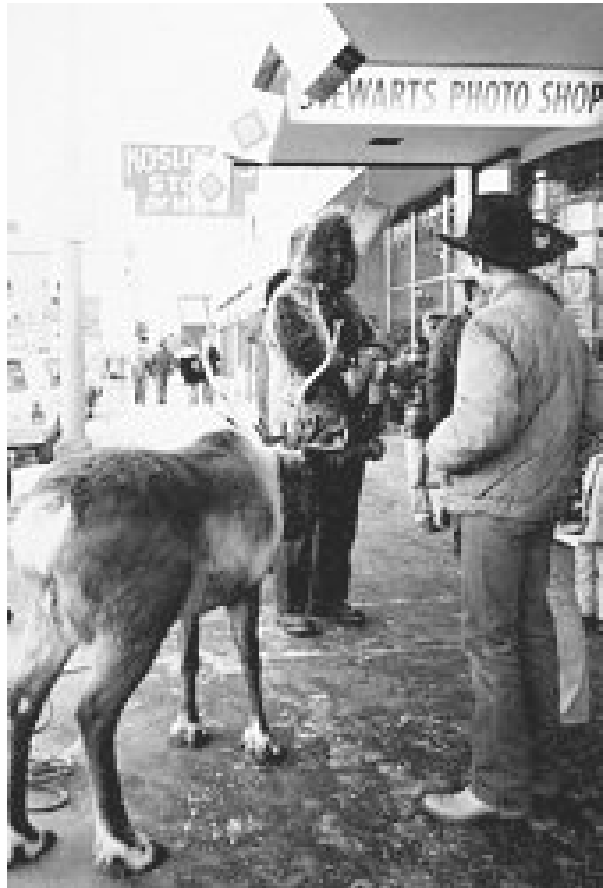


Alaskans / Pioneers
By Tricia Brown

STAR THE REINDEER: The Brightest Star in Anchorage



Alaska's biggest city has known many Stars, as pioneers Ivan and Oro Stewart shared their pet reindeer with the townspeople for decades. Photo courtesy Stewart's Photo Shop.

More about Star the Reindeer:

If the people of Anchorage ever voted on a city mascot, the hands-down favorite probably would be a gentle, affectionate creature named Star, the reindeer who has charmed locals and visitors for years. Star lives in a pen attached to a house at the corner of 10th Avenue and I Street, the former residence of Anchorage pioneers Ivan and Oro Stewart. She goes for walks with her caretaker, Albert Whitehead, to get her exercise,

eats alfalfa and timothy hay, plus a variety of tasty fruits and veggies. And while visitors may stare and point at the sight of a reindeer along a busy downtown street, Alaskans have grown used to seeing Star take a stroll down the city sidewalks to the grassy (or snowy) Park Strip.

Today “Star the Reindeer” has become an Anchorage institution. Nearly everybody but the newcomers recognizes the reindeer with the splash of white on her face, and drivers can’t help but glance in her direction as they pass. She’s won trophy after trophy in decades of Fur Rendezvous parades. She’s attended political events, and dropped in at Christmas and birthday parties. In the early days she appeared on stage with Alaska Native dancers. For forty years, Star has shown up in places you’d never guess you’d find a reindeer. Forty years? Can reindeer live that long? Well, no—the current Star is actually the sixth of the Stars—all females and virtual look-alikes, as each one has been chosen for the white markings on her face.

In 2001, when Star’s owner, Oro Stewart, was 83 years old, she told an *Anchorage Press* reporter that she kept the same name for each animal “to provide continuity to the people of Anchorage. They take their children to see the reindeer, and it’s always a Star.”

Anchorage first became a one-reindeer town in 1960, when Oro told her husband she wanted an Alaskan pet. They arranged for a domesticated reindeer to be shipped from Larry Davis, a Native herder outside the Nome area. The Stewarts were an adventurous pair who were used to following their dreams. Ivan had had a photo shop in Kodiak when they first married, and Oro learned the business quickly. In 1942, they moved into Anchorage, where they opened a photo shop on Fourth Avenue. They applied for a homestead in Potter Valley in the 1950s and hefted a houseboat onto blocks to serve as their cabin. Later, they moved into town. In 1960, the couple bought a jade mine outside of Kobuk, and sold their high-quality jade and other finds through Stewart’s Photo Shop.



Anchorage Museum of History & Art. Library & Archives.

These small jade boulders from the Kobuk area of northwestern were shipped through Fairbanks by Wien Air. Elisabeth Meyer photo. Anchorage Museum of History and Art, Library and Archives.

Collection Name:	<u>AMHA. Wien Collection</u>
Identifier:	<u>AMHA-b85-27-561</u>
Title:	<u>Jade - Fairbanks.</u>
Description:	<u>Title taken from verso. Large pieces of jade sitting on pallet next to sign reading "Wien" in Fairbanks, Alaska. Also from verso: "Copyright Elisabeth Meyer, Eckersberggt 21, Oslo."</u> <u>Photographer: Elisabeth Meyer. Original photograph size: 4 3/4" x 7 1/2".</u>
Creator:	<u>Meyer, Elisabeth</u>

The Stewarts traveled all over the state taking photos and remarkable movie footage—their images were even featured in a Disney film. Then there's the story of the famous Amphi-car (a combination car and boat) that they bought and test-drove on the Yukon River via Circle City. The stylish amphibious vehicle could drive from land into water with no trouble. It, too, appeared in many a Fur Rendezvous parade. They founded the Chugach Gem & Mineral Society and led field trips for fellow rockhounds, and in later years, Oro lobbied the legislature to have jade named as the state gem—and it worked. The Stewarts decided to host an annual Wild Game Barbecue at their photo shop

every year during Fur Rendezvous, free to any hungry or simply curious person—and they did it. So generally speaking, if the Stewarts had a good idea, they usually made it work. When Oro said she wanted a pet reindeer, they likely said to themselves, *Why not? Let's do it.* At the time, there were no laws against it.

The first Star got her name from the lovely splash of white fur between her eyes, and from that time on, Nome area herder Larry Davis selected every Star, except the last, to look like the first Star.

“Larry always tells me he’s going to give me the prettiest reindeer and he always does,” Oro told the *Anchorage Press* in 2001. “Star has always had a white spot in the middle of her forehead, like a star, and a white breast and trim. Most reindeer are all dark gray or brown.”

But while most reindeer are gray or brown, it’s also true that most reindeer are not loners. They’re herd animals. So those who loved Star also were concerned about her—whether she was lonely and whether she got enough exercise or the right food. Regular veterinary visits ensured that every Star was in good health, and the first Star lived to the age of twenty-three. Considering that wild deer live to eight to ten years old at the most, her life span was remarkable. But during the 1980s and 1990s, subsequent Stars had a rough go of it, as intruders maimed or killed more than one of the docile creatures. One of the Stars died from eating plastic bags in 1986, the same year that Oro’s beloved Ivan died at age seventy-four.

The widow asked for another reindeer from Larry Davis, and Star IV was her companion until 2002, living until age fourteen. By then Oro Stewart was eighty-five years old, no longer strong, and not sure if she’d get another pet. She didn’t have to do the chores alone—for years she and Ivan had counted on longtime friend Albert Whitehead to help care for their Stars. Finally, with Whitehead’s promise that he’d take care of a new Star for the rest of her life, Oro changed her mind. Later she told an *Anchorage Press* reporter, “I was so pestered by people asking when there was going to be another. This is a legend in Anchorage. You cannot give up at this point in the game.”

The last Star for Oro arrived that summer of 2002, but by fall, both Star and Oro Stewart had passed away within weeks of each other. Young Star V died suddenly from an infection; Oro, Alaska’s grand old lady, died from heart failure.

Albert Whitehead later told an Associated Press reporter that he struggled with the decision whether to continue the Star tradition without the Stewarts. But one little reindeer stole his heart, and that sealed it. Born at the reindeer farm north of Anchorage, Star VI, who had originally been named Noel, had been rejected by her mother and her growth had been stunted. She is only four and a half feet tall, he said, about six inches shorter than others her age.

“She was just a little sweetheart, the prettiest deer we’ve had,” Whitehead said. “This one is by far the best.”

So Anchorage’s favorite reindeer lives on. Stewart’s Photo Shop goes on, too. The oldest building in downtown Anchorage, and one that survived the 1964 earthquake, is now owned and operated by longtime friends of the Stewarts, Steve and Dianne Ellis. They still sell jade by the pound or by the boulder, too.

In the winter of 2006, the Fur Rendezvous grand parade theme was “Legends and Heroes,” a natural fit for a float honoring Alaska legends Ivan and Oro Stewart. As the float rolled down Fourth Avenue, the famous Star the Reindeer followed, joined by her devoted owner, Albert Whitehead. Along the parade route, cheers and the muffled applause of hundreds of mitts sounded through the cold air. Star would receive yet another trophy for her collection, this time for second-place in the Equestrian Division.

And yet a new generation of youngsters can say hello to (but please don’t feed!) Star in her home at 10th Avenue and I Streets.

(Please treat these two pieces as Sidebar material):

MORE ABOUT REINDEER (or is that a CARIBOU?)



A century ago, I_upiat travelers sometimes harnessed semi-domesticated reindeer to help make the trip easier. H. G. Kaiser photo. Alaska State Library.

Collection Name:	<u>Dr. Daniel S. Neuman. Photographs, 1911-1920. ASL-PCA-307</u>
Identifier:	<u>ASL-P307-0095</u>
Title:	<u>Alaska Reindeer Camp.</u>
Description:	<u>Title taken from album caption. Several Eskimos with harnessed reindeer and sleds, near a small structure.</u>
Creator:	<u>Kaiser, H.G.</u>

What's the difference between reindeer and caribou? Not much. Reindeer, whose scientific name is *Rangifer tarandus*, are semi-domesticated, slightly smaller than their

wild cousins, and have a flatter nose. While Americans make the distinction between reindeer and caribou, in most of the world, both types are called reindeer.

Oro Stewart always said that Star was very affectionate, and that when she saw Oro, she made a “snuffling” sound. That remarkable, snuffling nose is uniquely designed for life in the Far North. Inside are “nasal turbinate bones,” which look like rolled up pieces of paper. These specialized bones increase the area inside the reindeer’s nostrils, and allow body heat to warm the cold air before entering their lungs.

Reindeer and caribou hooves seem to adapt to the season. In summers, when the tundra is soft and wet, the animals’ footpads become spongy. In the winter, the pads shrink and tighten, exposing more of the hardened hoof, which cuts into the ice, giving them better footing. So winter or summer, the animal is prepared for what the weather brings.

A reindeer’s coat has two layers of fur. It has a dense woolly undercoat and a longer-haired overcoat consisting of hollow, air-filled hairs. The air-filled hairs hold heat from the sun, and also help the animals float when they’re swimming. Migrating herds of caribou often must swim across large lakes or fast-moving streams. Both males and females grow antlers, which are shed each year.

In Alaska, reindeer herding is the exclusive right of Natives since the Reindeer Act was passed in 1937. In 2000, there were close to 20,000 reindeer in Alaska. The most famous among the reindeer herders was Sinrock Mary, a remarkable Iñupiaq woman who was the richest woman in Alaska at the start of the 20th century. [\(LINK TO SINROCK MARY STORY\)](#)

STAR POWER

The original **Star** came to Anchorage in 1962, selected for Ivan and Oro Stewart by reindeer herder Larry Davis of Nome. Star lived to be twenty-three years old, far exceeding the eight or nine years that a wild deer lives.

Star II died in the mid-1980s when a newcomer to Alaska broke into the pen, killed and butchered her, and sold the meat. He spent a year in jail for his crime.

Star III died in 1986 when she ate plastic bags that had been pushed through the fence. Afterward, a sign on the pen warned visitors that plastic bags kill.

Star IV enjoyed many years under Oro's care, but suffered from arthritis and could only tolerate weekly walks. She was shaken, but survived, when a man climbed into her pen in 1987 and broke off one antler. Star IV was fourteen years old when she died in May 2002.

Star V was 2 months old when she came to Anchorage from Nome, arriving in July 2002. Sadly, she died unexpectedly of a bacterial infection, not long before Oro Stewart herself passed away that fall.

Star VI was born April 2001 at the reindeer farm north of Anchorage. Originally named Noel, she was renamed Star by her new owner, Albert Whitehead. In April 2006, she was nearly kidnapped. Whitehead found a hole in the pen's fence with a trail of hay leading out to the sidewalk. He was relieved and happy to see that Star had stayed in her cage, however, and that she was not hurt.

LINKS:

Associated Press story about Star the Reindeer:

www.phillyburbs.com/pb-dyn/news/281-03072005-459518.html

***Anchorage Press* story about Oro Stewart and the Wild Game Barbecue:**

www.anchoragepress.com/archives/document4478.html

Stewart's Photo Shop:

www.stewartphoto.com/

Amphi-Car photos:

www.amphicar.com/photog.htm

Visit the library for more information:

Your local librarian may help you find more about Star the Reindeer, and if you're interested in history, more about the early days of reindeer herding in Alaska. Visit your library or go online to see what's available in holdings all over the state. Take these simple steps:


1. Access **SLED** (State Library Electronic Doorway) at <http://sled.alaska.edu/library.html>.
2. Click on the listing for **ALNCat** (the Alaska Library Network Catalog) to view the Basic Search window.
3. Go to the Keyword field, and type in **REINDEER HERDING ALASKA**.

More Reading:

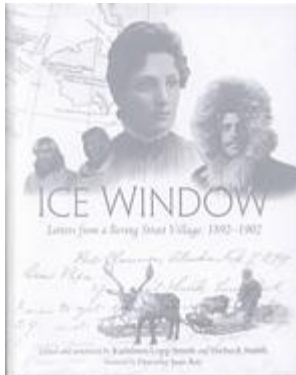
Eskimos, reindeer, and land /

Richard Olav **Stern**

1980

English  Book viii, 205 p. : ill. ; 22 cm.


[Fairbanks] : Agricultural Experiment Station, School of Agriculture and Land Resources Management, University of Alaska,



Ice window : letters from a Bering Strait village, 1892-1902 /

Ellen Louise Kittredge **Lopp**; William Thomas **Lopp**; Kathleen Lopp **Smith**; Verbeck **Smith**

2001

English  Book xix, 389 p. : ill., maps ; 26 cm.


Fairbanks, Alaska : University of Alaska Press, ; ISBN: 1889963208 (acid-free paper)
1889963216 (pbk. : acid-free paper)

Family correspondence, journals, drawings, and other materials form the basis of this collection documenting a slice of life at Cape Prince of Wales, an Alaska Eskimo village 55 miles across the Bering Strait from Siberia. Most of the letters were written by Ellen Louise Kittredge Lopp, a white teacher, missionary, and mother, who describes everyday Native life and celebrations, schoolroom adventures, visitors from trading and whaling ships, the environment, the subsistence way of life, and the herding of reindeer the school and mission acquired in 1894....

The great trek; the story of the five-year drive of a reindeer herd through the icy wastes of Alaska and northwestern Canada,

Max **Miller**


1935

English  Book 224 p. 1 illus., plates (part double) ports. 22 cm.
Garden City, N.Y., Doubleday, Doran & co., inc.,

Alaska reindeer herdsman; a study of native management in transition.

Dean Francis **Olson**


1969

English  Book xv, 156 p. map. 28 cm.
College, Institute of Social, Economic and Government Research, University of Alaska,

Reindeer and gold /

Keith A **Murray**


1988

English  Book x, 239 p., [11] p. of plates : ill. ; 23 cm.
Bellingham, Wash. : Center for Pacific Northwest Studies, Western Washington University, ;
ISBN: 0929008227

From hunters to herders : the transformation of earth, society, and heaven among the Inupiat of Beringia /

Linda J **Ellanna**; George K **Sherrod**; Rachel **Mason**



2004

English  Book ix, 227 p. : ill., maps ; 28 cm.
[Anchorage, Alaska : U.S. Dept. of the Interior, National Park Service, Alaska Regional Office]

"I used to have lots of reindeers" : the ethnohistory and cultural ecology of reindeer herding in Northwest Alaska /

Richard Olav **Stern**

1980



English  Book : Thesis/dissertation/manuscript  Archival Material xviii, 516 leaves : ill.,
maps ; 29 cm.

VIDEO:

The Reindeer queen the story of Sinrock Mary /

Maria **Brooks**

1991

English  Visual Material : Videorecording :  VHS tape 1 videocassette (VHS) (ca. 30 min.) :
sd., col. ; 1/2 in.
[Anchorage, Alaska] : KAKM,

Covers the life of Sinrock Mary, a major reindeer herder on the Seward Peninsula, Alaska in the late 19th and early 20th century.