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The Finnish migration to and from Russian Alaska and the Pacific Siberian Rim 1800–1900

Maria J. Enckell, MFA, has since 1988 researched the history of the Finns in Russian Alaska and the Pacific Siberian Rim. The article is a summary of the lecture given on October 28, 2002 at the Institute of Migration, Turku, Finland. Up to 2001 her main focus was the identification, rescue, and preservation of Berndt Abraham Godenhjelm's Russian Era Alaska Evangelical Lutheran Church altar painting.

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It is true that from a Finnish point of view our Finnish history in Russian Alaska covers a time-period of a mere 67 years (1800–1867). However, from an Alaska point of view, the Russian Era is a vital and significant part of that vast region's history. Furthermore, within the United States, this history in Alaska is both unique to this region, as well as exceptional. Today in Alaska its surviving tangible remains generate considerable tourist activities. Thus it adds much desirable revenue to the state of Alaska's coffers. As the Finns, Karelians, Ingrians and Balts played a major role in creating this history and thus to the development of Alaska today, one would think a thorough investigation of our part in it would be in our national self-interest.

Thus, if we wish to expand on the up-to-date rather limited research results, then we should not limit our research to Russian Alaska alone. Instead we should focus our attention on the Russian endeavors in the whole of the North Pacific region. The reason is that between 1800 and 1922 Imperial Russia's history making activities in this vast Northern region consists of an uninterrupted flow from one side to the other and back. Some perplexing obstacles are to be faced, however: Much of the published material on this unique history is based upon sources found mainly in Russia and some in U.S. archives. Thus the rich archives found in Finland, and in the Baltic states and Poland have never been searched in any truly systematic way. This is partly due to the fact that they are in languages other than Russian, such as Swedish, Finnish, German and Polish. Additionally, much of both tapped and untapped sources offer mere bits and pieces of information. In themselves they most often make little sense. However, if hooked up to bits and pieces found in archives located on the other side of the globe, they suddenly provide us with a near global vision of historical events previously unknown, or misunderstood. Sometimes a key piece of this puzzle is found in a mere two words found in some obscure old book.

In addition to obstacles mentioned above, it has been generally held that the Russian-American Company employees consisted mostly of single men. Moreover, it has been assumed that in any given year the Russian-American Company's white work force never numbered beyond one thousand. More likely it hovered between five hundred and seven hundred and fifty. Most likely this estimate is based upon accounts found in preserved Company records, such as payrolls. Therefore it might in fact leave out the following:

- Family dependents, including children both born in the colonies as well as born elsewhere, and household servants.
- Relatives and/or friends brought along.
- Skippers and ship-crews hired through the Åbo/Turku (Finland) based mega business tycoon Eric Julin & Co, for cargo hauling journeys made to Sitka and other company sites.
- Recorded long term visitors, including scientists who used Sitka as their base of operation.
- Skippers, navigators and seamen of the whaling ships belonging to the Russo-Finnish whaling company, as well as the later-on skippers and crews onboard the Helsinki-based whalers operating in this region.

- The local Creole population fathered by Finns, Ingrians, Karelians and Balts. This particular population grew into a significant part of the colonies' population as well as workforce. However, as one parent was Russian orthodox, Russian church law required their children to be registered as such.

Of the seventeen known individuals offered the position of Governor of Russian Alaska/Chief Manger of the Russian-American Company, eight were Evangelical Lutheran North Europeans. Of these men one died in 1811 on his way to Russian Alaska (the German-born Johann Koch), the second who was to replace him (the Dane Johan Banner), never received his final confirming letter, and the third (the Finn Johan Joachim von Bartram) declined the repeated offer. Two of Governors were Finns, Arvid Adolph Etholén (1840–1845) and Johan Hampus Furuhjelm (1858–1864). Baltic Germans were Ludwig Karl August von Hagemester (January 1818 – October 1818), Ferdinand Friederich Georg Ludwig, Baron von Wrangell (1830–1835), and Nicolas Jacob (von) Rosenberg (August 1850–March 1853). Thus out of fourteen serving Governors one third were non-Russian North Europeans.

The significance of the Russian-American Company board's decision to seek official permission to establish an Evangelical Lutheran parish/pastorate to serve its increasing numbers of Lutheran employees with its seat in Sitka must also be taken into account. This clearly indicates that the Company considered its Lutheran labor force numerous enough to permit the board to do so. In June 24 in 1839 the Tzar granted such an official permission to the Company. To be noted is that the motive here was purely economical and thus self-serving. This calculation panned out with increasing numbers attracted to serve under renewed contracts. Thus this work force provided the Company with an increasing number of highly skilled skippers, navigators, seamen, office employees, medical men, pharmacists, as well as a full range of skilled craftsmen.

Between 1840 and 1865 three pastors, recruited from Finland, served this region, through Sitka, where its church-building was built. As approval was granted, it allowed St. Petersburg's upper consistory to take such actions it deemed desirable by providing this new parish/pastorate with a "care package", which among its many items also included Finnish artist Berndt Abraham Godenhjelm's magnificent altar-painting, "The Transfiguration of Christ". It is to be noted that to this day this painting proclaims of our large North European Evangelical Lutheran presence in Russian Era Alaska, and the Company's many far-flung sites in the shores and islands of the North Pacific. (See cover for Godenhjelm's painting.)

As this church served all its members equally, services were held in Finnish, Swedish, and German. Every fifth service was held in German. Services were held not only on Sundays but also on all Russian-held national holidays, such as coronation days, Royal weddings and birthdays.

The distinctly separate ethnic entities this pastorate served was not any different from the one in Irkutsk, which was more than one hundred years older and served substantial numbers of naval officers and high ranking imperial military and civilian employees. Singularly different at Sitka was its population of civilian Finnish merchant skippers and seamen, including navigators, employed by the Company. It is a mistake to believe that these men came primarily from the Åbo/Turku region. Records preserved indicate that many came from Loviisa, Hamina, Viipuri, Pori, Rauma and Oulu, as well as from interior

sites such as Kuopio, Joroinen, Mikkeli, etc. Additionally, hired ships complete with skippers and crews with registered home ports identified in places such as Oulu, Pori, Turku and Viipuri.

Serving between 1800 and 1868 where at least thirty-six Lutheran medical doctors. Most were Baltic Germans trained at Dorpat University. Five came from Finland. Of the five, three served out of Sitka, the rest on board ships sailing the loop: Kronstadt – Sitka – Kodiak – Petropavlovsk (Kamchatka) – Okhotsk (initially) – Ajan (from 1846 onward) – Nikolajefsk on the Amur (after 1856) and back, sometimes via Hong Kong or Shanghai, mostly via Honolulu and/or Tahiti.

Furthermore, under study should be the Company's many other endeavors beyond its fur pelt harvesting, as many Finns and Balts took part in these endeavors as harvest site supervisors, furriers and accountants.

Acquiring the always-needed provisions, most often in short supply, necessary to the sustenance of staff and the labor force stationed both in Sitka and the many far flung Company sites.

Providing the desired luxury goods such as champagne, cigars, silks, gloves, shoes etc. for the ladies, and other such things.

Designing and constructing numerous buildings at various sites all through the Company domains. Not only where they built for housing (never adequately-provided-for at Sitka), but also for business purposes. Some buildings are still standing today. Those with distinct stone foundations are all Finnish-built. These include the historic Russian Orthodox Bishop's house in 1840–1841, and the original Russian Orthodox Cathedral which burned down in January of 1966. (A replica has since then replaced it.)

During his short reign Tzar Paul granted the Russian-American Company the monopoly on all the empire's endeavors taking place in the Russian Pacific domains and those instigated by the empire on other nearby sites. Thus numerous Finns and Balts, including naval officers, medical men, workmen, craftsmen, skippers and ship crews were involved in the following ventures:

Imperial Russia's repeated attempts made in their desire to penetrate Japan's then closed society in their hope of obtaining trade agreements with that nation. In 1792 the Finn Erik Laxman had instigated this attempt out of Irkutsk, east Siberia, The Russian American Company continued this effort under its monopoly rights. Such an agreement was finally completed under Admiral Putiatin's leadership in 1855–1858. Many Finns were in his entourage as well as in the ship crews.

Imperial Russia's desire to dominate the full length of the Amur River and its basin. It was a politically motivated issue the same Erik Laxman brought to Tzarina Catharine the Great's attention in 1790. This matter was successfully brought to completion in 1856–1858. Many Finns and Balts were involved.

As the move away from Russian-held Alaska was directly caused by events taking place during the Crimean War (1853–1856), a thorough investigation of its Pacific War-scene should be included. Numerous Finns and Balts, both Russian-American Company employees as well as others, civilians, naval officers, and marine soldiers were involved.

This includes the battles fought at Petropavlovsk, and this city's ensuing evacuation, as well as at Ajan, and at the Amur River delta, and other sites.

The sale of Russian Alaska was finally completed with the transfer of the territory to the United States on October 18 in 1867. However, the Russian-American Company's operating charter had already expired some years earlier, and although granted a three-year extension the Company was for all practical purposes defunct. Thus, dismantling the Company sites were started early. Ajan, on the Pacific Siberian side, was completed in the summer of 1865, the year Sitka's pastor Winter departed. The work in Ajan had been directed by the Finn, Russian imperial naval officer Alexander Elfsberg. One of his supervisors was Navigator Carl Constantin Swartz from Joroinen (Finland). Okhotsk had been dismantled in 1846 in favor of the better natural port found at Ajan. Fort Ross, the Company's Northern California site had been sold more than twenty years earlier in 1841. Ajan's subordinated sites had been dismantled at the time of Ajan, and then sold to the Finn Otto Wilhelm Lindholm and his partners Hutchinson and Törnqvist.

The migration away from the Company's Alaska sites started in 1861 and ended some fifteen years later in 1876, that is, some seven years after the actual transfer. However, due to the escalating famine years in Finland (1862–1870) it impacted heavily on destination choices. Additionally impacting on choices was the reality that the Company (or the government) only offered free passage to Nikolajefsk, de Castri Bay, Vladivostok, and Ajan. The rest of the journey home was far too costly for many-membered lower family unites.

Thus considerable numbers left for San Francisco and other California sites. Others settled in the Puget Sound region, including Vancouver Island. Some left for Astoria on the Oregon coast lured by the rich fishing on the Columbia River. Sizable numbers of Finnish and Baltic fathered families remained in Alaska. In the late 1800 Sitka is reported to have had some 500 individuals who could point to their Finnish ancestry. A few found their way to Honolulu and the other Hawaiian Islands as well as to Valparaiso. Significant is that all where thoroughly familiar sites to them all.

What attracted so many to move to the newly acquired Amur-land region was multifold:

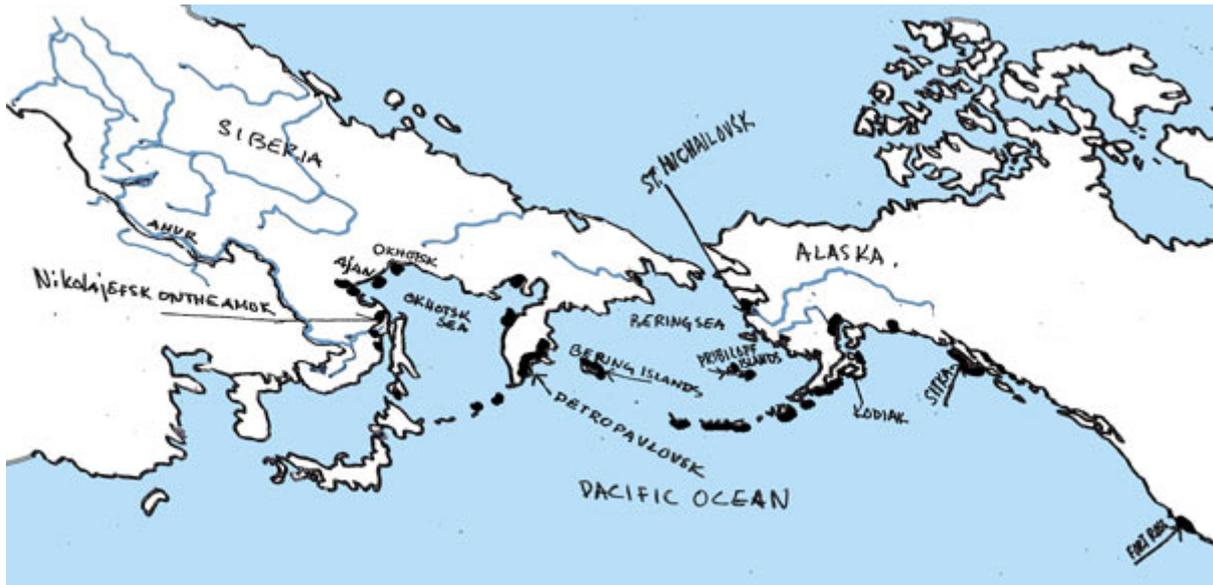
- The government's offer of free passage to the New Pacific Siberian sites.
- The fact that the region was already familiar to most.
- The government's offer of free land.
- The fact that the region was governed by their former Governor, Johan Hampus Furuhjelm, now as a military Governor (from October 1865 to 1871). His seat was the region's capital Nikolajefsk on the Amur. It held promise the city would resemble the familiar Sitka.
- The fact that his sister Ludmila, was married to medical Doctor Gustaf Schneider, who formerly of Ajan (1853–1865), had been appointed chief medical Doctor of the Amur-land region, with its seat in Blagoveshchensk up the Amur.
- His brother Harald Furuhjelm was now serving as chief administrator over this new region's crown lands as well as the region's settlement and land grant programs. His seat was at Nakhodka west of Vladivostok. To those departing Sitka the familiarity of such facts offered them much comfort in their state of upheaval.

In 1864 the Russian Evangelical Lutheran Church authorities had split from the huge Irkutsk based East Siberian pastorate, its South-West corner, thus forming a second East Siberian pastorate called the Ajan Trak pastorate. The Saarijärvi-born Finnish pastor Herman Wilhelm Roschier served as its first pastor from 1865 to 1880. His flock consisted mainly of immigrants and some exiled from Finland, Ingria, Estonia and Latvia. A church and an altar painting were provided.

Then in 1865, a mere month after military Governor Furuhjelm took up his seat at Nikolajefsk on the Amur (which was just about six months after Sitka's last pastor Georg Gustaf Winter's departure from Sitka on April 14), the same church authorities made its second move in the East Siberian region. On October 22 they split off from the rest of the Irkutsk pastorate the Pacific Siberian maritime region, forming out of it a separate pastorate. In the South it stretched to the Korean border, in the North its reach was the Arctic Sea, including Kamchatka. Thus this move brought welcome comfort to those arriving from the former Russian Alaska. Nikolajefsk on the Amur was this pastorate's seat and the post was designated a military one. Pastor Martin Kurtz was appointed its first pastor. Kurtz was an 1863 graduate from Dorpat University's theological department, born in Kurland on January 21 in 1840. Pastor Kurtz is documented as serving out of Nikolajefsk on the Amur from 1866 to 1873. Thus his assignments just might have included two summertime pastoral journeys to be made by ship in 1866 and 1867 which included stops at the now pastor less lutheran community at Sitka. That is, up to October 18 in 1867 when the actual transfer of Russian Alaska took place into American hands. However, no factual data indicating such pastoral journeys out of Nikolajefsk on the Amur with recorded stops at Sitka has yet surfaced. But the possibility is neither farfetched nor unrealistic.

A precedent exists: Irkutsk's pastor Butzke visited Ajan in the summer of 1848, a site attached to the Russian American company lutheran pastorate. There Butzke is recorded to have bumped into the Sitka based pastor Gabriel Plathán. From 1869 on Pastor Kurtz was also named acting military pastor at Irkutsk. It might be presumed this assignment was to cover his Irkutsk college's absences due to his long journeys to other sites of his pastorate, or a prolonged illness. Pastor Kurtz's own appointment at Nikolajefsk on the Amur coincides with governor Furuhjelm's governorship of this region; one might venture to presume that pastor Kurtz's departure also coincides with governor Furuhjelm's departure from Nikolajefsk on the Amur, to then serve out his term at Irkutsk as temporary military pastor there. This newly formed Siberian maritime pastorate covered a notoriously inhospitable region lacking any viable roads connecting any habited sites to its capital. The only viable means of travel was up and down the river Amur, and up and down the coast by ship. The climate was also harsh. Winters were very cold, summers short and cool, frequently plagued by impenetrable banks of fog.

While this was taking place on the Siberian side of the Pacific, on the American side the Western Union Telegraph Company put into action its huge venture, attempting to draw a telegraph line from San Francisco up to the Bering Strait. The plan was to cross the strait and then draw it down to Nikolajefsk on the Amur. There it was to be connected to the one connecting to St. Petersburg via Irkutsk and Moscow. The goal was to connect the U.S. with Europe through Asia. Involved in this venture were many Finns and Balts. Among them the Finn Carl Constantin Swartz. However, a few years later this project was abandoned as the same company had on its second attempt managed to connect the U.S. East coast with Europe by dropping a cable across the Atlantic.



Marked in black are the main sites of the Evangelical Lutheran Church and its pastors, serving out of Sitka, the farflung Russian-American Company colonies situated on both sides of the North Pacific rim and islands between 1840 and 1865. Source: Album Academicum der Kaiserlichen Universität Dorpat 1800-1886, number 6990.

By 1868 Nikolajefsk on the Amur was already a rough "city" several times larger than Sitka ever was. A large part of its population consisted of military men. Both the Pacific Siberian fleet's as well as the Amur's fleet's headquarters were there. Supplying them with desirable goods had attracted numerous German merchants. The garrisons were served by several medical doctors, all of them Baltic Germans educated at Dorpat University. Many of the officers stationed there were Finns and Balts. Prior to 1866 Irkutsk's pastor Johann Rossini (serving from 1863 to 1872) made regular journeys to Nikolajefsk, Ajan and Vladivostok as well as other sites. At Rossini's departure in 1872 Irkutsk remained without a permanent pastor for several years. Thus after pastor Kurtz's stint as Irkutsk's acting military pastor, pastor Herman Wilhelm Roschier from the Ajan Trak was assigned to serve the entire East Siberian region until Baltic pastor Theodor Rathke arrived to Irkutsk at the end of 1875. Roschier's long journeys to all corners of this vast region are well documented. Rathke took on the pastorless maritime region also, until January 1880 when the maritime region finally got its own pastor, the Balt August Rumpeter, who also had been educated at Dorpat University. By then much had changed in that region: as by 1871 Governor Furuhjelm had departed Nikolajefsk on the Amur and his brother had died at Nakhodka, as well as their sister Ludmila and her husband had been reassigned to Poland. Thereafter Nikolajefsk on the Amur was abandoned for the far better natural harbor at Vladivostok. The two fleets and the pastor's – and Governor's seat was also moved to Vladivostok. Nikolajefsk reverted into a sleepy garrison out-post. The next two Governors of maritime Siberia were the Baltic-Germans A. G. Kraun (1871–1875) and Gustav Wilhelm Erdmann (1875–1880). Numerous Finns and Baltic officers, both high and low ranking were serving here. Although the leadership was no longer Finnish and familiar, it was still North European and Evangelical Lutheran.

In 1867 at the time of the sale of Russian Alaska most of the Company's ships were purchased by the initial San Francisco partnership of Hutshinson & Hirsh, which shortly thereafter turned into Hutshinson, Kohl & Co., then into Hutshinson, Kohl, and Maksou-toff & Co., to then stay as Hutshinson, Kohl, Philippeus & Co. This Company was granted fur harvesting permits at all the old Russian-American Company sites on the American side and Russian Government permits on some of the Siberian sites excluding those sold to Lindholm. Thus in fact this Company continued the same operation in nearly exactly the same way as previously. However, this time out of San Francisco and under another name. Most of its site agents, skippers, navigators, seamen and expert furriers were former Russian American Company employees. One of the owners was the Finn Gustaf Nybom (Niebaum). The Company made millions, some through rather shade filled deals. This Company spawned the Alaska Commercial Company which also made millions.

In Vladivostok the partners Otto Vilhelm Lindholm and Törnqvist did equally well at the former Russian-American Company's old shore side whaling stations situated in the South West corner of the Okhotsk sea. The Company owned at least the following ships: Tugur, Alexander, Sibir, Carolina Törnqvist, and Hanna Rice. This Company owned lucrative gold mining sites, a shipping firm, the region's only flour mill, shipyards and an import firm. Most likely Lindholm surpassed Nybom in power and earnings.

The Commercial activities generated by these two firms crisscrossing the North Pacific was formidable. Anchoring as well as most likely protecting them and their activities were their old friends now serving as imperial Russian Consuls. In San Francisco it was Martin Klinkofström, then Valdemar Welitkovsky, then Gustaf Nybom himself, and possibly one of the Hanson skipper-brothers from Lovisa (Finland). In Oregon it was the Finn Gustaf Wilson. In Honolulu served J. P. Pfluger, then J. Bollmann. In China it was Mr. Philippeus. Under such favorable conditions those two firms could not but prosper. On record are orders placed via Vladivostok to California firms for hundreds of yellow rain slickers and boots for the Lena goldmines. Huge machines for the mining fields. Orders for fine ladies shoes, kid gloves, candied fruits, luxury goods, and dried vegetables for the region's department stores. Huge amounts of dried fruits for the Finnish firm Fazer and others. By 1890 San Francisco had more seamen than any other city in the United States. By the turn of the century 11 % of them were Finns. In 1900 San Francisco's population counted 342.782 and Vladivostok's was 38.000.

This panoramic view is not complete without the ships built in Finnish shipyards. In 1836-1839 the Åbo/Turku old shipyards built the ships "Nicolai 1" and "Naslednik Aleksandr" for the Russian American Company. In use these ships were mostly manned by Finnish skippers and crews. The same shipyards built several ships for the Russo-Finnish Whaling Company.

The Helsinki shipyards of Bergström & Suleman built the transporter "Baikal" for the Russian Government for the specific use in exploring the Amur River delta in 1848-1858.

The corvette "Varijag" built at the Oulu (Finland) shipyards of Bergman & Cadelin was used at the Pacific Siberian side of the Great Western Union Telegraph Company venture. Much of its crew and command was Finnish.

For the Amur River traffic the Helsinki firm Maskin och Brobyggnads Aktiebolaget built the following tugboats and passenger ships. Some accommodating up to 700 passengers.

1902: "Finljandijet", "Stretensk", "Argun", 1906: "Boris", "Udaloj", "Provorni", 1910: "Merkuri", 1912: "Ingenieur", "Wurtsej", "Ivan Oparin".

These nine ships were brought in sections to the Ussuri River where they were assembled by Finnish crews brought along. Also mentioned are ships built by the Crichton firm in Åbo/Turku (Finland). But so far I have not found their names. These ships were also designed for the Amur River traffic.

With this I conclude my panoramic view hoping I have convincingly communicated the importance of focusing on the enormity in what this handful of Finns and Balts managed to accomplish in the North Pacific region. It is truly mindboggling!

However, in 1922 with the Soviet regime taking control over maritime Siberia the iron curtain came down with a bang and most of the region's Finns were rounded up and executed on Vladivostok's main square. Vladivostok was declared a closed city, and remained so up to the mid 1990.

References

Because Finnish Seaman House ship-crew lists often lack actual destinations, I have used Honolulu, San Francisco, and Sitka port records for incoming and departing ships, as well as imperial Russian Consular records and the listings therein. The contracts made by the Hutshinson firm for their East Siberian sites are also located in the above mentioned consular archives. The same goes for the ships arriving to Honolulu and San Francisco, including their crew-lists, owners, homeports, and destinations. The list of goods shipped to Vladivostok and from there forward are also found in said Consular archives. The Hutshinson firm's ventures have been documented in a number of books on San Francisco's history. Other sources are city address directories. Additionally San Francisco's Russian Benevolent Society's Rooster has been consulted.

Eric Laxman's endeavors in Irkutsk are recorded by Professor Lensen (now deceased). Professor Stephan of University of Honolulu has recorded the Pacific Crimean war scene. Professor Jensen of University of Washington has recorded the details of the sale of Alaska, with more detailed documentation in the imperial Russian Consular archives. The names of the Baltic medical doctors on both sides of the North Pacific come from many sources and have been checked against Dorpat University's Matricle. The same goes for East Siberia's Evangelical Lutheran Pastors. Roschier has himself recorded his many journeys made in East Siberia. The reports are part of the archives of the Governor Generals of Finland found in the National Archives of Finland. In one of his letters quoted, he states he had upon his arrival received an altar painting for his church. The set of official letters requesting permission to establish an Evangelical Lutheran church/pastorate at Sitka I have published in my "Documenting the Legacy of the Alaska Finns from the Russian Period", Finnish-American Historical Society of the West. There is also much data on the history of the Godenhjelm altar-painting.

Much detailed documentation is found in bits and pieces in published accounts written by visiting scientists. This includes the early (prior to 1840) medical doctors serving in

that region. Other sources such as ship-logs have been consulted. The Creole population fathered by Balts and Finns I have handpicked out of Russian Alaska's orthodox church records. Professor Kishamutdinov of Vladivostok has documented the ventures of Lindholm and other Finns in Vladivostok as well as the execution in 1922.

The Western Union Telegraph Company's venture is well documented in several published accounts. One is authored by Bush who documents Swartz as their guide and interpreter. Other sources come from translated documents published by Oregon Historical Society. Much information of dramatic proportion is found in preserved letters, among them some written by the Finn Alexander Elfsberg born in Oulu (Finland). Much of above material can be found on microfilm at the Family History Library at Salt Lake City, and can be ordered through any Mormon church library.

Extrapolated and photocopied original documents are available for study at the "Enckell archives pertaining to the Finns and Balts in Russian Alaska and the Pacific Siberian Rim". It is located at the archives of the Swedish-Finn Historical Society in Seattle, Washington, U.S.A. This collection includes some 500 books on the subject in a multitude of languages, as well as hundreds of photocopied original documents found in numerous archives across the world. It is available to interested parties. A catalog of its holdings is also made available for a nominal fee. The Society's staff is very friendly and helpful in locating satisfactory accommodations for any length of stay.



The altarpiece painted for the Sitka (Russian Era Alaska) Evangelical-Lutheran Church by Berndt Abraham Godenhjelm was brought to Finland to be restored by the initiative of Maria J. Enckell together with Prof. Heikki Hanika from the University of Jyväskylä, and the Director of Degree Program of Conservation of the EVTEK Institute of Art and Design, late Mr. Rikhard Hördal.

The conservation-restoration work of the painting has been done by painting conservator, lecturer Tannar Ruuben partly assisted by the art history student Kati Huovinmaa from the Helsinki University. The painting has been fully documented, investigated by means of analytical photography (infrared light, ultraviolet light, radiography) and also conserved and restored. EVTEK (Degree Program of Conservation) and Tannar Ruuben have donated the whole restoration work.

The altar painting will be exhibited at the beginning of 2003, first in Finland and in the early autumn also in St. Petersburg, Russia.