

This Month in Moravian History

A monthly newsletter published by the Moravian Archives in Bethlehem,
commemorating events from Moravian History

No. 44

June 2009

Bethel, Alaska—Beginning of the Moravian Mission in Alaska

June 20 marks the 125th anniversary of the first Moravian visit to Mumtrekhtagamute—the future site of the Bethel mission station.

Interest in Alaska as a mission field was generated by Rev. Dr. Sheldon Jackson, then secretary of the Presbyterian mission board seeking ecumenical cooperation in evangelizing the Alaskan Inuit. In August 1883 he sent a letter to the Moravian mission agency, the Society for Propagating the Gospel (SPG), requesting help in Alaska. He followed up with a visit to Bethlehem where he gave a captivating speech on February 10, 1884, inspiring the SPG to agree to send two explorers to Alaska. Within a month the church had appointed Adolphus Hartmann, a missionary who had served in Australia as well as among the Canadian Indians, and William Weinland, a graduating seminary student, to make the proposed exploratory trip to Alaska. The pair soon set off on their journey with instructions to determine the most suitable place for establishing a mission. They received friendly assistance from the Alaska Commercial Company upon their arrival in Unalaska, Alaska, on May 16. Not wanting to compete with the Russian Orthodox church already established there, the pair traveled on to the Alaskan mainland, arriving in Nushagak on June 2. Their ship's captain, as well as another priest in Nushagak, recommended the Kuskokwim River area as a good place to start mission work due to the good river transportation and communication, and the fact that it was an unoccupied mission field.

Hartmann and Weinland set off to explore the Kuskokwim in bidarkas (skin boats) along with four native guides during the brief Alaskan summer. They kept a comprehensive journal of their explorations, as well as a visual record with the latest photographic equipment. After a couple of weeks, plagued by bad weather and vicious mosquitoes, the missionaries welcomed sight of an Alaska Commercial Company camp on June 20:

"We at length came in sight of the important station Mumtrekhtagamute. We were greatly cheered by the sight of this station, situated on a high bank, with a background of pine forest. The text for the day was both

encouraging and remarkable:

'God saith unto Jacob, Arise, go up to Bethel, and dwell there, and make there an altar unto

God that appeared unto thee.' [Genesis 35:1] It seemed as though the Lord was now speaking to us in these words, and was thereby pointing out the place for our future operations amongst the Eskimoes."

From that point development of the Alaska mission moved quickly. Although the pair investigated other potential sites on their journey, Mumtrekhtagamute, which they would later rename "Bethel" after the inspiring Daily text, remained the best option for a mission station. Upon their return to Bethlehem on September 25, the SPG resolved to start the mission in Alaska. Weinland was appointed to return to Alaska and start the new mission along with Rev. John Kilbuck, a Native American and alumnus from the same seminary class. Both missionaries married women described as "companions possessed of the true missionary spirit." Weinland married Carrie Yost and Kilbuck wed Edith Romig. The group traveled to San Francisco in the spring of 1885 where they joined Hans Torgeson, who completed their group. In June they arrived in Alaska, and a year and a day after Hartmann and Weinland visited Bethel, on June 21, 1885, the first Sunday worship service was held by Moravians in Alaska.

Image: Trading post in Mumtrekhtagamute (photo by Hartmann and Weinland). Sources: Henkelman & Vitt, *Harmonious to Dwell* (1985); *Periodical Accounts*.

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