

St George prepares for Bicentennial

by **Betzi Woodman**
For the *Tundra Times*

Once again St. George Islanders have erected scaffolding around their graceful 50-year-old church to repair the ravages of wind, rain and fog which scourge this second largest of the Pribilof Islands in the Bering Sea.

But this year the refurbishing has a special meaning; it is part of the community's preparation to observe the bicentennial of the discovery of St. George Island by the Russian fur trader Gerassim Pribilof.

Fogs also plagued the region 200 years ago when in June 1786, Pribilof, after more than three years of searching, finally located the place where the fur seals went to have their young. Pribilof, as earlier writers spelled his name, was commander of a small sloop, the "St. George." With his crew of Russian hunters and a group of Aleuts taken from settlements on the Aleutian Chain, the navigator was searching for a new source of furs, particularly the richly-furred sea otter. So intensely hunted were they, that as early as 1772 the catch of the then some 30 fur companies had dwindled from tens of thousands of pelts to only hundreds.

Prior to Pribilof's successful find, the attention of the greedy fur hunters began to center on the fur seals. These animals had been noted when they went north each spring through passes and channels between the islands and then back south again in the fall accompanied by their young. No one had ever seen the seals stopping "on a

single rock or beach throughout all Alaska or the Northwest coast," one writer reported. Little value was placed on the fur seal then, but the Russians were curious about the land the animals must have gone to, and they searched fruitlessly for some 18 years.

Pribilof was, according to historical reports, "moved and exercised his mind by the revelation of an old Aleut shaman at Oonalashka (Unalaska) who pretended to recite a legend of the Natives wherein he declared that certain islands in the Bering Sea had long been known to the Aleuts. According to the legend, they knew them as 'Ateek.'"

It was no wonder that no one apparently had "found" the islands ere 1786. Fog, storms, currents and winds work to make navigation extremely difficult even today with all the technological instruments available. But the Russian did well, according to historian Henry V. Elliott, who wrote: "Considering at the beginning of the third summer's tedious search his old sloop ran up against the walls of Tolstoi Mees and the fog was so thick he could see scarce the length of his vessel, his ears were regaled by the sweet music of seal-rookeries wafted to him on the heavy air. He knew then he had found the object of his search and he at once took possession of the island in the Russian name and that of his craft."

Historian Hubert Howe Bancroft said that "finding no anchorage, the

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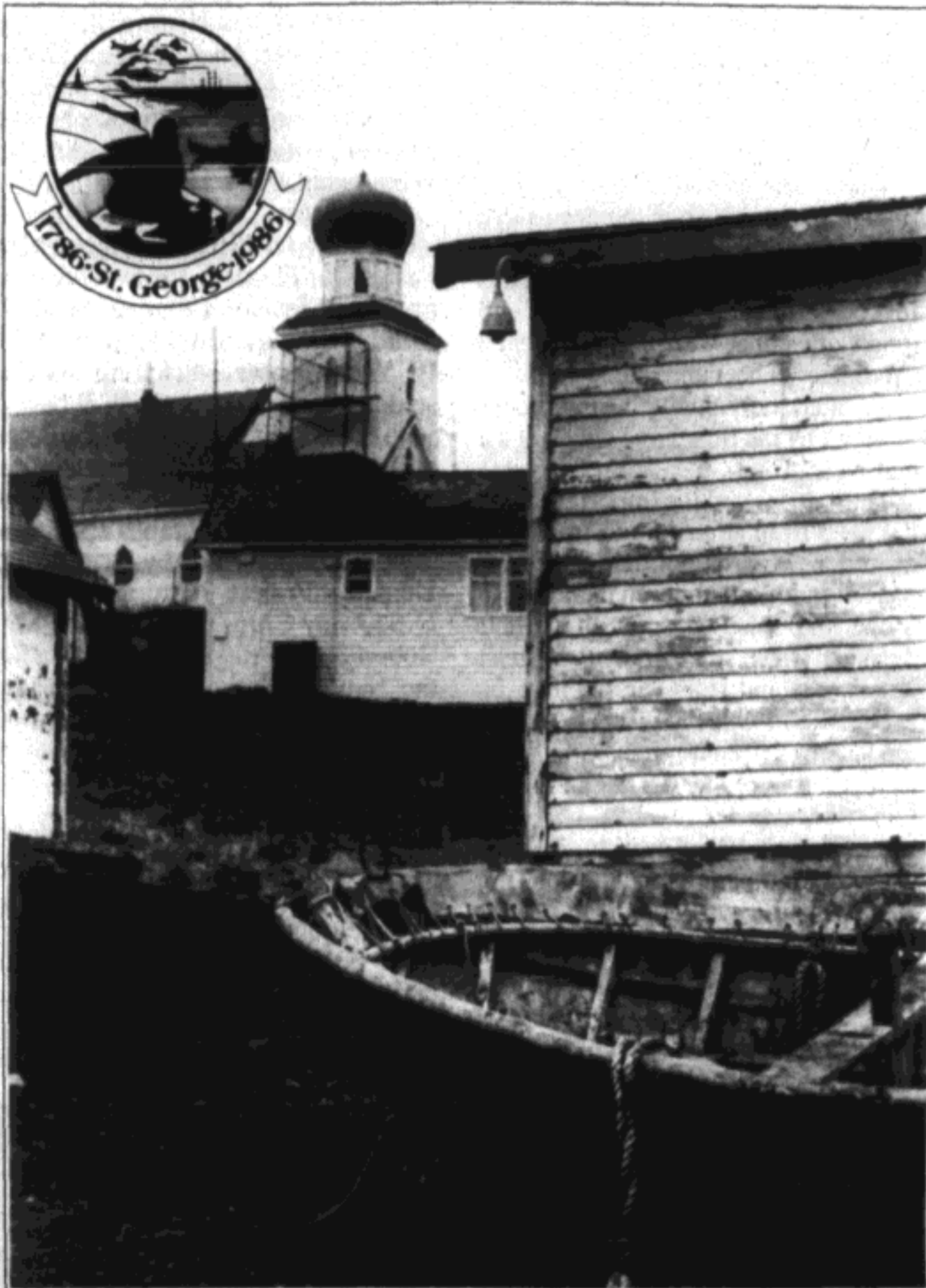


photo by Rob Stapleton

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commander (of the St. George) ordered the peredovchik Popof and all the hunters to land, with a supply of provisions for the winter, while he stood away again for the Aleutian islands, there to spread such reports as to keep others from following in his path."

The secret could not be kept, however, for the other ships watched and when Pribilof sailed to return to the island, they followed in his wake.

The shores literally swarmed with sea-otters, which, undisturbed so far by human beings, could be killed as easily as those on Bering Island during the first winter after its discovery. Large numbers of walrus were secured on the ice and upon the adjoining small islands; arctic fox could be caught by hand, and with the approach of summer, the fur seals made their appearance by the thousands.

Pribilof himself was a native of "old Russia." His father was one of the surviving sailors of the ship "St. Peter" which was wrecked with Bering in command, Nov. 4, 1741 on Bering Island. When cruising in 1783-86 for the rumored seal-grounds, Pribilof was merely the first mate of the sloop. The captain and part-owner was one M. Subov who was a member of a trading association then well organized in Alaska and widely known as the Laybaidev Lastochin Co.

Pribilof called these islands of his discovery after Subov, but the Russians, then and soon after, unanimously indicated the group by its present-day name. He died at Sitka in March 1796 aboard his ship "The Three Saints" while he was discharging his duties of running the company's ships.

Now the 180 or so people who live in the city of St. George, assisted by a group of off-island Aleuts and interested citizens of Anchorage, is celebrating this Bicentennial of Discovery with several unusual events. Although the Aleuts were forcibly settled on the island nearly two centuries ago, taken from their natural homes where food was plentiful to a far distant uninhabited land with poor food supplies, today's residents have a deep loyalty to their island home and the traditions which they inherited from their Russian masters. Their Native blood was mixed with Russian long ago and even their names today are Russian.



photo by Bret Coburn

They hope that the celebration events will stir interest in their Aleut heritage and open the island to broad outside interest, including tourism.

Projects planned are aimed at finding and preserving the elusive history of the island, its Russian Orthodox Church, and its people. But emphasis on the past is only part of the goal: to propel the community into another two centuries bright with promise and future which will depend more than ever on the people's own efforts.

Their early past could not have held much joy as they toiled as slaves for the Russians. One historian suggests that living conditions were so poor that the birthrate could hardly keep the population stable because so many died early of disease fostered by the poor housing and inadequate food.

The Creole Zakhar Chichenev who lived on St. George from the summer of 1832 to the autumn of 1833 said making homes from the island's natural material was difficult. He writes: "The largest part of the land is stony and boggy; with difficulty one finds soil to cover the houses and the 'iurtas' and one covers these with hummocks instead of turf... From July to the last days of September or first of October, people busy themselves gathering driftwood, riding in the baidara (skin boats) cutting of the wood. The women pull grass, collect moss for the roofs of the buildings."

A permanent settlement was established on the island in 1820 and in 1833 the St. George church was founded. In 1867 the United States purchased Alaska and American rule began. The federal government was then in control of the people's lives. In World War II, with no notice, they were evacuated for fear of Japanese invasion. The people spent a miserable time at a cannery in Southeast Alaska. In 1948 the islanders were given the right to vote, but it was not until 1962 that islanders were allowed to leave without government approval.

The Fur Seal Act of 1966 initiated the transfer of land and property to the Aleuts and the people won the right to form a town. The act set aside land for a Pribilof townsite. A phased withdrawal of federal control began in 1971, the same year as passage of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act. The next year was the last for commercial seal harvest on St. George, but federal government final withdrawal from the Pribilof Islands did not take place until 1983.

Since then, various grants and reparations have been made available as a "grubstake" for the islands whose people must now work to establish and maintain their economic independence.

Much of the economic hope is based in commercial fishery. The St. George people will process the black cod and halibut in their own plant and expect to produce quality filets for marketing in the Lower 48. The new boat harbor under construction, with dedication set for part of the Bicenten-

nial celebration, will serve the island's own fishing fleet. When the final phase is complete, it will have a 20-foot draft and be able to accommodate 250-foot long fishing vessels. Thus the community can develop a service and supply industry for the North Pacific fishing fleet.

Looking ahead, however, does not lessen the excitement of reviewing the past. The hope is to establish a bicentennial legacy with ongoing meaning such as an historical museum and library. Innokenty Lestenkof, a trained museum technician of St. George, will head this effort. The festivities will gain momentum until the biggest event in August and will lead naturally into next year's observance of the Bicentennial of Discovery of sister island, St. Paul.

The St. George "Misty Isles Newsletter for April" bulges with plans for the coming months. May 6 is named as St. George Day, a kickoff for the Bicentennial on the Feast Day of St. George. Special church services are scheduled with a community banquet that evening. Mayor Max Malavansky will deliver a proclamation declaring the Bicentennial officially under way. Sarah and Ann Prokopiou are in charge of the festive meal which will be potluck style.

On May 17 and 18 there will be celebration of the 50th anniversary of the consecration of the altar of the present church. The church has been a center of activity in the community since Russian days. To prepare for this

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special festival, the interior has been refurbished and the exterior is also being repainted. In addition, islanders are painting the church and cemetery fences and the chapel at Zapadni. Andronik Kashervarof and Anthony Mercurief are in charge of these renovation projects.

Using a crane, workers lifted the traditional onion-shaped dome to the ground to replace the wind-battered painted canvas roofing. Modern material will be used this time to protect the fine building and its treasures from the fierce storms of the area.

Bancroft reports that a church was built on the island in 1819 and named in 1833 after St. George the Victor. Veniamenof spoke of a chapel there in 1838. That was replaced in 1875 and consecrated the following year. According to Barbara Smith, who is preparing a history of the church for a bicentennial record, and the National Park Service finding, this chapel was modified in 1886. The altar, or apse behind the screen, was enlarged and the whole was "wider, higher and brighter." It was consecrated as a church in July 1897.

Presumably it was used from 1875 until 1936 when the present graceful building was consecrated. Bishop of Alaska Alexei Anteleev conducted that service. He had commented that the old structure was "extremely dilapidated" and he spent the previous winter on the island while the new one was being built. He noted that the new building was "heated from below" and particularly outstanding — "spacious, lofty and warm with a

large gallery for the choir."

Situated on a small rise, the present church is one of the nicer ones architecturally, according to Anchorage architect Ed Crittenden, who with his wife Kit is serving on the Bicentennial Advisory Committee. The chandelier of the church has not been electrified; it is a glorious sight when filled with lighted candles.

During April and May, a heritage program was ongoing in the school. Village elders conducted workshops covering such topics as arts and crafts, storytelling and traditional food preparation. Participants were Ariadna Lekanof, Ella Kashervarof, Mary Jan Mercurief and Anotoly "Tony" Lekanof. Tony, who lives in Anchorage, has given story-telling sessions for several radio stations and newspapers around the state.

Culminating these heritage workshops will be a family night at the school May 22 to share products of the program with the community.

It is planned to record traditional Christmas starring songs which are sung in Slavonic, Aleut and English. Michael Lekanof and Iliodor Philemonof, Bicentennial chairman, will be the principal investigators for this project.

June 6 there will be a dance at the community hall to welcome home the high school students and to celebrate the bicentennial year. Sara Prokopiou is coordinating this project.

Church treasures have been inventoried and their history is being developed. They will be displayed in cases built especially for the celebration. And the Bicentennial Committee is seeking historic photographs of people, activities and scenes on the island to be copied for the permanent display.

With research sponsored by a grant from the Alaska Humanities Forum and the National Endowment for the

Humanities, Barabra Smith has researched church records written in Russian. She has also talked with church elders assisted by Andronik Kashevarof. The grant also calls for interviews which will be developed into a manuscript history of the church with photo documentation.

Another on-island project is a 19-month calendar, beginning in May 1986 and ending in December 1987. It will feature historic photographs and is being prepared by Carol Lestenkof and Sara Mercurief.

The first 10 days of August, a time when weather is apt to be good and fishing season is over, there will be a major celebration. Activities include *bidar* races, using the traditional skin boats employed today only by the St. George Aleuts to lighter freight ashore because there has been no harbor to accommodate a ship. Although in later years the *bidars* have been made with oiled canvas, the construction is identical to the ancient days. Their use will be ended when the new harbor is completed and the *bidars* are "drydocked."

Theodosius, the former Bishop of Alaska and now Metropolitan of the

Orthodox Church in North America, has accepted the invitation to participate in August. He will bless the harbor.

Also planned are arts and crafts, games and contests and a special stamp cachet and general fun times.

Finances are needed to develop all the projects and a committee is working to solicit funds for building the museum, cataloguing and presenting the history of the church treasures, recording the old church music and developing a comprehensive list of the scores of species of birds which nest on the island.

It has been suggested that donations in increments of 200 would be a thoughtful way to assist, according to Iliodor Philemonof. This means anything — \$2,000, \$200, even 200 cents — he says. "We want to have participation from everyone who has an interest in this historic project and although we have set a goal of \$68,000 overall, we don't want to limit contributions only to those with ample means."

Contributions may be sent to St. George Bicentennial Project, 1684 C St., Suite 220, Anchorage, AK 99504.