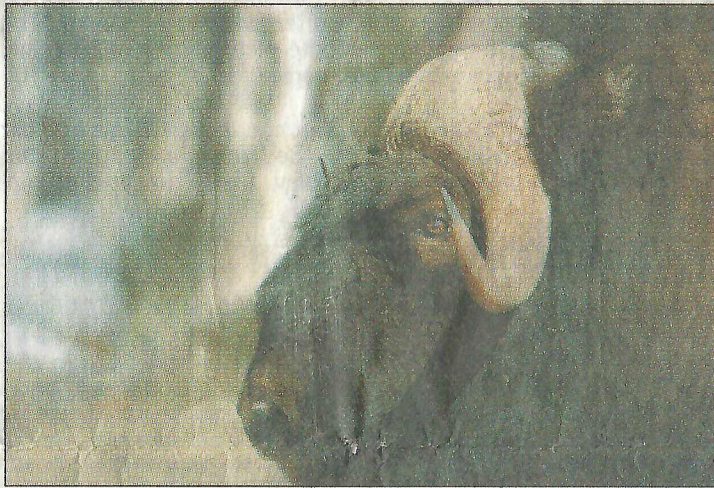


**Valley ranch makes  
a run at raising  
musk oxen for profit**

*Lovable*

# BRUTES



Story by **DEBRA MCKINNEY**  
Photos by **BOB HALLINEN**  
Anchorage Daily News

**PALMER** — "IT WAS A CRAZY IDEA," John Nash admitted, shaking his head real slow. "A spur-of-the-moment, crazy idea."

Maybe so, but that doesn't mean those shaggy, prehistoric galoots lumbering about his field are going anywhere. Musk oxen can be ornerier than a wounded locomotive, but the risky move John and his wife, Dianne, made getting into the business of raising them seems to be proving up.

They started five years ago with three. Now they have 15. Poncho and Lefty and Lavern and Shirley and a scrawny little thing called Slack-Jawed Yokel — and all the rest. Four were born just this spring.

"Itty-bitty little things," John said. "About yay high."

Home for the Nashes is a 220-acre farm up Lazy Mountain near Palmer, a place of gently rolling pastures and mountains every direction you turn. Up where winter winds rage and summer hay crops thrive, they're building the only privately owned domestic musk ox herd in Alaska.

John tends the herd while Dianne sells qiviut and other exotic yarns through Windy Valley Muskox, a business she runs from home. The chance they took on this venture turned out exceptionally fortuitous when, three years into it, Dianna gave birth to triplets who made her working at home seem an even better idea.

Eventually they'd like to sell musk oxen,

*See Page D-6, PROFIT*

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bring out their  
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## QIVIUT

Windy Valley musk ox qiviut from the Nash Farm can be found at Knitting Frenzy in Anchorage, Fantastic Fibers in Palmer, the Alaska Wildlife Conservation Center gift shop in Portage and Inua Wool Shop in Fairbanks. Web site: [www.windyvalleymuskox.com](http://www.windyvalleymuskox.com)

John Nash says that although he has been charged by his musk oxen, they're mostly bluffers and he has been able to stand his ground. "They're nothing warm and friendly, like you'd go pet," Nash says.



Dianne Nash spins qiviut, the extremely warm and light inner layer of musk ox fur, into yarn. The Nashes send their qiviut to Peru for processing. The yarn sells for about \$70 an ounce. A single animal supplies about 6 pounds of qiviut a year.





John and Dianne Nash maintain a herd of 15 musk oxen on their 220-acre farm near Palmer. They started five years ago with three animals and hopes of making a profit. Musk oxen are most closely related to goats.





Photos by **BOB HALLINEN** / Anchorage Daily News

**Dianne and John Nash tend to their triplets, from left, Makayla, Nathan and Madison. Dianne makes and sells exotic yarns, including yarn made from the fur of the musk oxen she and her husband raise on their farm near Palmer. The business allows her to stay home and tend to the children.**



## FAMILY VENTURE

Taking on musk oxen was a bit of a detour for the Nashes after two generations of raising a commodity as docile as hay.

John's parents, the late John Sr. and Sylvia Nash, bought land up Lazy Mountain back in 1949, then about five years later moved farther up Wolverine Road to the current hay farm. John grew up there with three sisters in a hand-hewed log cabin, doing what farm kids do — milking cows, hauling bales, tending a few pigs, chickens, horses and cows.

He was still a teenager when he started taking over the farm — “if I didn't, nobody would.” There were other things he wanted to do, but he stuck with it. Now, at 40, there's no doubt this is the life for him.

Dianne, 34, grew up in an opposite world in Phoenix, and she couldn't wait to get out of it. Her uncle lives just up the road from Nash Farm. So when she came for a visit, she and John soon crossed paths, first at a barbecue, then down in town.

“After that, everybody decided that we should be together whether we liked it or not,” Dianne said with a laugh. “So they kept setting things up.”

They did like it and married in 1996. As thoughts turned to kids, they wanted a way for Dianne to work at home. After getting the animals, she fell for the fiber and learned to knit and spin. Still, musk oxen were the last thing on the Nashes' minds just a few days before they owned some.

They were on a little road trip when musk oxen happened. John has a sawmill down by the barn, so he, Dianne and neighbor Todd Pettit were headed to Hope to look at some timber. Pettit was raising bison over at his place, so they stopped along the way at Big Game Alaska in Portage to take a look at some of those animals.

The 200-acre farm, now called the Alaska Wildlife Conservation Center, has moose, bears, lynx, elk, bison, caribou, Sitka deer, musk oxen and more, most of which were orphaned or injured. The Lazy Mountain visitors got to talking with director Mike Miller, and the way he remembers it, they asked: If he had to choose one species to invest in, which would it be? Miller gave two answers.

If you want an animal for fun and enjoyment as well as making some money, then bison are the way to go. If it's strictly about economics — forget the fun part — then musk oxen, definitely.

And then he went on and on about the potential of these ill-named beasts that don't have musk glands and aren't

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particularly breeding pairs. Young cows can fetch around \$6,000, bulls \$2,000. But for now it's all about the qiviut (pronounced *KIV-ee-oot*), the animal's cashmere-like thermal underwear that allows it to thrive in the Arctic. It's eight times warmer by weight than wool and couldn't be softer.

The Nashes do some combing, but mostly the stuff rolls off these animals in sheets.

“It just boils out of them,” John said. “I've found chunks this big on the ground, just light as a feather.”

Raw fiber picked up and stuffed in a bag goes for \$200 a pound. The more it's processed, the more it's worth. Cleaned, carded and ready to spin, it goes for \$30 an ounce. (The Nashes send theirs to Peru for processing.) Spun into yarn, it's more like \$70 an ounce. And a single animal supplies about 6 pounds of qiviut a year.

That's the upside of musk ox farming.

Then there's the downside.

This is a beast that wandered across the Bering Land Bridge during the Pleistocene, along with the woolly mammoth and saber-toothed cat, and neither its physiology nor its attitude are much different today.

“They're nothing warm and friendly, like you'd go pet,” John said.

Certain musk oxen can be tamed, but they are not a domesticated animal like a cow. Not by a long shot. Their immune systems are different. Their feeding requirements are different. And some have serious anger management problems.

Rut doesn't bring out their best behavior, either. Bulls can back up 30 feet or more, then come charging at each other full tilt, crashing head-on.

“Yeah, they're really head-buttin' creatures,” John said.

They'll do this over and over until one concedes and staggers off in search of aspirin. That's why their horns grow several inches thick all the way across their foreheads — to serve as bumpers. That part of the horn assembly is called a “boss,” and it's there to protect the bulls' one-track minds.

When threatened, musk oxen form a shoulder-to-shoulder defensive circle or crescent, with calves in the middle. Then one or more may charge.

“Really, that's the way they've survived in the wild, fighting predators,” John said. “They can't outrun them. They stand and fight. They've been known to kill bears, wolves and everything else.”

This circle-the-wagons routine works against four-legged predators, but it makes for easy pickin's by the human kind. Musk oxen were hunted to extinction in Alaska in the 1860s, then reintroduced to the wild here from Greenland in the 1930s. While the common cow has been domesticated for something like 10,000 years, efforts to domesticate musk oxen go back only about 50.



“  
*They're the neatest animals. They're playful and really curious and really smart.*  
”

— Nancy Bender, former musk ox owner

oxen but are more closely related to goats.

“The guy talked for like two hours,” John said.

Less than a week later, he and Diane had put down money on a three-piece starter set.

#### HARD TO GET

The stars must have been aligned, because finding musk oxen for sale isn't easy. That's the main reason more people aren't doing what they're doing, according to Bill Hauer, supervisor of the Robert G. White Large Animal Research Station at the University of Alaska Fairbanks. The UAF program has sold surplus animals through sealed-bid auctions, but only twice and only to qualified bidders.

The Portage farm doesn't sell any because it doesn't have enough to sell.

The nonprofit Musk Ox Farm in Palmer supplies qiviut to the Oomingmak Musk Ox Producers' Cooperative, which in turn keeps more than 200 Native knitters in remote villages stocked with yarn as a way of earning cash. The farm never sells animals, although executive director Cora Moses fields several calls a week from people wish-

ing they would — people in places like Florida or who want them for a casino prop in Nevada.

Yet back in 2000, when the Nashes went musk ox shopping, they found two possibilities. The Yukon Game Farm in Whitehorse happened to have surplus calves, and Nancy Bender of The Musk Ox Co. in Montana was selling her herd.

The Nashes bought their first animals from Bender — two cows and a bull named Becky, Luna and Max.

Bender was working at a Lake Clark fishing lodge back in the '80s when she first felt qiviut between her fingers.

A National Geographic photographer staying at the lodge had collected a pile of musk ox fiber during his wanderings about the state. When he found out Bender was a spinner, he offered to give her half if she'd process it.

“It was so amazing (that) I thought, I'll just find myself some more of that,” she said by phone from her ranch in the Bitterroot Valley.

At the time, UAF had a two-year waiting list for qiviut from its herd. If Bender wanted musk ox fiber in her life, she would have to buy the factory.

It took the Nashes a few days to find their first animals. It took Bender three years.

“We hounded everyone,” she said.

Finally, through a practically unheard-of arrangement, after a lot of research and proving herself, she was able to buy her first musk ox from the Minnesota Zoo, then later two more. She launched Moco Yarns, and over time she and her husband, Joel, built their herd up to 21, making it the largest private musk ox herd in North America.

“The learning curve was huge,” Bender said of the venture.

Take fencing, for instance. She was forever mending it, since musk oxen are so fond of ramming things. She literally wore out two fencing tools making repairs.

“And your health program has to be rock solid,” she said. “They are a wild animal, and often with wild animals they don't show signs of illness until they're almost going to die. I had a bacterial pneumonia in my herd and lost a bunch of animals. I didn't even know I had a problem until all of the sudden animals started dying.”

Those were the worst of times. The best of times included watching a bull named Patton play with his heavy-duty musk ox toys, his favorite being a big blue bowling ball.

“He'd take off running — charge! — and just smack it as hard as he could,” she said. “Then he'd run ahead of it and spin around real quick and meet it head-on and smack it the other way.”

“Musk oxen are very agile. You wouldn't think. They buck and spin and twirl. It's just a hoot when they get going.”

Bender kept her herd for 13 years before calling it quits and putting her animals up for sale. Selling three to the Nashes made it a little easier.

“We felt like they were kind of continuing what we started,” she said. “They were so enthusiastic about doing what we were doing, that whole vision.”

Bender kind of misses her old charges, but she's not exactly pining. They took up an awful lot of her time.

“They're incredibly challenging and very rewarding,” she said. “They're the neatest animals. They're playful and really curious and really smart.”

Too smart, in Mike Miller's opinion.

“They check the gate to see if you've locked it,” he said.





The births of four musk ox calves this spring increased the Nashes' herd to 15 animals. The couple are hoping to expand their business into selling animals, especially breeding pairs. Young cows sell for about \$6,000, bulls \$2,000.



## CLOSE ENCOUNTERS

Miller has had a lot of close calls with musk oxen down at the Portage wildlife farm.

"I'd much rather face off with a bear," he said.

One time out in the field, after noticing a bull named Xian acting up, Miller started playing "red light, green light, keeping an eye on him" when the thing suddenly came at him like a freight train. Miller shimmied up a cottonwood tree just in time, but it rammed and rammed the trunk, trying to shake him loose.

"Some tourist lady took a video of it," Miller said of the sideshow.

Xian also put a horn through one of Miller's four-wheeler tires and busted the handlebars too. And then there was the time he sneaked through an unlatched gate. The farm has some of those corny, life-size Alaska character cut-outs that tourists are fond of putting their heads through to have their pictures taken. Xian went right for it.

"He took one out at the knees, thinking he finally got a person," Miller said. The message was, "If I ever get ahold of you, this is what I'm going to do," he figured.

"Xian, he got up every day hoping it was the day. We hated each other for 10 years. But he had such personality. I was real sad when he died."

Back up on Lazy Mountain, John Nash hasn't had a lot of personality problems with his herd, although he has been charged. They're big bluffers for the most part, he said. So far he's been able to stand his ground.

Roy Corral, former director of the Musk Ox Farm in Palmer, stood his ground too until the day a steer with a head full of steam tried to make hamburger of him.

As Corral tells it, he was leisurely walking across a pasture, as he'd done many times, when he was charged by

a musk ox named Little Man that had always been gentle; Corral had even scratched him behind his ears.

When he saw Little Man coming, he did as he was taught — he charged back. It worked. Little Man screeched to a halt an arm's length away. But that didn't settle it. Snorting and swinging his massive head, Little Man came at him again. Corral held his ground. After a couple more rounds of this domination dance, Little Man had maneuvered his way into an uphill advantage.

That's when Corral knew he was in big trouble and made a dash for the fence. One of the last things he remembers is the sound of hooves pounding at his heels and the sight of a clipped horn closing in on his ribs.

Then his feet left the ground, his face slammed into the grass and he got a mouthful of dirt. Little Man then trampled and rammed, trampled and rammed until Corral lost consciousness. Then the brute tossed his limp body into the air and went at him some more.

Corral's daughter, Hannah, 20 at the time, witnessed all this from a distance. Believing she was seeing her father being killed, she charged Little Man with a vengeance, slamming against his side, screaming, "Get off my dad, you @\$%#!" Somehow she convinced him to back off and return to the herd.

Corral got out of this assassination attempt with a broken nose, broken ribs and bruises practically head to toe.

Later, all anyone could make of it was that even though Little Man was a castrated male, being with a herd of cows during rut must have triggered an instinctual reaction to protect his harem. For Corral, it served as a reminder that musk oxen should always be considered wild and unpredictable.

Up at Nash Farm, that's something John keeps in mind every time he steps into his musk ox field. And yet some members of his herd, like old Becky, will eat out of his hand.

Although he's not ready to sell breeding pairs quite yet, John has a little bull calf he's been thinking of parting with. This spring he put an ad in the nationwide Animal Finders' Guide just to see what kind of response he'd get. A fair amount, it turns out.

"There are a lot of tire kickers out there but very few who are serious about it."

Most calls came from the Lower 48.

"There's a guy in Iowa that wants to buy any animal I'd sell him. But you know, Iowa is not a good place for a musk ox. They don't take the heat good. I'd like to see them stay up here in Alaska. This type of country is where they belong."

In the meantime, he'll focus on fine-tuning the art of musk ox farming.

"He's become an expert on them," said Miller, who's kept musk oxen at the Portage farm since 1992.

Following conventional feeding practices, Miller went two breeding seasons in a row without his musk ox cows getting pregnant. Then he talked to John, who's been around livestock as long as he's breathed air. He suggested putting them on a higher plain of nutrition before rut, to send the signal that times are good and it's OK to conceive.

"I used the John Nash system and I have two healthy calves out there right now," Miller said. "They're only about as big as cocker spaniels."

He wasn't sure of their genders for a while, and he wasn't about to go look. He has since determined he has one of each.

The bull, he named Nash.

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