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LEON BINDENAGEL  
reindeer rancher

Photos by  
Lane Hickenbottom

**RIGHT: JINGLE BELLS**, one of Barb and Leon Bindenagel’s 15 reindeer, pulls on his reins while Barb Bindenagel holds tight.

**BELOW: LEON BINDENAGEL** shows off a pair of antlers in a barn on his reindeer ranch near Dannebrog. Reindeer shed their antlers each year and grow a larger pair in the following year.



## Reindeer draw crowd, boost holiday spirit

By ERIN GIBSON  
Staff Reporter

You know Dasher and Dancer and Prancer and Vixen, Comet and Cupid and Donner and Blitzen.

But they are more than Christmas carol lyrics for two Nebraskans who can see 15 of Santa’s reindeer at a ranch on Highway 58 near Dannebrog.

Leon Bindenagel, who owns the ranch with his wife Barb, said the rural central Nebraska highway teemed with traffic after they bought their reindeer — the only ones in the state — two years ago.

“It was a traffic jam,” Leon said. “If I had \$5 for every car that stopped out here to look at them, I’d be rich.”

After climbing the last hill on the way to the reindeer ranch, it’s clear to see why Nebraskans

stop for a peek.

The heavy, pointed antlers poke up over the fence posts, immediately capturing the curiosity of passers-by. Closer up, the small creatures look almost comic with their large crowns of antlers, knobby knees, soft, furry noses and wide brown eyes.

And like the lyrics “up on the housetop, click, click, click,” their hooves make a clicking noise as they walk.

Leon said that either the tendons in the reindeer’s lower legs or the cartilage in their hooves is responsible for the clicking noise, but the exact cause is a mystery.

Reindeer themselves also are a mystery to some who have seen them, he said. The Bindenagels often lease their reindeer for Christmas parties and events, where children can learn about the animals and take their picture with Santa and his herd.

Leon said that at one such event in Topeka,

Kan., a disbeliever approached him and said it was horrible for the Bindenagels to mislead children by implying reindeer actually existed.

“She said, ‘Well, I don’t know how you did it, but you put horns on those goats,’” he said.

But Barb said children greet the reindeer with less cynicism. One young boy in Hastings tugged at his older brother’s coat sleeve for minutes, breathless and jumping up and down and pointing at the reindeer.

“It’s cute when the kids enjoy it,” she said. “That makes it worth it.”

The kids aren’t the only ones who enjoy the animals, though.

In fact, the Bindenagels have sold some of their reindeer as pets, and have received phone calls from others who want to start raising the animals.

No calls have come in from Santa yet, but the Bindenagels’ herd will be ready Christmas Eve in case his sleigh needs a spare.

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