

REINDEER AND POTATOES ON THE KUSKOKWIM RIVER: A FAMILY HISTORY IN WESTERN ALASKA

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ABSTRACT

The Alaska Reindeer Project brought Saami reindeer herders from Finnmark in northern Norway to the Seward Peninsula of Alaska to teach their traditional herding techniques and lifeways to Eskimo hunter-gatherers at the turn of the last century. The arrival of the Saami on the Seward Peninsula was overshadowed by the Nome gold rush, but the herders and their families established themselves and the foundations of a herding economy in western Alaska. In 1903, the Sara and Spein families, members of the Saami group who arrived at Unalakleet in 1898, delivered a herd of reindeer to the Moravian Mission at Bethel and settled in the Kuskokwim River region where they helped to found a herding industry at Akiak. Adams Hollis Twitchell was a trader newly arrived in the Kuskokwim region when the Sara and Spein families arrived at Bethel. Twitchell was married to a Yup'ik Eskimo woman and was a collector of Yup'ik cultural objects who supplied hundreds of items to museums and major collectors. Twitchell sold his merchandizing business in Bethel to purchase reindeer from the Saami and establish his own herd near the Beaver Mountains, supplying reindeer meat to the Iditarod and Innoko District gold mines. When the Reindeer Act of 1937 ended their herding livelihoods, the Saami and Twitchell families turned to other western Alaska economic activities, including placer gold mining, store keeping, raising produce, and fur trapping.

KEYWORDS: reindeer herding; Saami, Yup'ik Eskimo, economic and cultural change

INTRODUCTION

This paper profiles the history and context of a family who lived and worked in the Kuskokwim River region of southwest Alaska during the territorial days at the end of the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century. This period was a time of significant social and economic changes in that part of the world, including the Nome gold rush in 1898 that brought the first wave of prospectors to western Alaska and the rise and fall of the United States government's Alaska Reindeer Project.

The author's family history reflects these larger events on a more personal scale; her great grandparents, Nils Persen Sara and Inger Maria Mortensdatter Sara, were

among the larger of the two emigrations of Saami herders in the 1890s. Concurrent with their arrival at Unalakleet was the arrival in Nome of a gold miner with roots in rural New England, the author's paternal grandfather Adams Hollis Twitchell, and the immigration of fifteen-year-old Jens Anton Kvamme from Finnmark, Norway to the U.S. The Sara family and Twitchell arrived at Seward Peninsula at about the same time, but there were no known interactions between them until after the Sara family arrived in the Kuskokwim River valley in 1903. Within a decade, reindeer herding and family ties would link these families, through the marriage of Adams Hollis Twitchell's son

Benjamin to Berntina Kvamme, the youngest daughter of Jens Anton Kvamme and Ellen Marie Sara.

THE ALASKA REINDEER PROJECT

The subsistence lifestyle of the indigenous people in northwestern Alaska was considered meager and abject as measured by the agrarian-based standards of missionaries and educators based in the continental U.S. At a time when the whaling industry was reaching farther north in search of diminishing resources and new gold discoveries in the Yukon and Alaska were creating rushes of people northward, a U.S. government-funded program spearheaded by Dr. Sheldon Jackson, a religious leader of the Moravian Church, brought a group of Saami reindeer herders from Finnmark in northern Norway to the Seward Peninsula of Alaska to teach herding culture and skills to Eskimo hunter-gatherers. The Alaska Reindeer Project was a unique effort played out during a time of great social and economic changes in a land that continues to engender broad social experiments (e.g., the Alaska Native Land Claims Settlement Act).

The Alaska Reindeer Project was the vision of Dr. Jackson, who convinced the U.S. Congress to fund the establishment of reindeer herding in Alaska with reindeer imported from Siberia and Saami reindeer herders imported from Finnmark to teach animal husbandry to indigenous Alaskans. Although the project was originally conceived as a way to provide a reliable and consistent food source and livelihood for Eskimo on the Seward Peninsula, it gradually evolved into an effort to create a new Alaska economy modeled after the reindeer economy of the Scandinavian countries.

At first, the reindeer herds grew quickly and the reindeer commission expanded reindeer herding geographically, but ultimately, growth of the herds exceeded market demand and the boom and bust cycle of early gold mining combined with the national economic collapse of the Great Depression reverberated within the reindeer industry as well.

Initially, Dr. Sheldon Jackson brought a small group of Saami to Alaska in 1894 to serve three-year herding contracts. Following that pilot effort, a larger, more permanent colony was recruited in Norway during the winter of 1898. Under contract to the U.S. government, most of the Saami herders were paid a monthly salary of \$22.33 plus food and clothing for the first two years of service, then the herder could elect to be paid in reindeer. Three un-

married Saami women were also hired to wash and mend clothing for the unmarried herders; they were paid \$4.46 per month. At the end of their service, the herders could remain in the U.S., pay for their own return to Norway, or have the government pay their way home—provided the herder worked six months with no salary. Seventy-two persons signed the January 24, 1898, contract.

As a result of the recruitment in Finnmark, 113 men, women and children destined for Unalakleet and more than five hundred reindeer (purchased at ten dollars per head for the ill-fated Yukon Relief Expedition) assembled at Bossekop, on Altafjord, Norway. The Saami had traveled overland, bringing the deer through the mountain passes down to the coast during a protracted and bitterly cold blizzard that developed into hurricane winds that rattled buildings and threatened to blow in the windows of the hotel at Alta. The Saami and all their sleds, harnesses and bags of lichen for feeding the deer were loaded on the steamship *Manitoban* which departed from Bossekop on February 2, 1898, bound for the stockyards of New Jersey. The ship was an old freighter configured to haul livestock and the Saami were treated like cargo, relegated to open steerage in the hold of the ship for the duration of the Atlantic crossing (Sakariassen 2002).

The February crossing of the stormy North Atlantic took twenty-three days, during which a fierce nine-day storm battered the ship, crushing a lifeboat, planking, and stanchions and ripping the figurehead from the bow. Virtually every person in the crowded and reeking hold was seasick. The pitching waves were so severe it was difficult to stand up and the food was carelessly contaminated by an indifferent and dirty cook who walked on the stored meat with the same boots he wore through the dirty water and manure in the reindeer pens. The reindeer that were penned in stanchions on deck had to endure the storm, including two days without food due to hurricane-force winds when no one ventured above deck.

THE SARA FAMILY IN ALASKA

Among the group of herders and their families who made the harrowing North Atlantic crossing were Nils Persen Sara, his wife Inger Marie Mortensdatter Sara, and their five youngest children, Ellen Marie Sara, who at fifteen was the oldest of the five children who traveled with their parents, and her brothers Mikkel (twelve), Morten (six), Klemet (four) and Mathias (two). An older brother, Per (Peter) Sara, traveled independently several years later

and rejoined his family during their relocation to the Kuskokwim Valley.

The Atlantic crossing in the dead of winter was only the first part of an epic journey. The arrival of the *Manitoban* and its exotic cargo at the stockyards of New Jersey created a sensation in New York (*New York Times* 1898). Both the reindeer and the Saami herders and their families crossed the U.S. by train, where crowds of curious people gathered at stopping points to stare at and touch the clothing of the Saami travelers. Berntina Venes, Ellen Marie's daughter, wrote that her mother had been impressed by the train journey:

She told us of crowds of people at train stops along the way that were curious about these strange people in their colorful clothing, and about the reindeer. She said people tried to reach out and touch their clothes and stared at them. To a young girl straight from the mountains of Lapland, the sights and sounds along the way of their journey to their new home must have been truly amazing (Venes 1971).

They arrived in Seattle on March 7 and encamped for two weeks in Seattle at Woodland Park, the only fenced area of Seattle, where they became a local attraction viewed by more than ten thousand people. During the protracted wait in Seattle the youngest Sara child, three-year-old Mathias, succumbed to an illness he had struggled against during the entire trip and was buried in Washington (Sakariassen 2002). The group was split up while the reindeer and men were shipped to Haines for the Yukon Relief Expedition; in the interim, the women and children were taken to Port Townsend to wait for their return. The herders returned to Port Townsend on May 18 and the Saami resumed their journey to Unalakleet on June 22; the two ships carrying the party arrived there on July 29 and 31, 1898. Two Saami families from the 1894 immigration and an Alaska Native family had brought the government herd from the Teller Station near Port Clarence to Unalakleet while Dr. Jackson was in Norway recruiting herders for the 1898 expedition.

The arrival of the new Saami herders at the chosen site of the future Eaton Reindeer Station, eight miles upriver from Unalakleet, was finally accomplished on August 5, 1898. The Saami were issued tents and food rations and immediately began to construct log houses to live in before winter set in.

One year later, Nils Persen and Inger Maria Sara, their sons Morten and Clement, and forty-two reindeer were

taken to St. Lawrence Island to begin reindeer herding among the Siberian Yupiit at Gambell. Within two years of their arrival in Alaska, a marriage was arranged for Ellen Marie Sara to Per Mathisen Spein, one of the Saami herders who had also arrived on the *Manitoban*. They were married on January 4, 1900.

As reindeer herding spread across western Alaska from its beachhead on the Seward Peninsula, some Saami families were charged with bringing starter herds to missions and villages in other parts of the Territory. In February 1903, the Sara family, together with Per Mathisen Spein, was tasked with bringing deer from Unalakleet to replenish the Moravian mission herd at Bethel. They also brought two herds of 100 deer each on loan from the government to establish their own private herds in the Kuskokwim region to support their families, because the meager rations provided to the herders by the U.S. government could not be extended to areas beyond the immediate region of the Seward Peninsula reindeer stations.

When the herd reached the Yukon River, the herders found that the tundra between the Yukon and Bethel was covered with a thick layer of ice, preventing the deer from finding food. Because it would have been perilous to continue with the deer, the family spent the spring, summer and fall grazing the herd in the Andreafsky Hills near St. Marys.

When Carl Lind reached the group in September, he discovered that Ellen Marie Spein had given birth to a baby just four days prior to his arrival and the herders had no milk and very little food in camp, and no ammunition to hunt wild game. They had not obtained more supplies at the nearest store because their government-authorized account with the merchant was so small they were reluctant to purchase what they needed. Mr. Lind was able to purchase a few tins of food, including one can of milk, from a riverboat galley cook and had them sent to Mrs. Spein (Lind 1904).

The Yukon River crossing and subsequent drive across the frozen tundra between the Yukon and Kuskokwim rivers was not accomplished until after Thanksgiving, when the river ice was sufficient to allow the herders and their charges to cross the river. To the credit of the Saami herders, only one deer was lost on the journey from the Yukon to Bethel—an old and lame animal that was butchered for meat after it fell on the glare ice of a lake crossing and was unable to continue (Lind 1905). The herders finally reached Bethel on December 3, 1903 and took the herd to the Moravian Mission reindeer camp on



Figure 1: Morten, Ellen Marie, Berit, and Clement Sara soon after their arrival in Alaska.

the Kisaralik River. The reindeer commissioner reported a total of 1,046 reindeer in the Kuskokwim valley in 1904; of these 283 were owned by Nils Sara and 242 were owned by Per Spein.

The Sara family and marriage-related Spein family (see Appendix) established their own herds, grazing their deer in the Kuskokwim and Aklun mountains, and eastward into the Tikchik Lakes region (Fig. 2). In addition

to Nils Sara and Per Spein, the young Sara brothers, Peter, Morten and Clement, eventually established their own reindeer herds. Several separate herds grazed ranges on the Kwethluk, Kisaralik, Fog, Salmon, and Aniak rivers, all tributaries of the Kuskokwim, and as far as the headwaters of the Togiak River (Sara n.d.). The Saami herders supplied reindeer meat for the some of the early placer mining camps in the Kuskokwim region.

Three men and five dogs had brought a herd of five hundred marketable animals, in addition to their pack deer. The men spoke only a limited amount of English but I gathered that this was about as many as three men could handle, particularly as they were being moved away from their familiar grazing round....

The herd was soon shaped up for the night and the boss herder called his dogs. A hundred feet, more or less, from the outer edge of the herd he made a mark on the ground and gave a command to one of the dogs. The dog sat down facing the herd. Taking the other dogs, the Lapp made a complete circle of the herd, making four more marks at regular intervals, with a dog stationed at each mark and apparently understanding that he had a definite post to patrol during the night (Peckenpaugh and Peckenpaugh 1973:79).

Reindeer could be driven to a location near the mining camps for purchase and butchering so the miners did not have to buy more meat than they could store short term. The small crew of men building the first mine on Marvel Creek in 1912 arranged to purchase two deer to supply the camp's meat and made arrangements for resupply in two weeks' time. The arrival of the Saami provided not only meat for the camp but also an opportunity for socializing in the remote wilderness.

Being above timber we had no means of hanging the deer while they were being drawn and skinned so they had to be "butchered in the skin," as an old time cowboy would have done it. This was the Lapp's usual method and they were experts.... Counting the correct number of ribs on the left side of the animal, the boss herder placed the point of his knife between the two ribs opposite the center of the heart, striking the end of the handle a sharp blow with the palm of his hand. Simple and quick. The blood settled against the diaphragm. By the time the animal was skinned and opened, it could be removed in one mass. Cooked with the brain, liver, and other tidbits, it was their meal supreme.

We squatted on the hides covering the floor, Turk fashion, rolled Bull Durham cigarettes, and sipped black coffee. The cups were too few to go around, so we drank in relays. They spoke little English and we spoke their language not at all, but they were glad to have us and we were happy to be with them (Peckenpaugh and Peckenpaugh 1973:80).

The Sara family had chosen to make its future in Alaska instead of returning to Norway at the end of their contracted government service. The Sara and Spein families settled in the Kuskokwim region where Nils Persen Sara and Inga Maria Mortensdatter Sara, who were forty years old when they immigrated to Alaska, lived

out their lives as reindeer herders. Several of the Sara children married into local Yup'ik Eskimo communities. Across the Kuskokwim River from the Village of Akiak, where residency was restricted to Alaska Natives and church and school workers, the Saami families helped found a community largely made up of Norwegian immigrants. Akiak became the center of the Saami reindeer industry on the Kuskokwim River (Miller 1930).

Ellen Marie and Per Spein had three children, Mary, Mathew and Anna, before separating in about 1914. On November 20, 1915, Ellen Marie Sara married

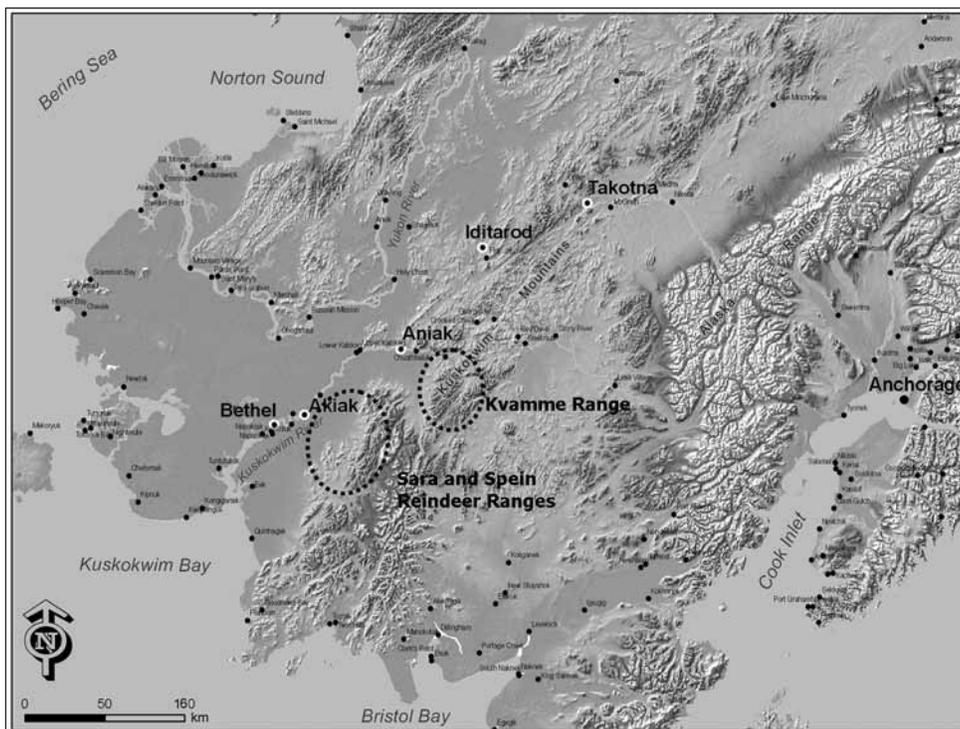


Figure 2: Map of the Sara and Spein reindeer ranges

Jens Anton Kvamme Andersen, a Norwegian immigrant born on Altafjord in the Finnmark region of Norway who left the country at the age of fifteen to join relatives in Michigan (Venes 1971). Jens was a restless young man and had moved westward to the gold camps in California and Oregon, ultimately following the gold strikes to Alaska. His arrival in southwestern Alaska was from the mining camps at Nome and Deering, where he heard about the new rush to the Iditarod River (Anderson 1957). In order to travel to Iditarod during winter, he purchased sled-trained reindeer, paying \$20 per head, and sleds from Native herders at Unalakleet. Reindeer did not require their food to be carried on the sleds; instead the deer were able to forage for themselves along the way. Jens arrived at Iditarod after nearly two months camping along the trail. Once he arrived, Jens found the good ground was already staked but there was no meat in town for the miners who were wintering there. He butchered a few of his deer, selling the meat for seventy-five cents a pound. He purchased more deer from the Saami families at Akiak, driving the herd north to supply meat for the Iditarod miners.

By that time, Jens had developed a sharp eye for gold mineralization, and he returned to some promising-looking ground he had observed on the reindeer range while he was obtaining reindeer from the Saami herders on the Kwethluk River. He discovered a small, rich placer deposit and filed claims on Canyon Creek, a Kwethluk River tributary, in 1913 (Holzheimer 1926). Jens successfully defended his discovery against claim jumpers rushing to his strike from Bethel (Lenz and Barker 1985). He invited other Akiak people, including Per Spein and Joseph Venes, another Norwegian immigrant, to participate in the gold strike, and ultimately, he sent for his brothers Alfred and Ole Andersen to operate the placer mine (Andersen 1957). The brothers worked the mine for nearly thirty years. Canyon Creek continued to be a source of income for the next generation as well, passing to Jens's son, Albert Kvamme, and finally to his grandson Albert Kvamme, Jr. before

being consumed within the great expansion of the Yukon-Kuskokwim National Wildlife Refuge in the 1980s.

Jens Kvamme established a new reindeer herd in 1914 with 289 deer acquired from Ellen Marie's brothers, Peter, Mikkel and Clement Sara, and 140 deer Ellen received from her father. The Kvamme family took their herd into the headwaters of the Buckstock and Aniak rivers and established a new herding range, constructing cabins and brush corrals in an area that had never been utilized by any other herd (Miller 1930). The Kvamme summer range camp was located on the East Fork of Aniak River (Atsakovluk Creek, near Timber Creek ([Fig. 3]).

My mother was separated from her own family and people when she and my father moved to the middle Kuskokwim area with their own reindeer herd. They settled down in the Napaimute-Aniak area. My mother was pretty much assimilated into the surrounding lifestyle of the area. She no longer had anyone to speak the Lapp language with and she saw her own folk only occasionally when she made the trip to Akiak to visit them. She learned to speak Eskimo and she had many friends among the Eskimo people in Aniak and the surrounding area (Venes 1971).

The Kvamme herd grazed among the high ridges and spurs along the divide between the Swift and Holitna river headwaters to the south and the Aniak, Holokuk, and Oskawalik rivers on the north side. The high ridges were preferred in summer by the reindeer because the biting



Figure 3: The Kvamme family at their Timber Creek summer camp in 1930. Ellen and Jens with children (left to right) James, Anna, Berntina, Ellen, and Albert Kvamme.

flies and mosquitoes were suppressed when the wind was blowing across the bare ridges, and the willow and dwarf birch thickets in the higher elevations could be utilized by the reindeer to brush off mosquitoes when the winds were calm. The deer were wintered at lower elevations because these areas had less snow-cover, allowing the deer easier digging through the snow to reach the lichen they consumed all winter. Travel to summer and wintering areas was accomplished with sled deer and pulks [sleds] on late spring and early winter snow (Fig. 4).

There were some things that were a part of the Lapp way of life that were practiced in our everyday life. My mother now lived in a different culture, but she clung to some of her Lapp ways of doing things.... We were not aware of the things we learned from her as she never consciously taught us about her culture, but we learned things that were part of the traditional ways of Lapp everyday life.... My mother spoke of taming and training reindeer, training her own sled deer, driving them, and taking her children with her in their unique sleds called *pulkas*. The youngest child, the baby, was wrapped up in the cradle that they called the *komsa*. This traveling cradle was made of a split birch log hollowed out. The headpiece, a half round canopy, was fastened to the cradle and the whole thing was covered with fabric. My mother's cradle was covered with a khaki drill material; it was trimmed with her hand-woven trims (Venes 1971).¹

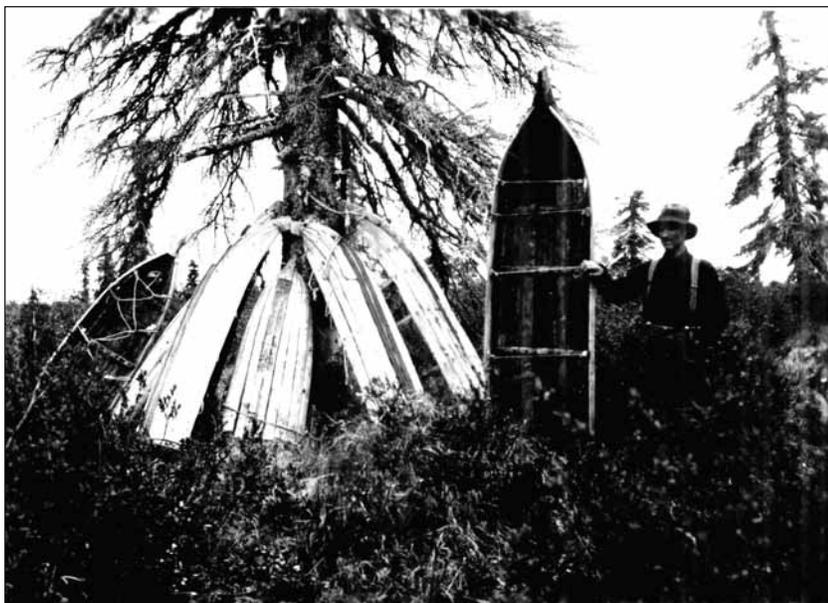


Figure 4: Jens Kvamme with freighting pulks stored at Timber Creek.

The Kvamme family initially spent the winter seasons at Kangirmiut (“Inikpuk #2 [Kungegamiut]” in Oswalt 1980:43) on the Kuskokwim River above Napaimute, where Jens built a cabin for the family. When a territorial school opened in Napaimute in the 1920s, Jens built another cabin there so that his children could attend school. In 1930, the family relocated to Aniak, where they lived temporarily in a log cabin owned by trader Tom Johnson, who had established a trading post at the mouth of the Aniak River, while Jens built a two-story log home for his wife and five children, together with a warehouse, smokehouse, shop building, and a large garden space on land just east of Johnson’s buildings.

The family was musical and acquired a piano, violin, accordion and guitar, and they had bookcases for their family library. The children slept upstairs and there was enough room on the main floor for dancing. Jens later built a lean-to on the back of the building that served as the master bedroom, which left enough space in the main room for a large console radio and a wind-up Victrola phonograph, the modern technology of that era.

The little shop building was later occupied during the winter by miner Joseph Konechney, who spent many years drifting along the mineralized veins exposed in the headwall of Mission Creek in the Russian Mountains northeast of Aniak. Konechney spent summers at his cabin in Mission Creek Valley, well above treeline, and sheltered at Aniak during the winter. Jens’s shop building (AHRS# RUS-027) is the sole remnant of the original Kvamme home site and is now the oldest structure in Aniak (Mobley 2004).

The Reindeer Act of 1937 brought an abrupt, government-mandated end to the reindeer herding life of the Alaska Saami by barring reindeer ownership within Alaska to all but Alaska Natives. The Saami were promised that they would be treated as whites (in contrast to the ethnic discrimination they experienced in Norway) but the disadvantage was that they were included in the non-Native category of reindeer owners. The non-Native-owned herds were condemned and appropriated by the U.S. government, who compensated their owners at \$3.00

1. Anna Spein Twitchell used the cradle for her children. It is now located in the Anchorage Museum at Rasmuson Center.

per head for reindeer registered with the U.S. Reindeer Service and nothing for unregistered deer. After implementation of the Reindeer Act, Jens Kvamme and his family focused on the mine at Canyon Creek. Peter, Michael and Clement Sara were similarly forced to sell their herds, and the Sara family's reindeer herding life ended.

The Lapps lived an adventurous life by the standards of today. It was a hard life with a lot of work. Yet they didn't think their life was so outstanding. They came to a land foreign to them from across the world, and made it their home. They were good citizens living from day to day, taking things as they came. In one lifespan, they left their native land in Norway and came to a strange land, bringing their traditional herding lifestyle with them. When that was taken away from them, they adapted to a new way of life (Venes 1971).

In 1942, the Kvamme family built a home across the Kuskokwim River from the Native village of Akiak (Fig. 5). The south side of the river was the home of Ellen Kvamme's brothers, Peter and Michael Sara, and other Norwegian immigrant families and homesteaders. From

that time, the Kvamme family split their residency between these two villages, spending summers at Aniak catching and putting up their winter supply of salmon and growing produce in their large garden. They spent winters at Akiak, from which they sled-hauled freight to the Canyon Creek Mine once snow-cover permitted overland travel.

The Saami families on the Kuskokwim River remained to garden, smoke and put up fish, pick berries, hunt, trap, operate stores, and generally participate in the mix of subsistence and frontier enterprise that is characteristic of rural Alaska. Today, the small community across the river from the Native village of Akiak has disappeared, falling victim to shifting rural populations and economies. Little remains of it today but the cemetery, where some of the former residents and their descendents still maintain the family graves.

THE TWITCHELL CONNECTION

When the Sara and Spein families arrived at Bethel in late 1903 with deer for the Moravian mission, a trans-

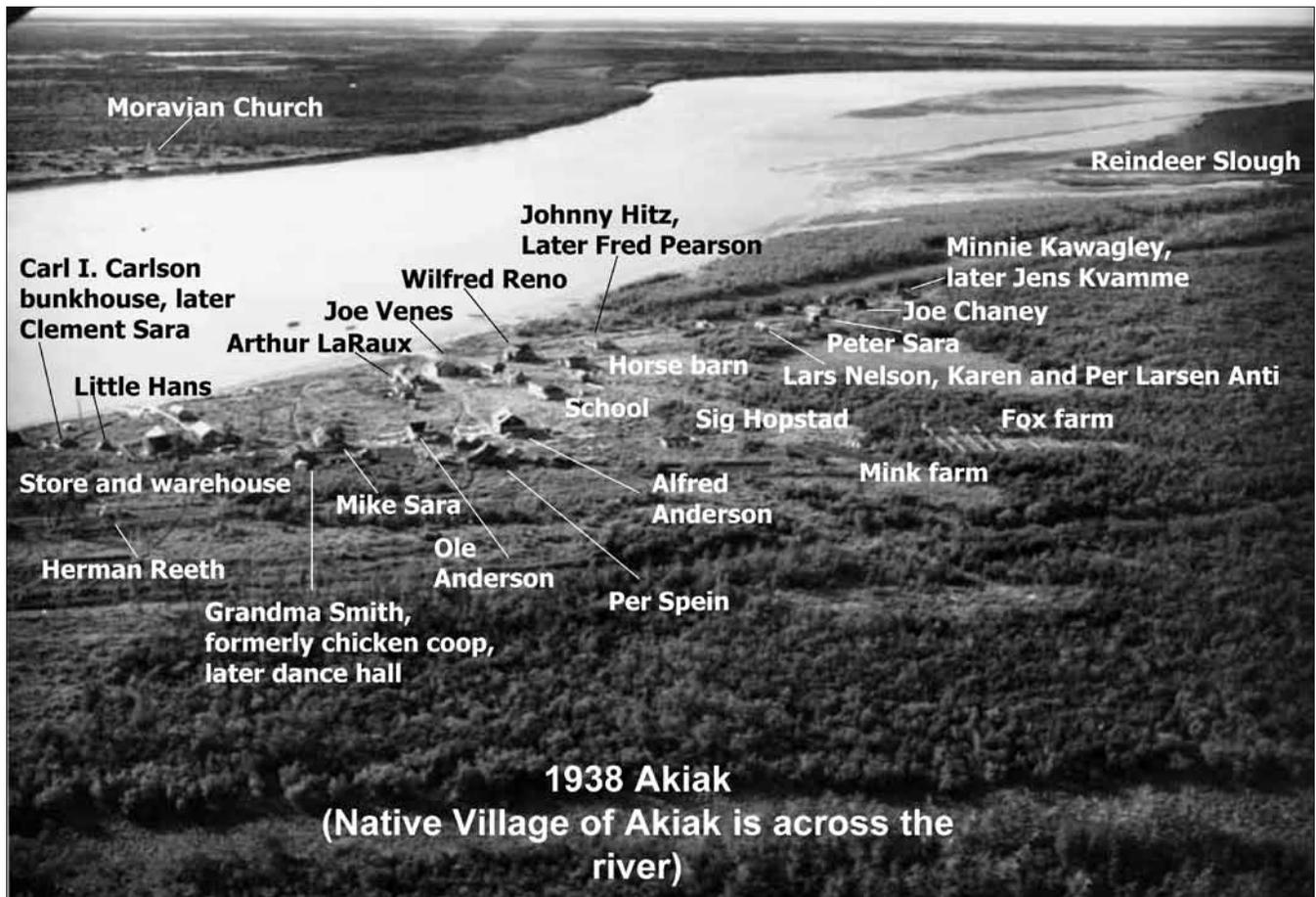


Figure 5: The non-Native community at Akiak, 1938.

planted New Englander from Vermont, who had followed consecutive gold rushes north, was fur trading on the Kuskokwim. Carl Lind, the U.S. reindeer superintendent who accompanied the Saami herders and their charges across the treeless, frozen tundra, and glare-ice-covered lakes between the Yukon and the Kuskokwim, noted his surprise at finding a white man living in a small Native village not far from Bethel (Lind 1905:69). That man was Adams Hollis Twitchell.

“A.H.,” as he was commonly known, was born in 1872 in Jamaica, Vermont, a small farming community. As a young man, A.H. left New England for the West and joined the gold rushes to at Dawson, the Cassiar, and Nome, along with many other young men of his time. He and his partner, Charles Fowler, for whom Fowler Island on the Kuskokwim River is named, were in Nome in 1902. The following winter, A.H. was in the Kuskokwim River delta, investigating the prospects for fur trading and commercial merchandising (Fienup-Riordan 1996:249).

A.H. Twitchell fared well in the Yup’ik villages. He knew the Yup’ik language, ate the Native diet, participated in the local culture, and flourished. He was a man who knew the value of fresh food, having seen in the Nome, Council and other mining camps the effects of inactivity during the long frigid winters and the restricted diet of flour and beans some of the wintering prospectors ate. Many miners holed up in their tents, doing less and less as their strength and energy waned. But those who braved below-zero temperatures to hunt, get wood, or visit Native settlements to get fresh seal, rabbit, or ptarmigan meat, did not suffer from scurvy and other “cabin-fever” ailments (Twitchell 1960).

A.H. Twitchell married a young Yup’ik woman from a small Native village, Nunacuaq. Qecik (Fig. 6) was baptized Elena (or possibly Irene) by the Russian Orthodox priest who made occasional visits to the tundra villages. A.H. entered the marriage record in the ancient Twitchell family Bible: “Adams Hollis Twitchell, Son of Adams Twitchell and Laverna Livermore Twitchell, married Ireene Kocheek of Kuskokwim District, Dec. 30, 1904, by Constantine Pavloff, priest.”

A.H. established both a family and a trading company at Bethel by 1905, buying out trader Edward Lind and sailing from Nome to eighty miles up the Kuskokwim River on his shallow-draft vessel *Zenith* (Oswalt 1980:30). It was the first ocean-going vessel to arrive at Bethel, and the event was celebrated by flag-flying and gunfire. That year A.H. and two partners, Charles Fowler, miner and former

Texas cowboy, and Frank Joaquin, a California merchant of Portuguese descent, founded a new company, Joaquin, Twitchell & Fowler, and built a store and warehouse in Bethel. Four years later the partners incorporated as the Kuskokwim Commercial Company to sell goods at Bethel and along the river with a sternwheeler, the *Quickstep*, which they imported from the Yukon River.

The Kuskokwim Commercial Company was sold to John W. Felder and Maurice Gale in 1915. The following year A.H. invested in the reindeer industry, purchasing two hundred reindeer from Per Spein plus additional reindeer from Spein’s son Matthew and from Nils Sara and his son Peter Sara (Fig. 7).

A.H. relocated his family to the Iditarod mining town of Flat and moved his reindeer herd to a new range between the Iditarod and Innoko mining camps (Fig. 8). He applied to U.S. Reindeer Commissioner John H. Kilbuck and was granted an exclusive right to his herding range on the Dishna River near the Beaver Mountains (Twitchell

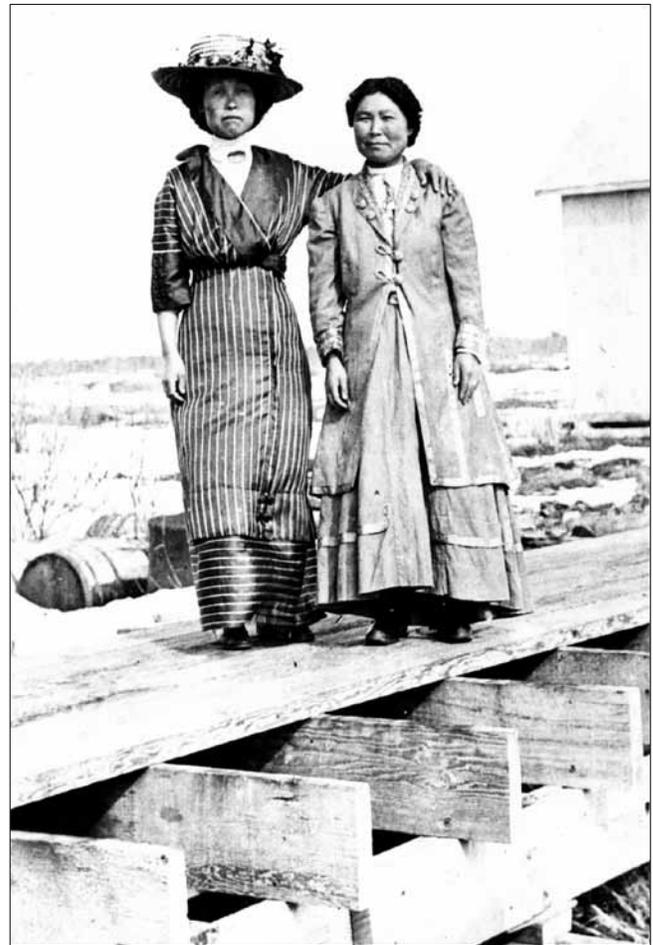


Figure 6: Irene (Qecik) Twitchell, left, and friend at Bethel, early 1900s.

1914–1946). Here, the prevailing winds created lush summer pastures on the southwestern side of the mountains and drier pastures on the northeastern side that were ideal for winter grazing due to sparser winter snow accumulation (Vorren 1994:97). A.H. moved the herd in a broad rotational succession of spring and summer grazing pastures between the Dishna River and the Beaver Mountain massif and wintered the herd on Tolstoi Creek.

On the Twitchell Range (Fig. 9), A.H. and his partners built corrals and several far-flung range cabins whose locations are still noted on topographic maps of the area. The herders practiced range rotation, moving from one grazing area and camp to another during the summer, eventually arriving back at the wintering grounds on Tolstoi Creek after completing a circuit of grazing areas between Mt. Hurst, Camelback Mountain and Crater Mountain in the upper reaches of the Dishna River (Vorren 1994:97).

The Twitchell family lived at Flat and the children attended school there and later at the Jesuit Holy Cross Mission on the Yukon River. A.H. marketed sides of reindeer meat to the miners at Flat, Moore Creek, Ophir and other Innoko District mine camps. A source of fresh meat was valuable in the remote mining districts, and in Flat there was a subterranean cold house especially built for meat storage.

A.H.'s formal education ended at sixth grade, but he was a self-educated naturalist who corresponded with biologists and other men of science. He read scientific papers and reports and critiqued the written English of his college-educated sons.

During his earlier trading years in the Bethel area, A.H. collected more than two hundred Yup'ik cultural objects, most of which went to the compulsive collector of Native American art, George Gustav Heye. The ethnological objects A.H. collected for Heye and George Byron Gordon, director of the University of Pennsylvania Museum, and included examples of women's handicrafts such as deftly stitched and pieced skin bags and clothing articles. However, the objects that generate the greatest at-

Atkasik, Dec. 30 1915

Received of John H. Kilbuck for A.H. Twitchell, one hundred dollars (\$100.00) - the last payment on 100 deer purchased from me, - and now I have been paid in full. —
Per M. Spein

Figure 7: Bill of sale from Per Spein.



Figure 8: A. H. Twitchell and children Alice and Benjamin with pack horses and sled deer

ention were the sixty-four dramatic dance masks and ceremonial objects he obtained from Napaskiak and perhaps other villages near Bethel (Fig. 10).

A.H. believed that these expressions of Yup'ik spirituality and world view were about to disappear under the influence of the Christian missionaries in the region, who discouraged or forbade the traditional ceremonial dances that expressed relationships with the Yup'ik spiritual world. The mask collection is notable for A.H.'s notes identifying the Yup'ik names of the representations and occasional explanations of their significance. One hundred years later, these names and brief descriptions provide information on spirits otherwise known to Yup'ik elders only through oral tradition (Fienup-Riordan 1996:257).

A.H. owned ornithology reference books and was keenly interested in scientific papers about insects and parasites. He collected specimens of worms, insects, birds, mammals and plants for scientists and museums, includ-

ing the National Museum of Natural History and the Cleveland Museum, and contributed notes about wildlife abundance and range extent to scientific journals. In a 1929 letter to his son Ben, A. H. touched on specimen collecting:

Ask Tim for that little paper on new species of tape worms and tell me what the college could do with such material—note it is a species new to science. A new species of animal parasite is of particular value. I have found several new species of parasite and others that are rare in collections. When I began collecting nose bots, I believe the Smithsonian Museum had but one and Biological Survey none. By collecting in a little known country, I have extended the known range of many birds, animals, and insects, and many valuable records will be kept in Washington and elsewhere that would possibly be of no interest to [the] college. I have sent out many specimens of a biting beetle—a parasite of beaver like a louse that in the immature stage is like a worm. These are common here but rare in collections. I think I would collect many specimens for colleges if there was some prospect of getting some pay at some future time. There is no big money in such work but some of my specimens get me fair pay for my work while most of them are donated and I do not even get the postage (Twitchell 1914–1946).

A. H. maintained a personal correspondence with Edward W. Nelson, touching on personal matters, wildlife observations and territorial game commission corruption, a sore point with both men that A. H. took an active part in reforming (Twitchell 1914–1946).

When Herbert Brandt of the Bird Research Foundation in Cleveland and Olaus Murie of the U.S Biological Survey made a winter dogsled journey from Fairbanks to Hooper Bay in March, 1923, to see firsthand the arrival of the great bird migrations first reported by Edward Nelson, they met up with A. H. Twitchell at a roadhouse near Ophir on the trail to Iditarod. A. H. took Brandt on a side trip to his winter reindeer camp at the foot of the Beaver Mountains, providing Brandt his first observation of rock ptarmigan, as well as a chickadee eating reindeer suet—which Brandt collected, taking it for a boreal chickadee, only to later learn it was an uncommon gray-

headed chickadee (Siberian Tit) south of its normal range. Brandt was so impressed by his visit to the Twitchell reindeer camp he devoted a chapter to it in his memoir, *Alaska Bird Trails: Adventures of an Expedition by Dogsled to the Delta of the Yukon River at Hooper Bay*, and also included a photograph of the ill-fated chickadee (Brandt 1943).

A. H. utilized his cabin-building experience to construct a series of small cabins on his grazing range. He also built three cabins for the territorial road commission along the trail to Iditarod (Fig. 11) as replacements for the worn canvas wall tents then being used as public shelters along that stretch of the trail (Sommers 1921).

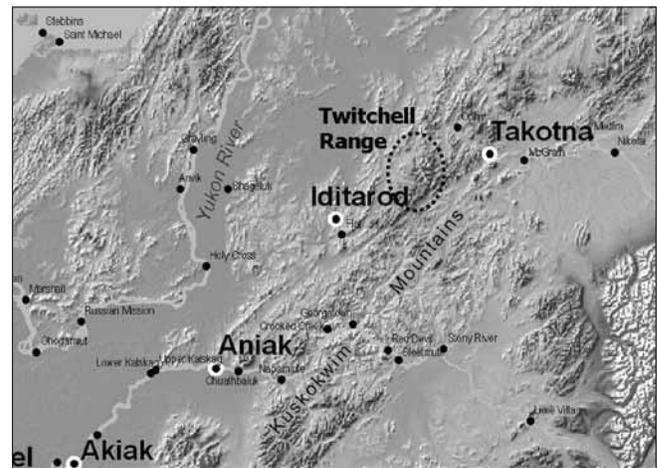


Figure 9: A. H. Twitchell reindeer range map (for location of detail map, see Fig. 2).



Figure 10: A. H. Twitchell, right, displaying Yup'ik dance masks collected after a lower Kuskokwim dance ceremony.

While still a young woman, Irene Twitchell became ill with tuberculosis and returned to the Kuskokwim River, nearer to her own family. She died on October 11, 1926 at the hospital at Akiak and was buried there. A.H. continued to live in the mining town of Flat until 1929, eventually selling his cabin there when the Guggenheim dredge mined through the town site; he then relocated to Takotna. Relating these events in a letter to his son, Ben Twitchell, who was attending college in 1929, A.H. told him: “I have sold my house at Flat. I sold it because it must be moved. Nearly every one except Mr. Dave Brown and the girls on the row must move (Twitchell 1914–1946).

A.H.’s reindeer herding enterprise was also terminated by the 1937 Reindeer Act but, true to his New England farming roots, he was already cultivating potatoes, turnips, rutabagas, and other root crops at Takotna with his long-time business partner Charles Fowler and maintaining a small store business.

A.H.’s oldest son, Timothy Twitchell, was the first Alaska Native to graduate from the University of Alaska, in 1937. He taught school at Eklutna and operated the post office at Aniak, where he met and married Anna Spein, daughter of Per Spein and Ellen Marie Sara in 1939, forming the first familial ties between the Twitchell family and the Saami families on the Kuskokwim. In 1946, A.H.’s second son, Benjamin Twitchell (a 1933 graduate of the University of Washington and Alaska Territorial school teacher) married Jens and Ellen Kvamme’s youngest daughter, Berntina, further linking the Twitchell and Sara/Kvamme families.

Ben left his teaching career and Civil Communications Administration work to assume A.H.’s farming and store-keeping operations in the late 1940s. A.H.’s farm fields and his general store business at Takotna became central to Benjamin and Berntina’s life. A.H. was in his seventh decade by then and was grateful to turn over his operations to Ben. Timothy Twitchell and his family also relocated from Akiak to Takotna in 1946. Adams Hollis



Figure 11: Frank Joaquin, Charles Fowler and A. H. Twitchell at Iditarod cabin

Twitchell died in September 1949 during a hunting trip with Ben on the Takotna River; he is buried there beneath a Vermont-marble headstone ordered and shipped from his birthplace. Next to his stone is another marking the grave of Per Spein, who came to live with Anna and Tim Twitchell at Takotna.

Ben Twitchell brought increased mechanization to his father’s farm fields, shipping in a plow, potato harvester, and steel wheels for the International Harvester tractor. These arrived by river barge on the Kuskokwim River to Candle Landing below McGrath. With several fields under cultivation and a sizeable root cellar to keep the produce from freezing, Ben was able to keep the store supplied with winter produce and even ship the surplus to customers down river, where the Twitchell potato crop was renowned.

The potato harvest at Takotna in early fall was occasion to dismiss children from the little one-room school to put in the crop that everyone would consume during the winter months (Fig. 13). Although the potato digging was now mechanized, filling buckets with potatoes and emptying the crop into jerry-can crates for the trip to the root cellar was work done by many hands; many of those hands belonged to women and children. Even the Territory’s missionary-schoolteacher joined in the community effort.

Log cabins of that period were often built over a root cellar to protect a winter supply of vegetables and costly shipped-in boxes of apples and oranges. The root cellar beneath the general store also kept butter and eggs, but the largest root cellar in Takotna held the commercial potato and other root crops.

The Takotna Territorial School was closed in 1956 due to the community's dwindling population, which precipitated the Twitchell family's relocation and Ben's return to teaching. The family left Alaska in 1957 and traveled across the U.S. from the Pacific to the Atlantic and back again, eventually settling in Oregon. Ben Twitchell went back to college and was reaccredited to teach school in Oregon. The family maintained a link to the farming tradition as Ben hired himself and his children to harvest fruit and garden produce during summer breaks between school sessions. Picking cherries, strawberries and green beans was a traditional means of earning school money in Oregon's Willamette Valley in the 1950s and 1960s. Even



Figure 12: Charles Fowler and Berntina Twitchell with the 1949 potato harvest at Takotna.



Figure 13: Takotna school children harvest potatoes near the log home built in 1952 by Ben Twitchell.

when Ben's teaching positions took the family from the green Willamette Valley to the Oregon sagebrush country, the family returned to the valley orchards during cherry season to help clean the trees of their fruit.

Ultimately, all of Ben and Berntina Twitchell's Alaska-born children returned as adults and now work for federal land and resource agencies, business entities created by the 1971 Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act and private corporations.² Their family history in Alaska (see Appendix) is intimately tied to the history of the Alaska Reindeer Project and the gold discoveries that overshadowed it. These events provided links, both business and personal, between the Saami immigrant herders, the Norwegian and Yankee gold-seekers, and the indigenous Yup'ik people of the Kuskokwim region during a unique period in Alaska's history. Although the herding and farming cultures of the Sara, Kvamme and Twitchell families failed to gain a permanent hold in the Kuskokwim region, they did provide an adventurous and prosperous life for people who were committed to a new land, a new country, and to new opportunities for themselves and their descendants.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

From childhood, I was aware of my family's connection to reindeer herding and the Saami immigration to Alaska. My parents were both children of reindeer herders and possessed, if not experience, at least firsthand awareness of the reindeer industry in southwestern Alaska where

both were born. This heritage lived in the background of my life but the story unfolded for me when my mother, Berntina Venes wrote down for her children the story of how her parents and grandparents came to Alaska from Finnmark in northern Norway and what happened to them after they arrived. Place names and dates extracted from government reports provided historical context to family recollections, but my mother was the first in her family to weave those threads together.

Likewise, my father, Ben Twitchell, wrote a character study about the

2. June McAtee, Calista Corporation; Margie Brown, Cook Inlet Region, Inc.; Adams Hollis Twitchell, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; Michael Twitchell, McKesson Corporation. Berntina Irene Steele, born in Oregon, is a U.S. Forest Service biologist.

uncommon life of his father, Adams Hollis Twitchell, as a gold-seeker, trader, reindeer herder, farmer and collector of cultural objects and biological specimens. I am indebted to both father and son for preserving correspondence and personal papers that provide insight into a wide-ranging curiosity that drove an unusual life. Recognition of individual character, accomplishment and pride in our distinctive heritage was ingrained in all of us through our parents' examples.

Chris Wooley, Katherine Pendleton, and Amy Russell each provided me historical documents that contain references to the Kvamme and Twitchell families in Alaska as they encountered them in their own research, helping expand my understanding and document the lives of my grandparents in western Alaska. Faith Fjeld and Nathan Muus researched the history of the Alaska Saami immigrations and located historical photographs of my relatives on eBay, graciously giving these images of the past back to the family. I am particularly indebted to Ann Fienup-Riordan for bringing Adam Hollis Twitchell's history as a collector of cultural objects—and the ultimate disposition of those objects—to new awareness among his descendants, as well as to a wider community.

APPENDIX: FAMILY TIMELINE

- February 2, 1898** Nils Persen Sara, Inger Maria Mortensdatter Sara and their children Ellen Marie, Mikkel, Morten, Klemet and Mathias, reindeer herders from the Kautokeino area, are among the Saami departing Bossekop to go to Alaska as part of the U.S. Government's Alaska Reindeer Project.
- February 28, 1898** The Steamship *Manitoban* arrives in New Jersey. The following day, the people and reindeer are loaded on rail cars and begin traveling across the continent to Seattle, Washington, becoming objects of public curiosity along the way.
- March 1898** The train arrives in Seattle on March 7 and the people and deer are taken to Woodland Park, where the Saami camp during a two-week long wait for boat transportation which is delayed by the war in the Philippines. The Sara's youngest child, Mathias Nilsen Sara, dies at Seattle and is buried there. The Saami women and children are moved to Port Townsend to wait while the Saami men and reindeer are taken to Haines to begin the Yukon Relief Expedition reindeer drive to Dawson. The men return on May 18.
- June 22 to July 29, 1898** The Saami in Port Townsend travel in two ships to the Eaton Reindeer Station near Unalakleet and the men are immediately put to work constructing buildings that will be their shelter for the winter.
- 1898** Adams Hollis Twitchell arrives in Nome during the Gold Rush.
- 1898** Jens Anton Kvamme, age fifteen, immigrates from Alta, Norway to Michigan.
- 1899** Nils Persen Sara and Inger Marie and sons Morten and Klemet are taken to St. Lawrence Island to introduce reindeer herding to Siberian Yupiit at Gambell.
- 1900** Marriage is arranged between Ellen Marie Sara and Per Mathisen Spein, the first Saami marriage in Alaska.
- 1903** The Sara family and the Spein family bring a herd of reindeer to the Moravian Mission at Bethel plus reindeer to establish the two families own reindeer herds on ranges in the Kuskokwim and Aklun mountains.
- 1904–1905** Adams Twitchell marries Qecik (Irene), a Yup'ik woman from Nunacuaq and buys out trader Edward Lind. Twitchell sails the *Zenith* from Nome to Bethel, the first arrival of an ocean-going vessel in Bethel.
- 1909** Twitchell incorporates the Kuskokwim Commercial Company at Bethel with partners Charles Fowler and Frank Joaquin.
- 1913** Jens Anton Kvamme travels from the gold camps on the Seward Peninsula to a new strike at Iditarod. He acquires deer from the Saami herders at Akiak and discovers gold on Canyon Creek, a tributary of the Kwethluk River.
- 1915** Jens Kvamme marries Ellen Marie Sara and they establish their own reindeer herd in the headwaters of the Aniak River with deer purchased from the Sara family.
- 1916** A. H. Twitchell buys reindeer from the Saami herders at Akiak and drives them to a range near the Iditarod and Innoko mining camps, settling his family at Flat.

1924 Herbert Brandt makes winter dogsled journey from Fairbanks to Hooper Bay and visits A. H. Twitchell at the Tolstoi Creek winter reindeer camp.

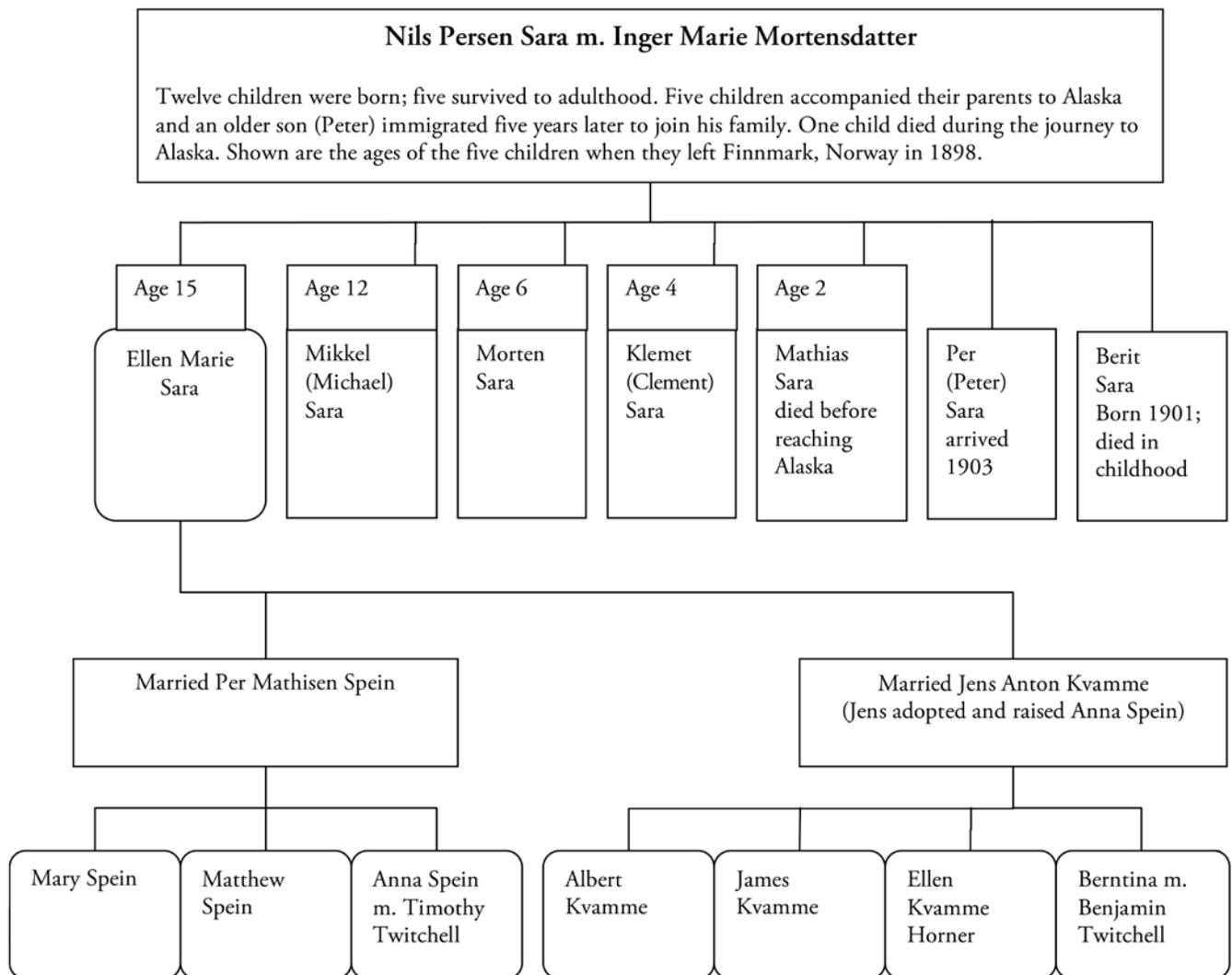
Twitchell relocates to Takotna when the townsite of Flat is dredge mined.

Reindeer Act regulation ends non-Alaska Native reindeer herd ownership.

1942 Jens Kvamme's family builds home in non-Native community at Akiak and begins living there and raising a garden and fishing at Aniak.

Benjamin and Berntina Twitchell move to Takotna to take over farm and store operations from A. H. Twitchell. Timothy Twitchell's family relocates to Takotna from Akiak.

1957 Timothy Twitchell family's leaves Takotna; the territorial school closes and the Benjamin Twitchell family leaves Alaska to settle in Oregon.



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