



A JOURNAL OF ORTHODOX FAITH AND CULTURE

# ROAD TO EMMAUS

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Lavrentii

# FOLLOWING THE STAR

## Conversations with Sitka Elders

In August of 2015, *Road to Emmaus* asked four long-time parishioners of the Cathedral of St. Michael the Archangel to tell us their memories and impressions of Orthodox church life in Sitka, Alaska. Three are native Tlingit: Subdeacon Lavrentii Young, Herman Davis, and Betty Allen, and the fourth is Betty's husband Bob Allen, an Alaska resident for more than sixty-five years. We think you will agree that their narratives are both surprising and moving.

SUBDEACON LAVRENTII: When I was a young boy, my grandfather, John Littlefield from England, came to work in the Chichikoff mine stamping numbers onto the gold bricks. He stayed in Sitka, built himself a house, and married my grandmother, Annie Peters of the Kogwanton tribe of the Eagle moiety. I belong to the Gooch Hit (Wolf) House and to four different moieties within that house: the Eagle, the Wolf, the Bear, and the Killer Whale. My wife Marina comes from the Raven and the Dog Salmon moieties—the opposite of myself. (We do not marry our own sisters, nor even women from our own houses. We always marry opposites.) In fact, it was an arranged marriage and I was promised to Marina before she was even born. Until today, I thank God for that. She is a tremendous person.

RTE: Wonderful. Can you tell us now of your impressions of St. Innocent and his time in Sitka?

SUBDEACON LAVRENTII: When I attended St. Herman's Seminary on Kodiak, I was asked by Bishop Gregory Afonsky if I would like to go to a class on St. Innocent. I had never realized that one person could do so much to spread the word of God. He traveled from one end of Alaska to the other, bringing the sacraments, building churches.

*Opposite: Subdeacon Lavrentii Young.*

St. Innocent was a tremendous person, and he didn't let little things bother him. When he came to Alaska, he learned the language of the Aleut people, he gained their confidence and their love, and he learned to gather, preserve, and prepare the foods they ate. He spent seventeen years with the Aleut people, and then he transferred to the Kuskoquim area with the Upik Eskimos. He learned their language as well, and then he came all the way down from Kuskoquim in a *baidarka*, a native kayak, in a sea where the waters are never more than 40° F. He travelled over 2000 miles with nothing to eat but fish on the way down. When he got to Sitka, he once again learned the language and our local foods—how to get them and how to preserve them. Subsistence living is difficult.

St. Innocent earned the confidence and love of the native people, and he showed them that he was able to live among them. He taught them about Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ and he built the first chapel on the hill. In 1838 he visited Russia, and while he was there his wife died. He became a monk and the next year he was elevated to the rank of Bishop of Sitka and All of Alaska. He had already begun designing St. Michael's and he spent years gathering materials for the building of the cathedral, which stood until the fire of 1966.

RTE: Were you here during that tragic fire?

SUBDEACON LAVRENTII: Yes, I was. When you think of Sitka in January, you think of snow, but we didn't have snow that January. If it had been snowing, the cathedral roof wouldn't have caught on fire, nor the other buildings in downtown Sitka, but as it was it was -10° F., very dry, and the wind was blowing from the south-southeast.

Across the street was the Coliseum Theater with a small store next to the theater, whose owner had put in a new furnace thermostat that day. The workman, however, didn't use the recommended wire, but a lighter, less expensive one, and close to midnight the wire overheated and the shop caught fire. The hot embers landed on the roof of the cathedral, which had been waterproofed with Spruce pitch when it was built in the 1840s. The theater and the top of the Lutheran church across the street also caught fire. The fire engines came down, but the fire hydrants were frozen, and I just thank God that the Coast Guard was able to quickly bring over a five-inch dewatering pump from the base across the bay. They laid a hose from the beach all the way up to town to pump salt water.

While the Coast Guard was setting up the pump, the people of Sitka swarmed into the cathedral. They rushed through the doors, and then dismantled the front and side doors. They formed a human chain in the cathedral. It was just unbelievable, but within eleven minutes they had everything stripped off of the altars and the walls, which they initially stored in shops along the street. The priest and some others later took an inventory and not a single item was missing. The Sitka people just loved this cathedral. The clock on the bell tower that St. Innocent had made was completely destroyed, of course, although that clock still kept time over a century after he built it. The clock was hooked up to the bells and at noon and midnight the bells rang twelve times. Those bells were greatly missed.

## Rebuilding the Cathedral

My mother, Charlotte Elizabeth, was one of the leaders of the cathedral sisterhood and my father was the *starosta* [church warden] of the cathedral for many years. My mother, who was the backbone of our family, used to come sit in the corner of the church to pray and think. That was where she got her strength. After the cathedral burned, my parents were quite upset because they didn't see any way of restoring it, until one day my mother said to me and my five brothers, "Boys, each of you has your own abilities, you know how to do things, and you know how to take care of each other. Now put that together and start thinking about what you ought to do. I say this because we need to help rebuild the cathedral and we are going to do it together as a family."



*St. Michael's Cathedral engulfed by flames on January 2, 1966.*

My older brother Tom who was the hunter said, "I'm going deer hunting." I said, "I'll catch pink salmon and halibut." My other brothers also went out in their boats—one got clams and cockles, another caught pink crab and Dungeness crab. We always prayed as a family before we went out to fish—to our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, to St. Nicholas, to St. Michael. My older brother Tom would say, "Let's go," and we would gather in front of my mother's icons to pray. We were always taken care of.

When we brought the catch in, my mother and aunts would prepare it at home, and then we'd bring the food to town and sell it at the American Native Brotherhood Hall. Back then, there was a paper pulp mill outside of town, and the men who worked there would also purchase these lunches. This went on for years, and all of the money went to help rebuild the church. Women from the sisterhood were always selling fried bread, baked goods, and lunches. Other donations came in from all over the world, and there was a painted "thermometer" that showed how much money we'd raised. It went up steadily until the church was completely rebuilt ten years later.

You can read about the rebuilding and about Tlingit history and culture in the book *Memory Eternal* by Sergei Kan, who is my brother by adoption.<sup>1</sup> My mother adopted him. He was accepted into the world of the Tlingit, and in Christ is a part of us. This is very rare.

RTE: What a marvelous effort to rebuild the church. Do you have other memories of church life?

SUBDEACON LAVRENTII: One of my first memories is when my grandfather, John Littlefield, first brought me to the cathedral. I was about four years old. It was cold outside and we walked here over Sitka's wooden sidewalks. I remember that I had on shoes with holes in the soles.

All the way up, Grandfather was telling me about the cathedral and about the star that the three Wise Men followed at the Saviour's birth. He talked about "following the star." We entered the cathedral, the first ones there. He took me to the side altar where the Sitka Mother of God icon is and he said, "Sit here in the corner." I sat down by one of the big oil heaters and it was so toasty warm that I fell asleep. After a while, someone shook me awake and I looked around to see the older men from the Indian village who came once a week to clean the church and polish the brass. On special occasions they would take the 450-pound chandelier all apart and polish it. The chandelier was hooked up to a block and tackle that could be lowered into a special metal frame. As we left the church my grandfather said, "Do you remember what I told you about that star?" I said, "Yes," and he said, "Alright, now look at the star of Sitka." That chandelier had become so bright with their polishing that, to my young eyes, it shone like a real star. When I was a paratrooper in Vietnam in the jungle and needed help so badly, I remembered that star. It is still here.

<sup>1</sup> Sergei Kan, *Memory Eternal: Tlingit Culture and Russian Orthodox Christianity through Two Centuries*, Univ. of Washington Press, Seattle, 1999.

Another memory is the first liturgy after the church was rebuilt. When the bishop consecrated it he said, “Saint Innocent brought with him an icon of St. Nicholas, and St. Nicholas is the patron saint of all those who sail on the sea. That ocean is big and very cold, but if you carry him in your heart, he will protect you....” I’ve always remembered that.

A third important moment is that while working in Kodiak a few years after the church was rebuilt, I had a cerebral aneurism. I was in a coma for a very long time, and at one point I was looking down at my body and wondering how I was going to get back into it. Then I remembered that my mother had said, “If you ever feel alone and you need someone, just repent.” I started thinking about the different things I had done. I remembered especially when I was a little boy of about four or five, I didn’t want to go to church one day and so I jumped out of the window. That was very bad because I landed on one of my grandfather’s roosters. (*Laughter*). As I repented, I began coming closer and closer to my own body, until I finally came out of the coma.

## II. Betty and Bob Allen

RTE: Can you begin by telling us a bit about yourselves and your family?

BOB ALLEN: My wife Betty is a native Tlingit whose family began with a Russian ancestor named Plotnikoff (meaning “carpenter”). This Plotnikoff was one of the Russian workers who came with Alexander Baranov in 1799 along with Aleut natives and Russians to build the first fort for the Russian-American Company. In 1802 the Tlingit captured the fort and destroyed it, killing all but six people, one of whom was Betty’s ancestor. The survivors were rescued by a British ship and ransomed in Kodiak. When Baranov and a new crew returned in 1804 to rebuild the fort, Plotnikoff was with them again, and this time he married a native interpreter. This was the beginning of Betty’s family. As a carpenter and boat builder, Plotnikoff also helped build St. Michael’s Cathedral.

The Tlingits have been here for thousands of years and part of the reason that the Tlingits have never been beaten in war is that they understood that to be strong you cannot intermarry with relatives. For the Tlingit this includes people within your own clan or moiety. For example, an Eagle cannot marry another Eagle, and for centuries if someone from the Eagle moiety tried to marry another Eagle, they would kill him. An Eagle can only marry a Raven, and a Raven can only marry an Eagle.

I was born in Eureka, California, and my father brought us to Alaska in 1950. I was in the engineer corps in the Korean War, and when I left the army I worked construction jobs and did some commercial flying. By the time I married Betty, I'd flown, fished, trapped, gold mined, and ran dog teams—(*smiling*) all of the things you should do before you get married. After the 1964 Alaskan earthquake and tsunami, I stopped fishing because there weren't any canneries left. I worked in salvage until we earned enough money to buy this land and started the tour boat business that my children now run. We have forty-six great-grandchildren and fourteen great-great grandchildren.

BETTY ALLEN: Although I'm from a Tlingit family, I was born and grew up in Juneau. When Bob and I decided to marry, we moved to Kodiak and were married in the Kodiak church. Our five children were born up there and we were in church the Sunday they announced that the Sitka Cathedral had burnt down. We came here in 1967, a year later. Although my roots were here, I had never lived in Sitka, and when I first came I felt like an outsider. Subdeacon Lavrentii's mother, Charlotte, took me under her wing and taught me the native ways. She was someone I looked up to at church, and I could always go to her if I needed to talk.

RTE: What changes have you seen in the Orthodox community since you've been here?

BETTY ALLEN: The change from Slavonic to English services, and the older generation of people dying off year after year.

RTE: Do you miss the Slavonic services?

BETTY ALLEN: I don't mind the services in English, but my mother and the other old people always said, "We do not want English when we die, we want our funeral to be in Slavonic."

When we came, there were probably six hundred Orthodox people in the parish, and the elders were very loyal and supported the church. Those old people never held back. They always gave, and they always prayed in front of the Icon of the Sitka Mother of God. At that time, many families were active in church and in Sunday school, but our young people are just like those everywhere, and once television came in, things started to change.

*Opposite: Betty and Bob Allen.*





Also, in the early 1970s, native education came in, and the American Native Brotherhood Hall received money to push the Tlingit culture, with lots of after-school and weekend activities. “Remember your culture!” was the watchword. Many people went for that, and as a result, church attendance also dropped off. The younger people still show up for a funeral or a wedding, but they are busy with their own lives, and don’t come regularly.

## Rebuilding the Church

BOB ALLEN: A major reason we have St. Michael’s Cathedral today is because Bishop Theodosius (Lazor) came to live here for six years after the church burned. He even stayed for a while in the Bishop’s House, which had a leaky roof and no heat. It was in terrible condition, but Betty managed to teach church school there for years.

BETTY ALLEN: That was before they sold the building to the U.S. Park Service. It was so cold up in the Bishop’s House that the kids and I froze. The floor slanted so badly that if we put anything on the dining room table, it would roll right off. We had to hold onto the table to not slide away ourselves, but we had a good church school!

BOB ALLEN: When the church burned down, Bishop Theodosius came here, rolled up his sleeves and dug in. He knew the right people in Alaska, and he also took the Sitka Mother of God icon and traveled all over the United States to raise money from other Orthodox churches. To help with the restoration and to make ends meet, Betty and many of the women worked selling lunches and fried bread, and on holidays we’d have a booth where we sold fish pies. That paid the bills, and when it didn’t cover them, Betty paid the electricity and heating oil herself. Also, the cruise-ship industry was picking up at that time. Bishop Theodosius knew that tourism would keep the church alive, so after we rebuilt we began asking donations from visitors.

By this time we had built up our own line of passenger tour boats in Juneau and Sitka, and when the Sitka church was in need, we came up with the idea of offering our passengers a free pass to see St. Michael’s Church. Our company pays the donation for each passenger who visits.

## The Earthquake and Tsunami of 1966

RTE: Bob, I understand that you were part of the Kodiak rescue team after the terrible earthquake and tsunami of Good Friday, March 27, 1964, and that you have quite an interesting story. Can you tell us?

BOB ALLEN: We'd been out fishing for twelve days when the earthquake and tsunami hit. As soon as we could get in, we took our fishing boat into the harbor at Kaguyak on Kodiak Island. The village, on a spit of land with a lake behind it, had been wiped out, and people were sitting on the hillside. It was 23° F. that night and there were no blankets and no food. They'd run right out of their houses when the earthquake hit. The water had risen 26 feet, and when it receded, it took the village with it.

People who have never been in a tsunami don't understand that the water rushes in quickly and then it recedes. It flooded so far into the interior of the island that the water picked up a fishing boat in the bay and deposited it six miles inland. When the water receded, it just sucked everything out with it: all of the houses and buildings, the church, the school—even logs and seaweed off of the beaches. The force was so strong that it scoured the lake and uprooted the plants from the lake bottom. The tide had gone from full high to full low in about fifteen minutes.

We were in our fishing boat, so we only had a single lifeboat that could get in close enough, a rowing skiff that held about fifteen people. It took us four trips to get everybody off. We also found someone drowned farther up the beach, so we carried the body to church, but when we arrived, the church was gone. It had just been built and was not yet consecrated. All we found were two church banners, so we spread the banners over the body and sailed to Old Harbor in our boat, where we picked up another fifty adults and thirty kids.

We had a skipper and an engineer with us for the rescues. As we headed to Kaguyak, the engineer started cooking hotcakes on the boat's big oil stove, where he could make about six hotcakes at a time. By the time we took on the first load of people, he had a stockpile. We ran out of butter and margarine right off, of course, but we had a kettle on for hot water and just kept adding sugar and boiling it down to make a syrup. We just kept cooking.

When people came onboard, they were in shock. They couldn't even get to the table for a hotcake, unless you led them there. From 7 o'clock in the morning until 11 o'clock at night, we cooked for about a hundred adults and thirty kids.

The mystery of this was that we only had enough flour for our crew of four on that boat, because if you carry extra supplies, weevils will get into them. We'd already been out fishing for twelve or thirteen days and were on our way back to Kodiak when the tsunami hit, so we had almost no food left. But we started cooking and just kept it up. People were eating and eating and eating. When we got into Kodiak, I unloaded everyone off of the boat and the Navy guys took them to the mess hall and fed them eggs and more hotcakes. To this day we have no idea how that flour multiplied to feed so many.

### III. Herman Davis

HERMAN DAVIS: I'm almost 82 and I was born in the Todd Cannery on Chichikoff Island where my mother worked. She was over fifty when I was born, and I'm from the Coho clan, the Raven tribe. I grew up speaking Tlingit, and you should know that last year the governor signed a law into effect that along with English, Alaska now has twenty official co-languages, including Tlingit.

I've seen Sitka grow from 2000 to 9000 people. When I was young, we were about half native and half white. As kids we used to play Indians and Cowboys (*laughter*), Hide and Seek, Kick the Can, Norwegian baseball, and marbles. The girls played hopscotch. In the winter we played hockey, built snow houses and snowmen, and sledded down the steep streets. There was also an oil dock where they kept empty wooden barrels, and we'd get into those barrels and roll down the hill. At home, we listened to the radio every night: Glenn Miller, Dinah Shore, The Lone Ranger. Somehow I got turned onto classical music, especially Mozart. One of my other favorites is Verdi's Requiem. I first heard Handel's Messiah when I was ten years old. I've always loved it, and I have many classical records.

I went to a government school and late every summer, after the fishing was over and the cannery closed around the beginning of September, our family would go camping for six weeks to hunt, fish and gather our subsistence food—dried and canned meat, fish, berries. My grandmother made moccasins out of sealskin and deerskin, and I used to help scrape the sealskins. When she finished, I would take her downtown to sell the moccasins in front of the shops.

I started fishing in 1946 when I was in the eighth grade. We didn't have hydraulics then, so everything was done by hand—sailing with oars, pulling

all the fish in, processing them, everything. I made \$3000 that first trip and (*smiling*) I was the richest kid in school. I went into the military in 1956.

RTE: Were you here when the cathedral burned down in 1966?

HERMAN DAVIS: Yes, my great-grandfather helped build the original church, and in 1966 I was working in the Pioneer Home for the elderly on the mid-night to eight shift. My boss said to me, “The fire looks like it’s going to jump over to the church. Go help them.” So I went over, but it was already too late. There were lots of people taking icons out of there, but there was no time to save the church records that were up in the loft. We couldn’t get up there because there was too much smoke. When the roof caught, it went like a box full of matches. One of the firemen came up to the men holding the hoses, who were trying to put the theatre out and said, “Never mind the theatre! Save the church! Save the church!” But there wasn’t enough pressure behind the hoses because it was winter and the hydrants were frozen. A lot of people in town donated to help rebuild.

RTE: You have lived a long life. How do you see Orthodox coexisting with your native Tlingit culture?

HERMAN DAVIS: We have many native sayings that are also Orthodox. For example, “Just like the roots of a tree, we are all intertwined,” and, “When someone talks to you, listen to him, because maybe that’s your brother or your father.” When a person dies, we have a regular Orthodox church burial and funeral, and we also have a traditional native gathering. Our clan has a ceremonial hat for our leaders that is worn at gatherings and potlatches. It is like the crown for the King or Queen of England, and ours has been with us for over 300 years. At a memorial gathering, we put the hat on the casket, and say a ritual phrase to comfort the relatives: “All of those who wore this hat are here to support you. It is as if you were traveling in your boat, and a storm came on you. That is why we have come with our regalia. It will be like medicine to you. It’s going to hold you up, because we don’t want you to only taste bitterness. The people who are lying in the blankets [the reposed] are also here.”

RTE: Wonderful. Do you have any special memories about church life at St. Michael’s Cathedral?





HERMAN DAVIS: I began standing in the church choir during services when I very young. My mother couldn't handle me, so my Dad, who was a tenor took me to stand beside him when he sang. I didn't sing at first, and I didn't understand the Slavonic, but my mother didn't have to worry about me after that because I was always at the choir stand. I liked it so much that I went myself. I still sing in the choir, both tenor and bass.

One of my favorite childhood memories is starring with my Dad on Christmas Eve. We had a star—ours was a big umbrella covered with cloth and then with a garland of colored cellophane with an icon in the middle. The priest would bless it and then we would go through the town singing Christmas songs. There were about twenty-five adults and children and we would start at the Bishop's House, the one St. Innocent lived in, and walk through the streets of Sitka. Even those who weren't Orthodox would invite us into their homes to sing. They gave us oranges, apples, candy, soda pop. We continued through the night and sometimes finished at 5:00 in the morning. Some of those people waited up for us all night long. Starring became a stronger tradition when Fr. Michael Osarigan came into our lives. He knew Slavonic, and he knew how to teach church music. Those were the songs that we sang at Christmas.

We all used to help light up the church at Christmas. I thought, "When Jesus was going to be born, there was a bright star in the sky, and when the Wise Men got to the cave, it was all lit up." I think of the church like that too, like a cave; and the door has to be lit up.

RTE: And Pascha?

HERMAN DAVIS: I still cry at Pascha, especially during Holy Week when we sing "Noble Joseph," and I think of all of our people who lie up in the Russian cemetery. When the service was over on Pascha, we children would run down to the water. There is an island across the way that had no ferry service then, so on Pascha night the kids from that island would wait on the pier until our service was over. First we would sing the Paschal Troparion in Slavonic, and when we finished they would sing it back. Then they sang it in Aleut and Eskimo, and we would sing it back a third time in English. I loved the Slavonic.

We didn't know the Tlingit then, but we do now. In fact, some of our church music was translated into Tlingit, but someone removed the music from the church about ten or fifteen years ago. I don't know why. In Angoon,

*Opposite: Herman Davis.*

however, there is a family who has a recording of those songs, so maybe we can get it back.

RTE: It's interesting that you feel so close to the Slavonic services. Some years ago Aleut natives and seminarians in Kodiak told me that it felt very natural to have the church services in Slavonic, and that they preferred it. How do you feel?

HERMAN DAVIS: Slavonic words and music is the Church; that is what I feel about it. I was really surprised when I came back from the military and they were singing things in English. I thought, "Where are we?" I wish they'd stayed with Slavonic because it sounds better, and a lot of people lying up in that cemetery felt the same way I do.

I remember that from the 1920s until television came in there were many people in church. Then they started watching sports and stopped coming. My whole family was very close to the church. There was nothing that could come between us and the church. I don't know what else to say. It's just there in my heart. ✦

*Opposite: Betty Allen's family totem pole chronicling her Native-Russian forebearers.*



