

**Marian Johnson,
Baranov Museum
an
Oral History**

**by
Kathy Moore
Dec. 12, 1994**

The following interview was conducted on November 26, 1994. Marian Johnson, Director of the Baranov Museum, was interviewed in the museum. The interviewer was Kathy Moore.

KM: Please explain the events that led to the development of the Erskine House into the Baranov Museum. I am also interested in the progress the museum has made since it began. What plans are in the museum's future?

MJ: In the early 1950's, Kodiak citizens gathered together to sign a petition to save the old Erskine House which had been sold to Donley and Attchison which was part of Mercantile Company here. But it was not to happen. The building was used as a rental by DNA.

It wasn't until 1962 when the building received National Historic Landmark status on June 13, 1962 by the Secretary of the Interior. Dr. Bob Johnson worked long and hard filling out forms, doing much research often using Mr. Erskine's notes to put the building on the register. This designation as being a National Landmark site was very important for later in 1964 when the earthquake/tsunami happened. The building was purchased by the Alaska State Housing Authority and became part of the Urban Renewal Plan for the city of Kodiak.

1954: A group of citizens had banded together to form a non-profit cooperation of 501C3 education known as Kodiak and Aluetian Historical Society. There were about 50 members interested in history of the area and saving things. They created the society and got their non-profit status.

1958: When they were given a 26 foot Koniag badarka, they opened up a small museum with volunteer help in a WWII Quonset in downtown Kodiak.

1958-59: Statehood occurred for Alaska. The building became very important for the state of Alaska. It is known as the oldest Russian Built Structure in North America. There are 4 left from Russian/American times:

2 in Sitka

1 at Fort Ross

1 in Kodiak(it is the oldest)

1964: This site was affected by the earthquake/tsunami. The society was told they would have to move their small museum pieces. They worked with the ASHA to lease the Erskine House. They put their collection there. Then started a tremendous amount of work renovating the building. Cleaning up because of bad repair. In fact we have spent over 1/2 million dollars repairing the foundation, the roof, and the windows. We wired and plumbed the second floor and put in carpet. A lot of scrubbing took place.

1965: There was a feasibility report done by National Park Service.

1967: It was leased by the Kodiak Historical Society. Alaska Centennial Commission Funds were used to expose the logs which were covered with many, many coats(hangings) of wall paper and install first floor electricity.

The Kodiak Rotary Club did lots of work on the building or donated lots of funds to repair different things.(The roof was leaking).

The Lions Club also helped. They helped paint the outside with the Rotary Club.

After the earthquake, downtown Kodiak was in a time of rebuilding. There was lots of construction going on. We(the society) put a caretaker into the building to keep control of safety and to open it up for people who came by to see what it was.

The State of Alaska came through with a new shingle roof and new furnaces(The old building seems to really use furnaces. We have had furnaces put in in 1970, 1980, and 1984. In the winter, the furnace has to work almost fulltime).

Also in 1967, some little rooms were taken out and also some supporting walls in the building.

1972: The City of Kodiak accepted responsibility for the building. It is now owned by them. Kodiak Historical Society, a non-profit, manages the Baranov Museum in the building. We continue making improvements such as:

burglar alarms

halon fire suppression system

In 1995, halon will be outlawed. We will have to do a replacement chemical for the fire replacement system. One nice thing about halon is it does not damage anything. With a building as large as this, we feel it(the halon system) would be adequate; but we have never tested it. Hopefully we

won't ever have a fire. We are very careful especially about not smoking. For those who want to cook outside, we caution to stay away from the building.

1977: The Kodiak College taught a class called "Field Methods in Archeology". We were going to go ahead and repair the foundation which was quite rotten. Before we did, One of the archaeologist at the college wanted to do the course. I believe we did 8 test holes. We do have those artifacts here. They were uncovered. I was part of that team. It was really quite interesting. That's when we found quite a few a Russian trade beads. We also found lots of garbage, broken glass, bones, etc. One of the wonderful things found was a little lead disk that dates back to Russian/American times. It had an X for Kodiak that was used as a marker on sea otter pelts. We have that on display in the museum. The other artifacts are in storage.

1978: We went ahead with a concrete foundation. Rasmussen Foundation in Anchorage, who are the owners of the National Bank of Alaska have helped us repeatedly with funds to improve the building. As they have done with other museums and libraries throughout the state. When the foundation was done, we found a big pool of water under the building. We removed it with drainage tile. Then the building started to dry up and it took a couple of years because it had been nice and moist(which means it was nice and rotten). The second floor started to fall, so we strengthened it. Oil

money(when it was prevalent in Alaska) from the Legislature was used to strengthen the floor.

Also at this time, an extensive archeological study from UAF was conducted around the building. About 20 students spent two weeks, literally in the mud and rain, working around the outside of the building. (I thought they all deserved a badge for working so hard).

Also in 1978, lots 1-3-4 block 16 became property of the City of Kodiak. It is important to save this whole block(block 16). In the past this block has had many, many buildings on it. What we have done is those buildings have been removed wither by fire or they fell apart, or urban renewal. We have improved the land with park service funds. It is the only green area in downtown Kodiak and needs to be preserved. Hopefully others that come after me will have this feeling too.

1979: We got some money from the State of Alaska. We went upstairs and took out all the dead rats and filth from the storage space. We put in carpet, electricity, and plumbing. Now we have this wonderful second floor. We use it for storage, offices, and archives. We have five 4-door file cabinets fill of Kodiak information. We help those who are writing books, articles, looking for what Kodiak was like in WWII, what happened in the earthquake/tsunami of 1964, and Katmai.

1986: We painted the exterior. With the saltwater, we need to repaint every 4-6 years. We also did more repairs:

improved the kitchen with plywood and vinyl

continue to replace storm doors
painted inside

1993: We are constantly writing grants. We applied for a Federal grant which brought a conservator(a person who knows how to take care of objects and buildings) and also an architect/historian(who is up to date on humidity control and ultra violet damage). They were under the building and in the attic taking pictures. Each provided a 1 inch written report of many improvements which we need to do. When they did the foundation under the building, he said that they hadn't attached all of the metal staunchings, which means that if we had a really good earthquake the building could have moved off of its foundation. It is a very flexible building. Our vapor barrier under the building was repaired.

During the Hickel administration, we have gotten more money to improve things- the rotten front steps and a railing for the wheelchair access. We still need to do bathroom repairs and get under the building to do some more insulation.

Future improvements to the museum:

Uncover the kitchen area. Put in a Russian kitchen with the original bricks; however, it is filthy and would like to see someone else do that job. We use the kitchen as it is now for receptions and classes. We would need lots of money to do the kitchen area.

Thought of building an addition. Mr. Erskine had a house built next door for his sister in 1912. It would be nice to reconstruct if we had an unlimited budget.

Extension to go off of another room.

For now status quo. It is a major tourist attraction, a community resource that needs to be retained.

Additional information from interview with Marian Johnson about the development of the museum:

Katmai was a very tremendous explosion. The volcano threw ash on Kodiak for 48 hours. We(the museum) have personal letters and many photos about it.

On Wood Island the Russians had an ice company. Many teachers were at the school there even after it became part of the US- teachers, Russian priests, and Baptist missionaries.

In 1893, Baptist Mission moved in with an orphanage. Lots of activity at Wood Island. One of the missionaries' granddaughter and another teachers granddaughter gave their collection from 1860-80 to the museum.

Missionaries and teachers were collectors. They had the knowledge and the funds. They knew what was important. Lots of times, local people didn't realize how important their things were or they were desperately in need of money. We have baskets, stone artifacts, and photos. We have recopied the photos. The originals are very brittle and almost destroy themselves. We put them in acid free supplies and lock them in fire proof containers.

Several public hearings on the park have taken place. It is an area people should be able to have to use. It is used in the summer for picnics and in the winter for sledding.

The logs don't need a lot of maintenance.

We see about 10,000 people a year. Our busiest time is from May to September. We still see lots of locals. Many visit during the holiday season.

When we strengthened the second floor, we removed the brick chimneys. We saved the bricks and hope to some day build a Russian stove downstairs in the kitchen.

A quote from Barbara S. Smith(read by Marian Johnson):

25 years after the Erskine House had been declared a National Historical Landmark, Barbara Smith came by with the National Park Service and did a follow up report.

"It has been altered quite a bit and people do question us on that. But keep in mind it has been here a very long time. It started out as a two room log building with openings from the front. It has three layers put on at different times-porch added, roof changed, furnace room added. Many additions, one of which was destroyed by the 1912 volcano. It has been changed, but basically inside seeing the same logs that were here in 1808.

Built by the Russians in 1808, the salted logs, two story structure has served Wilbur Erskine, the Alaska Commercial Company, his residence store and warehouse. Although relatively crude construction, the Russian magazine was nonetheless the safeguard for tremendous wealth of the

Russian/American Company. It was built to last. It has survived as one of the only four Russian structures remaining in US. It is essentially the same box like structure erected by the Baranov administration. Its walls and basic floor plan still intact. Among the surviving Russian era building, the Kodiak magazine has an additional extinction. It is the only structure that embraces the activity of both Russian /America and ACC(enterprise which shaped the face of North Western America). Engaged not only in commerce but in administration, law enforcement, and exploration these companies were truly the masters of Alaska from whence they ruled fur markets of the world. The sea otter pelts were stored here, the foxes and probably some fur seals from Pribiloffs. Sea otters were called soft gold. They brought lots and lots of money. While ACC was here in this area, they were very wealthy; same as the Russian/American Company. It was latter when sea otters were less in number that people began to struggle.

This file is part of the Kodiak History Project.

For an index of other recordings in this collection see the index:

96-49-01_I01.pdf