

Hugo L. Mäkinen

UNO CYGNAEUS IN OLD SITKA, ALASKA

The young Finnish pastor Uno Cygnaeus left Finland for Sitka in Russian America on September 12, 1839. The passengers on the 'Nikolaj' were mostly Russians but there was a group of Finns, too. Besides the director of the Russian American Company Arvid Adolf Etholén, who also acted as Governor-General of contemporary Alaska, and his wife Margareta, née Sundvall, the passengers consisted of Etholén's nearest man lieutenant Johan Bartram, a young physician/naturalist Reinhold Ferdinand Sahlberg and some others.

In South America the vessel touched at Rio de Janeiro in Brazil and Valparaiso in Chile. A brig was bought at the latter port and named (in Russian) 'Grand Duke Constantiné. The ships arrived in Sitka May 12, 1840. The voyage had thus taken eight months.

Sitka or Novo-Archangelsk was hereafter Cygnaeus's place of residence and office for a period of five years. During this time, however, he went on official business to the southeastern islands of Alaska and still further away to Kodiak, the Aleutians and the seal islands in the Bering Sea. He even visited the Kuriles near Japan. These destinations were thousands of kilometres



Hugo L. Mäkinen, was born in Rockland, Maine on July 9, 1908. He attended public school in Worcester, Mass. before the family decided to move to Finland in 1921.

Mäkinen has been an active writer and translator for half a century. Co-operatives and the Labour Movement are his special points of interest.

Mr. Mäkinen's interest in American Finns derives quite naturally from his early childhood when he lived in Worcester among emigrants from 10-15 European countries. Alaska, however, was soon to attract his attention. A long time member of the Board of Directors of the Suomi-Seura (Suomi Society), he became aware of the fact that very little was known or written about Finnish people in Alaska. This observation prompted him to start gathering material concerning his countrymen in both Alaska and the Yukon (Klondyke) and to make a manymonth trip to these areas in 1959-60.

away from Sitka and the journeys took weeks and months. The restless north Pacific often threw the vessels and their human cargoes in mortal danger.

On the very next day after arriving in Sitka young Cygnaeus hurried to meet his congregation. 'I went to the workers' barracks and some twenty or thirty Swedes and Finns gathered around me and rejoiced at my coming; this was a very pleasant

occasion.' In addition to the newcomers from Finland, the Lutheran congregation then formed in Sitka was made up of Finns and Swedes from St. Petersburg and its vicinity, of Germans from the Baltic countries and, probably, of some Estonians, too.

The biographer of Cygnaeus, Lönnbeck, mentions that 'these European labourers formed the main part of the small congregation. The total membership reached approximately 150 persons.'

According to some Russian counts there were 86 Lutherans in Novo-Archangelsk in 1839, i.e. prior to Cygnaeus's arrival; but in 1844, in the fourth year of his term of office, there were as many as 203. Simultaneously, the number of Greek Catholics was 1 618. No other religious communities are mentioned in the Russian annals.

Very great ignorance seems to have prevailed among the Finnish labourers in Sitka,' notes Lönnbeck on the basis of the Sitka pastor's letters to Finland. When Cygnaeus arranged for Holy Communion in Finnish a short time after his arrival, 'some of the participants didn't know how to read at all and they didn't have the slightest notion of what religion meant,' said Cygnaeus himself. 'I took them in for a few evenings and endeavoured to plant in them some idea of the sacred rites they were to take part in, but I noticed to my disappointment that there was little to be achieved in this respect.'

Cygnaeus was thirty at the time. He has referred to a stipulation in the contract he signed before leaving for Sitka: '... that no services in German shall be conducted in Sitka and that, at the most, there shall only be a few confirmational sermons during the year.' In Sitka, however, the clause was soon changed and the young shepherd of the flock had to conduct every fifth divine service in German. All

the others were in Finnish or Swedish, both languages Cygnaeus knew well. As he had no German theological literature with him, these services caused him 'unbelievable worry and much concern.'

The Lutheran services were first held in a room belonging to the Manager's official residence. This soon proved to be a poor arrangement and both Cygnaeus and Etholén made up their minds that the little town must have a Lutheran church of its own.

The corner stone was laid on November 22, 1841. The building was constructed by the Finnish carpenters who arrived on the 'Nikolaj' or who already lived in Sitka. 'These axemen were unexcelled as timberworkers and most of Sitka's finest log buildings were hewn out of native spruce by them,' says a member of the Sitka Historical Society in a discourse held in the 1950's.

The same account states that this church was first Protestant church established in Alaska and possibly the first on the entire Pacific coast. It was preceded only by the Russian Greek Orthodox Church. In fact one can go further: Where on the western coast of the Americas or in the whole Pacific Ocean area with the possible exception of the Dutch East Indies could there have been a Protestant church in those days, the 1840's?

In a drawing made by Cygnaeus himself and enclosed in one of his Sitka-letters, the wooden building comprised a church hall and parsonage. The building was rectangular and the main entrance was situated at the lane end. To the left of the entrance there was a storeroom and on the right a small library. A door opened into the center of the building, the church proper. The raised altar was at the far end of the church while the pulpit was on the right. A corridor divided the seven or eight benches into two sections, the right and the left.

In the rear there was an organ loft. The plan also indicated that space had been reserved for a parsonage, bedroom, kitchen and small rear entrance. Cygnaeus's bedroom contained his two bookshelves and the front room a sofa, rockingchair, music stand and mirror table. A small garden was to be planted alongside the building.

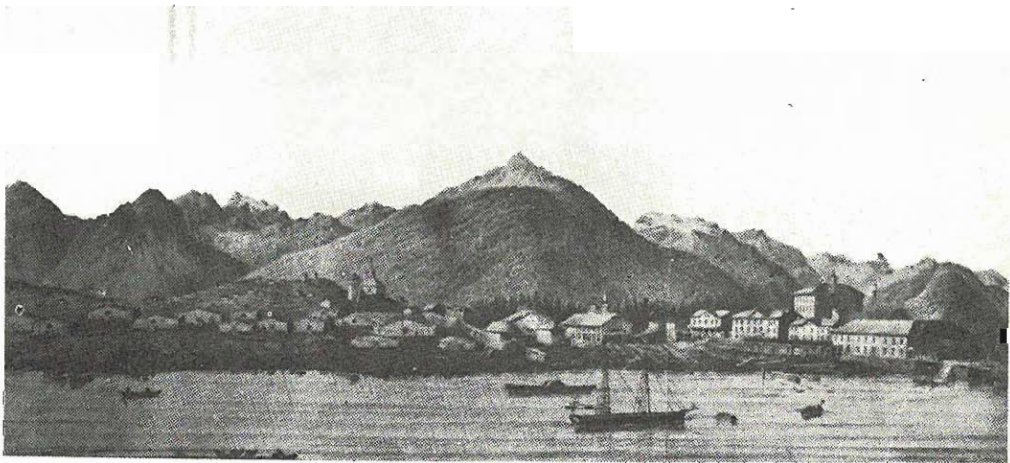
In August 1890, two years after the dilapidated building was ordered to be pulled down, the 'Alaska Weekly' published an article describing the old Lutheran church.

'Although the outside of the church was humble in appearance, the interior was richly decorated. It contained an altar, decked with a drapery of valuable lace and was further adorned by an oil painting of the Transfiguration which is now found over the Royal Doors of the Russo-Greek Church. The space in front of the altar separated from the auditorium by a velvet-topped balustrade edged with fringed gold and silver, was richly carpeted. From the ceiling were pending two gilt chandeliers of fine workmanship, and as is generally found in Lutheran Churches, it contained

the fine organ which is now on exhibit in the Sheldon Jackson Museum and was originally acquired by the Alaska Natural History Society.'

The 'Alaska Weekly' article continues: 'The main body of the church was finished with a small chancel and comfortable seats for the congregation. The church further possessed some very valuable plate for communion and baptismal services. All of this valuable estate was partly derived from an annual tax of one percent of the salary of each member of the congregation. Upon the transfer of the territory to the United States, Prince Maksoutoff shipped all the valuable moveable belongings of the church to the consistory of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland.'

Did this really happen I do not know. If this was the case, the valuables should be located, catalogued and kept in a safe place. Americans, on their own side, are also interested in finding articles once a part of the church possessions. As regards their present holdings, these are mentioned later in this text.

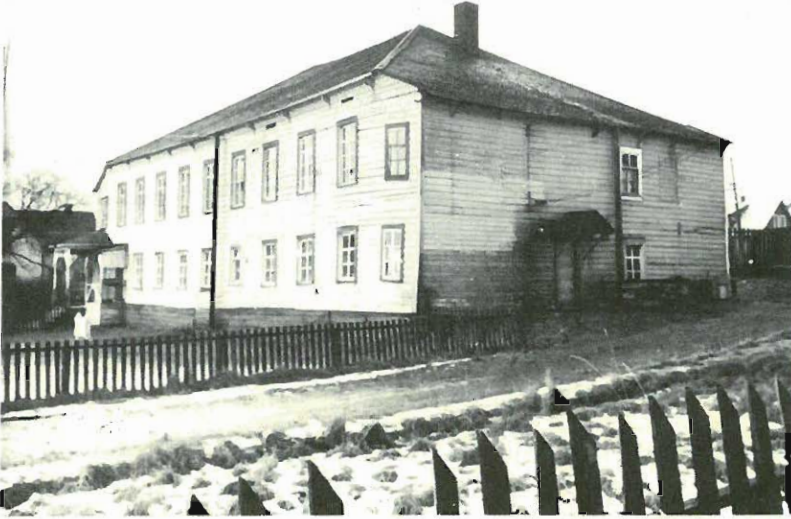


Sitka in 1869, during time of military occupation. The large building Arvid Adolf Etholén, in which Uno Cygnaeus held the first Lutheran service in Alaska. (Photo Shop Studio, in Alaska Day. Sitka, Alaska Oct. 18, 1959)

It seems the Cygnaeus church had no belfry or church bell(s). The director of the Hudson's Bay Company Sir George Simpson who visited Sitka twice during Etholén's term of office manifested once that he was only happy the chapel had no bells.

repair their equipment or just have a good time. Several foreign vessels were apt to be in the harbour at the same time.

As their officers and men were seldom Russian Orthodox or even Roman Catholic,



An orphan home at Sitka built by Finnish carpenters in the second half of the 19th century.

He had arrived in the little port from Honolulu on April 18, 1842, only to find himself in the midst of the Russian Easter festival.

'During the whole week,' he wrote, 'there was an incessant ringing of all the bells in the Orthodox church. From morning to night, from night to morning, there was nothing but one perpetual peal of discord.

The evil, however, might have been worse, for luckily the Lutheran chapel made no noise, the bell being an appendage exclusively of the National Church; and I was sincerely thankful that toleration had stopped at the critical point.'

In Etholen's days, Sitka was a rather well-known port of call in the mid- and north Pacific. San Francisco, Seattle, Vancouver, etc. were as yet insignificant or non-existent. The European and American vessels on their way to China, East Asia or the whaling and sealing waters of the North used to stop at Sitka to supplement their stores,

they attended services at 'pastor Sidinius's little church. The church is mentioned in the memoirs of several seafarers.

Cygnaeus was not satisfied in functioning as a clergyman only. He preferred to act as a private teacher, too. He also participated in founding what might be termed Alaska's first elementary school. With this detail in mind, it is probable that his stay in Novo-Archangelsk benefitted his pedagogic thinking when he later in life became the man Finns adore as the 'Father of the Finnish Public School'.

Governor-General Etholen and his family, pastor Cygnaeus, lieutenant Bartram — now a married man, too — and several other Finns left for their home country on the other side of the world after their 5-year contract terminated in the summer of 1845. That was 135 years ago now.

Their journey commenced this time across

the northern reaches of the Pacific to Okhotsk on the Sea of Okhotsk and continued then by foot, horse, dogteam or river boats across the vast lands of Siberia and Russia proper to the capitol St. Petersburg. Thus they had come to make a journey around the whole globe. It was Dr. R. F. Sahlberg who then wrote a book about this – in those days – spectactlar feat.

Cygnaeus was succeeded by pastor Gabriel Plathan and he, in turn in 1852 by pastor Georg Winter, both of them Finns. According to one source, it was only after thirteen years that Winter returned to his native country.

In 1853, i. e. during Winter's time, the Lutheran congregation had 120–150 members. Winter's salary was 2 000 roubles a year. When he left Sitka, it seems nobody arrived to take his place as the Lutheran priest. In fact, almost three quarters of an century were to pass before Lutheran

churchmen settled down again in Sitka. They, however, were not Finns. In the meantime, some Finnish speaking pastors or preachers did visit Alaska and contact the new generation of Finnish emigrants who had now arrived through the United States. Their story is quite a different one and calls for a special article.

On October 18, 1867, the ownership of Alaska was transferred from Russia to the United States. Five days earlier the newly-arrived Americans attended the first church service ever held in English in Alaska. They gathered in the little Lutheran church built by Cygnaeus, Etholen and their fellow countrymen a quarter of a century earlier. The sermon on this historical occasion was preached by an American army chaplain named Rayner. According to a comtemporary document, the listeners were 'Finns, Russians and other Sitkas inhabitants and men of the 9th infantry regiment, F-company, and the 2nd artillery regiment, N-Battery.' The soldiers had been sent from



The organ, altar dais, crystal chandelier, and other objects from Uno Cygnaeus' church are now preserved in this museum in Sitka.

San Francisco.

Services were held in Cygnaeus's church quite regularly until 1877 when the U. S. army units left Sitka. One of the celebrities who visited Sitka in those days with his family was the ex-Secretary of State Wm. H. Seward, the man who negotiated the purchase of Alaska. One of the many names Alaska had already acquired was 'Seward's Folly.' Seward, it will be remembered, was the Secretary of State during both Abraham Lincoln's and his successor's Andrew Johnson's presidency.

Once the army left Sitka, unruliness and disorder became rampant among the Whites, Indians and Creoles. Thousands of these lived on Baranoff Island (=Sitka) and in the nearby archipelago. During the period the church was well nigh vandalized and many valuable items were stolen or broken. Finally, the building lost its previous status and was even used as a meat shop and a joiner's working place. In 1888 the Grand jury of the district Court considered the building unfit for human use and ordered it to be demolished. This took place two years later. In that very same year, the original builder of the church, pastor Uno Cygnaeus, died in his own country, Finland. Only three old members of the Sitka church were available for consultation. Two had belonged to the American Navy, the third was an Otto Nelson who might have been a Finn with a typical Scandinavian name. Nothing more is known about him. These men carried out the court order, pulled down the ramshackle structure and put up a fence around the lot.

What is left of the once-famous chapel? Is there anything? Yes, the Sheldon Jackson Museum in Sitka treasures the raised altar and its balustrade. The organ, manufactured in Tartto, Esthonia, is on this dais. A high organists chair stands in front of the organ keyboard. A white wooden pillar, possibly

a part of the preachers pulpit, has also found a resort in this museum. There is also a Finnish hymnbook and a crystal chandelier. Quite unique are the hand-wrought nails made by Finnish blacksmiths. A Fairbanks Finn, Pauli Sorvo, has once mentioned that the christening font used in the church has been located but I have not been able to verify this detail.

In 1939 a Sitka or rather Kasaan Finn named Otto Lindeman raised an interesting question: Would it be possible to revive the old Lutheran congregation? His initiative received a warm welcome and a meeting was arranged August 25, 1940 to further the project. However, the ownership of the original piece of land had to be settled first.

As good luck would have it, the last manager of the Russian American Company, Prince Maksoutoff, the Russian agent Alexis Petschouroff and the American agent Lowell H. Rousseau had on October 14, 1867, signed a document giving the eternal ownership and right of usage of the piece of land to the Sitka Lutheran church. To my knowledge, the original document has never been found but the decisive information concerning its contents were in Otto Lindeman's possession. This fact came as a great surprise to the Sitkans. Lindeman's article in 'Suomen Silta' (Finland Bridge), September 1939, presents more details concerning this interesting sequel of events.

A new Lutheran church, this time of concrete, was then built in Sitka on the historical spot opposite the Russian Orthodox St. Michael's Cathedral. The new corner stone was laid on November 23, 1941—100 years almost to a day after the first church had been started. The new house of worship was inaugurated March 1, 1942. The United States had entered World War II only three months earlier.

The new pastor was an American named

Hugh Dowler. He was succeeded in May 1944 by pastor Ernst N. Nygaard who was of Norwegian heritage. Later the Canadian Frederick Kneble, the American Richard Gaenslen and others have been shepherds of this congregation.

There is every reason to believe that there has been an unbroken line of Finns or their descendants in Sitka in the years following the transfer of territory in 1867. A certain Henry Korhonen is always mentioned in this connection. A storekeeper Mrs. John Peterson came to Alaska in 1893 and settled soon in Sitka. Surely she must have had some initial Finnish contacts. There is an Oja Street in Sitka, and a Finnish forest engineer Into Liimatta belonged to the church council in the 1950's. These are some examples of continuous Finnish influence.

To summarize, Finns and Sitka have had much in common for at least 140 years; indeed, it must be remembered that Etholen, then a midshipman, and Finnish sailors visited the little town already in the 1820's. Finns participated in the building of the town, they were labourers, artisans, fishermen, clerks and the like.

The valuable religious, cultural and social work done by Cygnaeus and others warrants a lasting monument in Sitka. The Delaware Finns got their beautiful memorial already in 1938. Why not have the local people, the State of Alaska, the Lutheran Church of America and the Evangelical-Lutheran Church of Finland join hands, provide the necessary funds and erect a monument to the memory of the courageous people who came from so far away to further ideals they considered both noble and precious.

Yhteenveto

Alaskan suomalaisten vaiheita jo parinkymmenen vuoden ajan tutkinut Hugo L. Mäkinen kertoo artikkelissaan pastori Uno Cygnaeuksen matkasta kaukaiseen Sitkaan eli Novo-Arkangelskiin 140 vuotta sitten. Kahdeksan kuukautta kestänyt matka alkoi syyskuussa 1839, kävi Rio de Janeiron ja Valparaisoin kautta Tyynelle merelle ja päättyi Sitkaan toukokuussa 1840.

Seuraavan viiden vuoden aikana Cygnaeus otti osaa hallinnollisiin tehtäviin, toimi sielunpaimenena ja opettajana ja innoitti Venäjän-Amerikan komppanian johtajan Arvid Aadolf Etholenin avustamaan kirkon rakentamisessa tähän venäläisten, suomalaisten, ruotsalaisten, saksalaisten ja balttien asumaan satamapaikkaan.

Kirkon peruskivi laskettiin marraskuun 22. päivänä 1841 ja pyhäkön rakentajina toimivat lähinnä ne suomalaiset kirvesmiehet, jotka tulivat Nikolaj-laivalla Sitkaan samalla kertaa kuin Cygnaeus, amiraali Etholen ja tämän vaimo Margareta, o.s. Sundvall, luutnantti Johan Bartram ja lääkäri luonnontieteilijä Reinhold Ferdinand Sahlberg.

Tietämättömyys ja kurittomuus vallitsivat kuitenkin silloisessa Sitkassa eikä nuoren pappismiehen ollut helppo saattaa seurakuntalaisiaan edes rippikouluun tai pyhän ehtoollisen ottoon. Seurakuntalaisia oli hänen aikanaan 150-200. Tämä määrä pysytteli suunnilleen samana myös hänen seuraajiensa Gabriel Pfathanin (1845-52) ja Georg Winterin (1853-65) aikana.

Alaska siirtyi Venäjän omistuksesta Yhdysvaltain hallintaan lokakuussa 1867. Vanhan lipun laskussa ja uuden lipun nostossa oli katselijain joukossa myös suomalaisia. Alaskan ensimmäinen englanninkielinen jumalanpalvelus pidettiin muutamia päiviä ennen Alaskan luovutusta, ja pitopaikkana oli Cygnaeuksen perustama kirkko.

Amerikkalaisten joukkojen siirryttyä pois Sitkasta pääsi epäjärjestys taas valtaan, kirkko joutui hävityksen kohteeksi ja monet sen kalleuksista katosivat sen tien. Onneksi on sitkalaiseen Sheldon Jacksonin museoon saatu talletetuksi mm. Cygnaeuksen käyttämät urut, alttarikoroke, kristallikruunu, suomalainen virsikirja ym. Viimein kirkon kunto kävi niin huonoksi, että viranomaiset määräsivät rakennuksen hävitettäväksi. Tämä tapahtui 1890.

Sitkassa on ollut suomalaisia tai heidän perillisiä jatkuvasti 140 vuoden ajan. Kun uuden kirkon rakentaminen tuli ajankohtaiseksi toisen maailmansodan alussa, suomalainen oli jälleen aloitteen tekijänä. Otto Lindeman onnistui näet selvittämään, että luovutussopimuksen allekirjoittajat olivat v. 1867 päättäneet, että Sitkan Cygnaeuksen kirkon tontin tulee kuulua ikuisiksi ajoiksi Sitkan luterilaiselle seurakunnalle.

Kirjoittaja esittää, että Sitkassa jo lähes puolen-toista vuosisadan ajan vaikuttaneiden suomalaisten muistolle olisi sitkalaisten, Alaskan osavaltion, Yhdysvaltain Luterilaisen kirkon ja Suomen kirkon toimista rakennettava Sitkaan pysyvä muistomerkki Delawaren suomalaisten v:n 1938 muistomerkkin tapaan.