

This Month in Moravian History

Issue 58  October / November 2010

The Drowning of Hans Torgersen in Alaska, 1885



On August 10, 1885, one of the first Moravian missionaries to Alaska, Hans Torgersen, drowned after slipping on the wet deck of the missionaries' vessel, Bethel Star, and falling into the Kuskokwim River. Torgersen's accident occurred as he and fellow missionary, John Kilbuck, transported the last load of lumber for the new mission buildings from the warehouse on the Shinette River to the site selected for the Bethel mission station. After less than eight weeks in Alaska, the mission group lost its most experienced member. However, Torgersen should not be remembered so much for his death, but for the powerful model of lay leadership he provided in his lifetime.

Hans Torgersen was born near Laurvik, Norway, in 1850, and emigrated with his parents and four siblings to Door County, Wisconsin, near Sister Bay. His half-sister, Matilda Hogenson, later recalled: "he stands

out from the rest of us [children] as so much more considerate, both of parents and all the children. He seemed to have a great knowledge and understanding of the things of the Spirit, long before other boys and girls gave a thought to those things." His childhood pastor recalled how he trekked several miles to church on skis during Wisconsin winters when the temperature plummeted well below freezing. This acclimation to cold weather, hard work and spiritual matters deemed him a logical candidate for mission work at Moraviantown (today New Fairfield), Canada, and later Alaska. The mission farm at New Fairfield prospered under his supervision from 1878-1885. A visitor to the Torgersen's home during that time remembered, "It was a very godly home, the Bible being read morning, noon and night, after which we all knelt in prayer...Torgersen was one of the most consistent Christians I ever met. He did not talk much about consecration, but he lived it."

Although successful at New Fairfield, Torgersen longed to do more for the church. When he offered his service to the Provincial Elders' Conference (PEC) to start up the Alaska mission, the church easily accepted his offer. He wrote to the PEC in February 1885: "I said to my family: that if it is one or two Brethren that is willing to leave their families and friends at home and go out and start to study the language, I am willing to go with them as a lay assistant and rough it for a year or two and do what I can in the way of providing, building and arranging. I am a little used to sailing, especially in smaller boats, but I am more used to rough it in shanties and in the woods ... This is my simple, but earnest offer. We are contented

either way as long as we can do something for the Savior's great cause." A few months later Torgersen left behind his wife, Christine, and two small sons with the intention that the family would be reunited after a year. He joined the other members of the mission team, John and Edith Kilbuck and William and Carrie Weinland. This was the first call of service for Kilbuck and Weinland, who were recent seminary graduates. Torgersen, experienced in the mission field and ten years their senior, was sent as their assistant and practical advisor, with the special assignment of constructing the mission buildings, since neither Kilbuck nor Weinland "could saw a straight square cut."

After several weeks in Alaska Weinland fell ill and Kilbuck suffered from eye inflammation, leaving Torgersen to do the majority of the work. In leading the small company in daily devotions, Torgersen often prayed "that we should live each day as if it were the last." Kilbuck later reported that Torgersen focused on John 14 during his final devotion on August 10: "Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also."

Sources

Torgersen to Edmund DeSchweinitz, PEC, February 14, 1885; Henkelman and Vitt, *Harmonious to Dwell: The History of the Alaska Moravian Church, 1885-1985*; Clement Hoyler, *A Brief Account of the Life of Hans Torgersen, one of the Pioneers of Moravian Missions in Alaska*, 1935.

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