

PATRICIA SMEDLEY
ON
TEACHING RUSSIAN AT KODIAK HIGH SCHOOL

By

DAWN CLAYTON

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Restrictions, None

DC It's May 6, 1996. I'm Dawn Clayton and I'm here with Patricia Smedley. We're going to be talking about her experiences as a high school Russian teacher. And let's start off with a few questions. How long have you been in Kodiak?

PS This time we've been in Kodiak since 1980. We lived in Kodiak from 1972 to 1974 earlier.

DC Good! And how do you like Kodiak?

PS Oh, it's home.

DC (laugh) Forever.

PS Well, this is sorta where we decided we were going to settle and stay. The first time that we were here we liked it well. Our children were small at that time. My husband was in the military. We transferred several times and we ended up coming back here. All of our tours while he was in the military were in Alaska except one which was in New London, CT. So, we came to Alaska in 1965 from Ohio and we've been here ever since except for that four year tour in CT. While we were there we could hardly wait to get back to AK. And here we are now in Kodiak.

DC Great. Now, how long have you been teaching?

PS Well, I taught for four years when my husband was in dental school and then I quit teaching and I didn't teach for about twenty years because I was wife and mother. I was just taking care of the home and the kids. I went back to subbing in 1982, I think, here in Kodiak. My degree is in History and so I've always taught Social Studies. When I started subbing and

then when I got a semester job because Fred Zharoff was elected to the legislature. He was the Junior High Social Studies teacher. So when he would go to Juneau in January they needed a replacement for him for a semester. I was lucky enough to be able to do that for two years. I taught '82 and '83 the Spring semester, 7th and 8th grade Social Studies at the Jr. High School.

DC So how did you get involved with teaching Russian?

PS Well, after that I ended up with a full-time job at the High School teaching Social Studies. The curriculum at that time Russian wasn't being taught. Russian had been taught at the High School several times before we came back. When we came in 1980 I think they had taught Russian up through '79. It wasn't offered anymore. At one time, Jerry Wilson, who was the Arts Council Director had taught the Russian at the High School. He later taught it at the College. Then Georgine Sink, who taught at the High School, taught English. She also taught Russian for a while but then the program was dropped and she just taught English. When I started teaching Social Studies my first topics were U. S. History and Western Civilization. The curriculum was changed and I'm trying to think of the year (I'm not exactly sure of the year that the curriculum was changed) to reflect a more global nature, I would say probably '86 maybe '87 to include something called Pacific Rim Studies. I ended up teaching Pacific Rim Studies because nobody else wanted to. I learned a lot from that also included Russian history more than it had with the Western

Civilization. I taught Russian language, culture, history course in '88 and '89. That course involved basically it was half language and half history. I wasn't really well versed in Russian at that time. I knew the Cyrillic alphabet and I knew some of the words. The way we ran that program was that we bought a correspondence course and it was all on video cassettes. The Russian teacher was always there on the tapes so she taught the language and I supplemented and drilled the kids on that. I also filled in with the history part of the language. Then that program was dropped in 1990. Basically it was dropped because I ended up having cancer and I had to cut my teaching time one semester. So they just dropped the Russian program at that time.

DC Was it your choice to develop the Russian language course or did they approach you about it?

PS Actually, I wanted to do it and also Larry LeDoux wanted to develop the Russian language course. Because of my teaching half time we weren't able to work it in that particular year. He worked on developing it and then in 1992 I took a years leave of absence and went up to the University of AK in Fairbanks and took some Russian language courses among other things while I was up there so that I became more fluent in Russian. When I came back in 1993 and taught again the program was in place and Larry had gotten the necessary paper work and everything done to have the course and students had signed up for the course. So we offered actually a Russian language course in '93 and again in '94 then I

retired.

DC Now, when you came back in '92 were you teaching via tapes also or just totally on your knowledge and textbooks?

PS Basically on my knowledge and textbooks when I came back. So, I had learned a lot. I still was not really fluent. I had many students who were really excellent students. Russian is such a hard language. There are so many things that you have to learn. It's really difficult and it takes a lot of studying. I have to say I had so many students that worked so hard in there. The first time I taught it when it was with the tapes and when I supplemented with the history and research. There are two students from that class that went on to become Russian majors. And a couple of others of those students have Russian minors. One of the students is now teaching at the college and she's also teaching the Russian class at the High School and that's Kim Wallace. She graduated from University of AK at Fairbanks.

DC That's where she pursued her studies there?

PS Uh-hum.

DC Well, neat!

PS And the other student is Amy Oliver and she currently a Russian translator in Moscow. She graduated from Georgetown University.

DC How great!

PS And Dwayne Kracke who is going to Stanford he has, as far as I know, Russian is his minor. The students that I had in '93 and '94 are just graduating from High School now. So I don't

know whether they will continue on with Russian or not. A lot of the ones who are Seniors now I had as Juniors in Russian II. They didn't offer Russian III.

DC So it was a two year program basically and you did both years?

PS I did both years, yeah. If I hadn't retired we probably would have had Russian III. And then a lot of the students I had last year continued on with Russian II this year. I haven't talked to anybody do I don't know what's happening with the Russian program. I mean, I don't know how many students are involved with the Russian program this year. But, from what I understand they're not gonna offer it next year.

DC Oh really!? Well, that's sad.

PS Yeah, it is. It's rather interesting that Russian has had such an on and off course here in Kodiak because this place is, you know this is sort of the seat of Russian culture. Basically, this was the first capital of "Russian America". There are a lot of people here that have Russian heritage. And there's also a lot of Russian words that a lot of the people use in this town that have lived here a long time, I mean it's part of their language. The church services are conducted in old church Slavonic, which is the really old Russian, Orthodox. The church here also follows the old Russian calendar where a lot of the Orthodox churches in the lower 48 have switched over and used the calendar that the Christian churches use. They use the Julian calendar, and I think that the Russian here use the Gregorian calendar.

DC Does the Russian church here have the(a lot of stumbling

around words)

PS You know they have the Seminary.

DC Do they conduct classes in Russian there? Do you have any idea?

PS No, I don't know if they do or not. I don't think so, but I think that most of the priests and instructors there are knowledgeable in Russian and a lot of the writings are in Russian. We really haven't talked about my experiences as a teacher. What would you like to know? Teaching it, basically, when you're learning a language it's a lot of repetition. Maybe I should talk about how we started out the class, like in a first year class.

DC Okay, that would be great.

PS The very first thing that the kids have to learn is the alphabet. Because they can't do anything until they learn the alphabet.

DC So, what you're doing then, you're teaching them to speak Russian but also to write Russian at the same time.

PS Right, right.

DC Oh, that's hard.

PS So when we started out we would learn some words and we would repeat those. And we did learn the alphabet, basically the first month of class was learning how to write the alphabet. A lot of Russians don't print. They write instead. One of the things that makes it so difficult is you have to learn to recognize the printed letters. You also have to learn to recognize the written letters too. So, like I say this class

at the High School was conducted as an Honors class, which meant that it was a little bit more intense. But students didn't have to be honors students to take it. Anybody who wanted to could take the class. Because basically it was memorization and I tried to make it as fun and interesting. But, a lot of it is really drudge work.

DC What was your turn out, as far as students participating in the class? Do you think you had a good turn out?

PS Yeah. I think I had a really good turn out. The first year I taught it we had two first-year classes. And there were approximately twenty kids in each class. Actually when we started out with the two classes there were probably fifty kids and I would say ten dropped. So we ended up with about forty kids. The second year I taught we had a two year class which was sort of a combination of the first two classes and there were like, I think there were twenty-four or twenty-five kids in that. So approximately a little bit more than a half went on to the second year Russian. And then we had two classes of first year Russian approximately between twenty and twenty-five kids in each one of those classes. The one problem that we ended up with the second year with the first year students was that there were some students that had signed up for the class that thought that it was gonna be pretty easy. They had to work a little bit harder than I think they wanted to. Because the class was a substitute for a Social Studies class. The way the School District used the classes Russian and Japanese were also considered Social

Studies classes, even though they were basically language classes. So kids could take Russian or Japanese instead of taking, for example, Western Civ or Pa Rim Studies.

DC But it also met their foreign language requirement if they had wanted that.

PS It basically served double duty. It would serve as a Social Studies and they could also get, if they took two years of it, then they would have a language credit also. So that worked out really well. And like I said, the second year there were some kids that came in there that didn't want to take Pa Rim Studies so they figured they'd take Russian. It didn't turn out quite the way they thought it was going to turn out.

DC Not quite that easy 'A'!

PS But, you know, I mean like I say anybody who wanted to could take it and you didn't have to be an honors student to take it because it just meant you had to do some work. So, once we learned the alphabet and they learned how to write, it was just basically drill work and practice, practice, practice. And I really tried to have the kids (how do I want to say this?) I would let them retake their tests in there because if they didn't learn the alphabet they couldn't go on. So the goal was to be able to write and be able to do these tests and get as good a grade as they could.

DC The first section, that was by tape, did you feel that was an adequate pace? Did it go too fast? Was that just an interesting experience or experiment I guess too!?

PS That one was taught by a Native born Russian. It was sorta

hard to grasp. The kids learned a little bit of language through that, but they didn't really learn... she didn't really teach the alphabet as such, but she did a lot of writing. It was more of an emersion type that she taught. It was repetitious, but it was... for me it was hard to follow. I think it was sorta of hard for the kids to follow and so what I did with that program in the very beginning was to... I taught the kids the alphabet before we started watching the videos so they knew the alphabet as she was going through and using the different letters and writing the different letter. They already knew the alphabet so that gave them a little push. They were better able to understand her. And I know that one of my students that went on to college... didn't finish college... but she went to the University of AK in Anchorage and took Russian there and she told me, after she came back on one of her vacations, she was the envy of her class there because the beginning Russian students didn't know Russian. She already knew the alphabet and she knew some of the words so that gave her a little heads up over the other students. So that made me feel good because you never know while you're doing some of this teaching what kids think and what is going on. The first year I taught it in 1993 Susan Oliver arranged for students to go to Russia if they wanted to study for a semester because we had had some Russian visitors come here to Kodiak. It was arranged privately. I don't know if the ones that came here whether they were arranged partially through church group or not. The semester after '93

that group of kids... there were three young ladies that went to Moscow and studied for a semester.

DC Now was that like on an exchange program?

PS Well, they said it looked like an exchange program because the Russians had come here, but it was privately arranged.

DC And they went to a Russian school?

PS They lived in private homes and they went to Russian schools. Katy Oliver, Jackie Danelski and Jennifer Lichter, they were in Moscow from August I think through December. It was quite an experience.

DC When they came back they were still in their high school years, right?

PS They were second semester Juniors. Katy and Jennifer elected to take Russian at the college because they were far advanced and Jackie Danelski had not had Russian before and so she came into the Russian class and took Russian then. She took second year Russian because she had been over there and she had spoken it for or learned it. She didn't know the alphabet so she had to sorta do double duty and pick up and learn the alphabet. The second year I taught it which was last year for me it was a bit of a disappointment because I had some medical problems, not serious one or anything like that, but I did find out after I had retired that I had had walking pneumonia for a semester. I was really tired the second semester and I missed a lot of school so I ended up going out on not such a you know like you want to go out with a bang and have everything be so good. And so I wasn't able to really do what

I wanted to with any of my classes because of that because I would be teaching and you know I'd work for three days and I'd be so worn out and then I'd have to take a couple of days off. There was not a lot of continuity. What I did in the Russian classes was switch over to history. And so we didn't do so much language the second semester as I had wanted to do, but we did a lot of history.

DC When the girls came back then from overseas I was gonna say from Russia did they enjoy sharing their activities and experiences with the class?

PS Oh yeah, they did!

DC Did they bring a lot of interesting stuff back?

PS They did and they talked to the class but because they were... and Jackie was a member of the class. She was able to relate a lot of things just as we would be talking in class. She would relate her experiences. So it was, it was really interesting. I would say that the Russian students are probably more independent than the American students.

Discussion continues about travel in Russia and several other topics. We speak some more about education at the end of the interview.

This file is part of the Kodiak History Project.

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