

The History of Beekeeping in Alaska



Part 1 of 2

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Introduction

Probably the first thing I learned while delving into beekeeping history was go to the source – not only can you read accounts firsthand, but often a more complete picture emerges and snippets of information can be gleaned; if anything perhaps more questions will be raised. Another aspect is to be leery of oft-quoted sources (especially the Internet); their intentions may be honorable, but they may not be substantiated - go to the source!

Rule number three – stay focused! While perusing issues of old bee journals it's easy to get side tracked; e.g. while thumbing through a 1968 issue of *American Bee Journal* I ran across an article about a Peace Corp volunteer from Texas in Afghanistan; now the Kentucky National Guard is currently involved in a beekeeping development program over there – under much different conditions. Then there was the... you get the idea.

First Introductions – 1900, Sitka; Father Methodius - Alaska's first beekeeper

The first documented introduction of honey bees to Alaska appears in Appendix I of the 1900 Annual Reports of the US Department of the Interior written by Father Methodius to then governor of the Territory of Alaska, John G. Brady (Methodius 1900);

APPENDIX I.

PARSONAGE OF THE GRECO-RUSSIAN CHURCH,
Sitka, Alaska, September 1, 1900.

Sir: In compliance with your request I have the honor to submit herewith the result of my first year's experiment in apiculture in Sitka, Alaska. On May 31, 1900, received from Seattle, Wash., two hives with two swarms of bees at the cost of \$25. These hives I placed in the yard adjoining the parsonage, and up to June 20, 1900, the bees increased to two or more

swarms, and on the 28th of same month two more swarms were added with a satisfactory result.

My experience during the summer showed that apiculture in Sitka is not only possible, but also profitable, as there are an abundance of nectariferous wildflowers and plants, also some vegetable gardens, and the experimental grounds of the agriculture department where buckwheat, clover, and various plants are raised, which furnish sufficient food for the bees. I noticed that during the hot, bright summer days a swarm of bees brings more honey than in Russia near St. Petersburg where apiculture is highly developed.

The season was not favorable for the

apiculture industry, as the bees worked not more than 15 days from June 1 to September 1. The old swarm of bees produced about 15 pounds of honey for profit, besides 25 pounds left for their wants.

In connection herewith I would also state that the nectar here is in great quantity on account of the abundant morning dews.
Very respectfully,

FATHER METHODIUS,
*Priest of the Greco-Russian Church,
Sitka, Alaska*

Hon. John G. Brady,
Governor of Alaska, Sitka, Alaska



A Russian priest in Sitka with some bee hives; this is most likely Father Methodius, Alaska's first beekeeper, with his six hives in the fall of 1900. Photo courtesy of Alaska State Library - Historical Collections, Sheldon Jackson College, Merrill Photograph Collection, SJC 29-861¹.

Father Methodius is not clear in his terminology, especially in his use of the term "swarm". Perhaps a bit of apicultural speculation is in order here. Contemporary beekeepers may say that his colonies swarmed, he retrieved them and thus made his increases. I think Father Methodius is using the term "swarm" for "a colony of bees" or in later references a "split". Note on May 31st he received his initial shipment of two hives with two "swarms" of bees (italics mine); he then reports that on June 20th "the bees increased to two more swarms", and on June 28th "two more swarms were added with a satisfactory result". If we examine the evidence in an article (quoted below) from the newspaper *Sitka Alaskan* dated September 15, 1900, it is more likely that he made what we would call splits. He paints a pretty rosy picture of the apicultural potential until he mentions the rain – according to both Kashevaroff (MS 149-4-3, 1927) and Georgeson (1906) Father Methodius was unsuccessful in his attempts at beekeeping.

Here is the full text from the September 15, 1900 issue of the *Sitka Alaskan* (De Armond 2009a):

APICULTURE

A Practical Demonstration of that Industry at Sitka.

Another industry has been proven to be possible and profitable in Sitka by Father Methodius of the Sitka Russian Mission.

Father Methodius whose previous residence was St. Petersburg, has, during his leisure moments, made a study of bee culture, and had quite an extensive apiary at his suburban home there. After a careful study of the environments at Sitka he became convinced that bee culture could be made a pleasing and profitable odd moment occupation.

By an expenditure of \$25 he imported two hives of bees from Seattle the latter part of May. On June 20 he divided these swarms and instead of two, had four armies at work among the daisies and clover blossoms. October 15 he again broke into the arrangements of his laborers households and added two more hives to his apiary.

He now has six hives of the busy little insects and is confident that they will all be able to supply themselves with a winter's stock of food after he has taken about 40 pounds of honey from each of the two original swarms.

At St. Petersburg Father Methodius started with seven swarms and in four years had increased his stock to 150 swarms, without the importation of a single bee. Besides thus increasing his hives he had an income of a thousand dollars a year from the sale of honey and wax.

This opens to the door to an industry whose field is as broad as are the mountains and valleys of Alaska, and a great feature of this industry is that it requires no great expenditure of either money, brains or physical strength, but only a watchful attention.

From a "modern" management perspective (albeit not knowing the strength of the original 2 colonies) making four splits from two colonies in less than one month, then expecting good queen mating in an area where Father Methodius himself wrote, "as the bees worked not more than 15 days from June 1 to September 1," would seem to me not the best management technique. As there is no mention of any queens being imported we'd have to assume the splits were left to raise their own queens. However, please remember this is apicultural speculation on the part of this author.

The next documented source I could find was in the Annual Report of the Agricultural Research Station in Sitka (Georgeson 1906). Georgeson mentions that the Experimental Station brought two stands of bees to Sitka in June of 1905 supplied through the Bureau of Entomology from a beekeeper in southern Washington State. In his report C.C. Georgeson also describes a Russian priest importing bees prior to 1905 (undoubtedly Father Methodius), but they failed to thrive. This earlier attempt is substantiated by correspondence between a Professor Essig (University of California, Department of Entomology) and A.P. Kashevaroff of the Territory of Alaska Library and Museum in 1927. Kashevaroff's reply to Essig's query about bees in Alaska states that a missionary named Father Methodius attempted to keep bees in Sitka in 1900 but without success (MS 149-4-3, 1927). Kashevaroff also discounts rumors that bees were brought to Alaska in the early 1800's (Ibid). Essig reports on his correspondence with Kashevaroff discounting earlier Russian introductions in his classic work, "A History of Entomology" (Essig 1931).

S.S. West, a Fairbanks beekeeper in the late 1940's, writing in a University of Alaska publication (West 1947) mentions "In 1900, Father Methodius of the Sitka Russian Church, who had formerly had an apiary of 150 colonies in St. Petersburg, imported two colonies of bees from Seattle at a cost of \$25.00. The bees arrived near the end of May, and on June 20 he divided both colonies to obtain a total of four. On October 15, he divided again, so that he wintered six colonies. Apparently all died during their first winter or shortly thereafter." West does not give his sources, but his article does not tally exactly with Father Methodius' official report.

Frank Pellett's book, *American Honey Plants* (Pellett 1920) is often cited in articles both in print and on the Internet giving 1809 as the first introduction of honey bees to Alaska. He does not give his sources, but it appears that it was based on earlier reports by Parks (1917). Unfortunately this date (1809) cannot be substantiated; let's look at Pellett's full quote -

"By the accounts given in Bancroft's *History of Alaska* and in translations made for me by Rev. George Kostrometinoff (DeArmond 2009b) from the records of the Orthodox Russo-Greek Church at Sitka, the honeybee was first introduced into Alaska in

1809 by a monk named Cherepenin. These bees came from the Department of Kazan, in Siberia, and were brought that honey might be added to the scanty food supply of the pioneer teachers of the Faith as well as to supply the candles for the church services.... As early as 1819 apiculture was taught in the church school and was continued up to 1894. It would appear that the bees never flourished and seldom swarmed. There are a number of records of new importations to take the place of dead colonies. Very early a white clover was introduced to help out the honey supply. About 1830 bees were taken from Sitka to Fort Ross in California. As late as 1905 there were about 30 colonies at the Russian school at Sitka. These bees were in straw skeps and were kept on shelves under the eaves of the house. In winter they were kept within the same projecting eaves. In 1906 the Experiment Farm at Sitka made an unsuccessful attempt to keep bees in Langstroth hives. It is not probable that beekeeping will ever be a commercial project in Alaska. References to beekeeping at Sitka by Dr. Sheldon Jackson are to be found in the Report on Education in Alaska, Bureau of Education. Prof. C. C. Georgeson, in the reports on work done at the Experiment Station in Alaska also mentions beekeeping. Bees were observed collecting nectar and pollen from plants given below during the years 1905 to 1912...." (Pellett 1920).

Problems with Pellett

Although Pellett (1920) sounds very convincing with his date of an 1809 importation, I was unable to verify any of his sources. I have read H.H. Bancroft's *History of Alaska* (Bancroft 1886) several times expressly looking for bees or beekeeping references – not even the word honey shows up.

I was unable to verify Pellett's claim that "As early as 1819 apiculture was taught in the church school and was continued up to 1894" but, during the restoration of the Bishop's House by the National Park Service (a project begun in 1973 and lasting for 16 years), a book (in Russian) "Lectures on the benefits of Raising Honeybees" published in 1902 in St. Petersburg was discovered (Thorsen 2009) and has been on display at the museum. The Russian Bishop's House in Sitka is one of four remaining Russian built structures left in North America; others include - one at Fort Ross California, another building in Sitka, and a decrepit building in Kodiak, Alaska.

Much of Pellett's information appears to be gleaned from an earlier account by H.B. Parks writing in the *American Bee Journal* in June of 1917 (Parks 1917; also cited in Watkins 1968a). The account by Parks describes how "a double walled skep and its horde of toilers" were brought from Kazan and "today in Sitka and other old Russian towns in Alaska are the sturdy descendants of this hive." Further on in the article he makes the claim that, "...Fort Ross was established by the Russians about 200 miles

north of San Francisco. Here bees were brought from Sitka, so that in California today may be found the descendants of bees from Russia, Mexico, and Spain, together with modern importations” (Parks 1917).

H.B. Parks was the instructor and superintendent of mechanical work at the Sheldon Jackson Indian School in Sitka from mid 1907-1911, contemporaneous with C. C. Georgeson of the USDA Agriculture Experimental Station. Parks, who was very interested in beekeeping, later (1918) became the apiarist for the division of entomology, Texas Agricultural Experimental Station in College Station and in 1923 moved to San Antonio to establish the nearby Apicultural Laboratory. He spent the rest of his life in Texas involved with beekeeping and research projects. There is no doubt he was not just a layman writing about bees, but he is also no stranger to “historical controversy”. I found a biographical sketch of Parks on the Internet where he is credited for having “discovered” a popular folk song “*Follow the Drinking Gourd*”. In a discussion of the historical roots of the song and Parks’ credulity, researcher Joel Bresler mentions “*A clever fabrication?*” and “*he wouldn’t be the first folklorist of the late 19th and early 20th century to embellish an account*” (Bresler 2008). Parks gives no references for his information in his 1917 *American Bee Journal* article “*Some Bee History*”, allowing no further investigation.

Lee Watkins, writing in the April 1968 *American Bee Journal*, takes Pellett and Parks both to task in an article “*The Myth of Russian Bees in California*” (Watkins 1968a). We must also consider the historical setting of Russian America (as Alaska was called at the time), New Archangel (present day Sitka), the time and travel distances, the rigors of colonial life, and the climate; none of these factors are conducive to beekeeping.

Russian America was “discovered” (it was there all along – Asiatic peoples had migrated across from Asia thousands of years before) by a Dane, Vitus Bering, under the employ of the Russian Czar and a Russian, Aleksei Chirikov (captains of separate ships) in 1741. The present city of Sitka was established in 1799 by Alexander Andreevitch Barnof (also spelled Barnov), then Chief Manager of the Russian America Company (RAC). Barnof arrived under the auspices of the Russian-American Company, a “semi-official” colonial trading company chartered by the Tsar. In 1802 a group of Tlingit (the local indigenous people) destroyed the original establishment known as Redoubt Saint Michael (an area today called the “Old Sitka”) and killed most of the Russian inhabitants. Barnof returned to Sitka in 1804 with a large contingent of Russians and Aleuts aboard three small but armed RAC vessels and the Russian warship *Neva* commanded by a Lieutenant Lisianski, who was diverted from a Russian round-the-world expedition. The ships bombarding the Tlingit fort were not able to cause significant damage to the earth works, but shells

lobed over the walls caused loss of life. The Russians then launched an attack on the fort and were repelled by Tlingit fighters and marksmen—Barnof was slightly wounded. However, the Tlingit gunpowder reserves had been lost before the Russian assault and the Tlingit were forced to leave the fort. Following their victory at the Battle of Sitka the Russians established a permanent settlement in the form of a fort, named Novoarkhangelsk (New Archangel).

There was significant animosity between the locals and the colonialists—the Russians spent lots of time huddled in their stockade, food was short (starvation was common) and supply ships seldom visited. It was also a long way home to Mother Russia - two Naval Lieutenants on an “express mission” from St. Petersburg to Okhost (a port on East coast of Russia) spent from April to August of 1802 just crossing Siberia (Davidoff 1810).

Sitka is also notorious for its precipitation – an average of 87 inches of rain and 40 inches of snow per year are recorded over the last 30 years. The temperatures are mild, with an average of 55°F in July and just 34°F in January; not a climate conducive to beekeeping as the average July temperature is right near the threshold for bee foraging flights.

C.C. Georgeson, after failing in his attempts to keep bees in Sitka, wrote in his 1906 USDA Agriculture Experimental Station Report “*Beekeeping cannot be made a success in Southeast Alaska*” (Georgeson 1906).

I find it difficult to believe that bees in skeps could have been transported from Kazan (west of the Ural Mountains in central European Russia) to the east coast of Russia, a distance of more than 6000 kms (3600 miles) in the early 1800’s. Eva Crane reports that bees were first brought to the Khabarovsk (Primorye) region in 1887 (Crane 1999) and Dorothy Galton mentions bees in the early 1800’s being introduced to Tomsk in SW Siberia - still thousands of miles from Russia’s Pacific Coast (Galton 1971). It does not seem logical that the Russians would bypass the rich bee pastures of the Primorye region in favor of rainy Sitka. The Trans-Siberian Railroad was not completed until 1913.

I could not corroborate Pellett’s claim that “*References to beekeeping at Sitka by Dr. Sheldon Jackson are to be found in the Report on Education in Alaska, Bureau of Education*” after searching archives in Sitka and historical collections at the University of Alaska, Fairbanks. As H.B. Parks was Assistant Superintendent of the Sitka Training School from 1905 to 1911, concurrent with the residency of C. C. Georgeson at the Ag Research Station, and Sheldon Jackson left Alaska in 1907 (he died in 1909); the three of them must have crossed paths in a small town like Sitka. It is strange that Georgeson, after his attempts at apiculture, would not have mentioned other bees kept in Sitka - “*(As late as 1905 there were about 30 colonies at the Russian school at Sitka.*

These bees were in straw skeps and were kept on shelves under the eaves of the house. In winter they were kept within the same projecting eaves)” (Pellett 1920); or Parks would have not given better references. In addition to the accompanying photo of Father Methodius with his bees in back of the Russian Bishop’s House, I have seen other photographs and never seen “*projecting eaves*”.

The claim by Parks and Pellett that honey bees were brought by the Russians to California in 1830 has been historically debunked (Watkins 1968a) and from a practical standpoint does not seem likely. The coastal zone shelf where the Russian settlement of Fort Ross was established is currently described as “not suitable for honeybees”, however a species of bumblebee (*Bombus vosnesenskii*) thrives in the area (Fort Ross 1998); named after Russian naturalist I. G. Vosnesenskii who, as a naturalist and curator of the Zoological Museum of Natural Sciences in St. Petersburg, was sent to collect insects (Essig 1991).

Alexander Barnoff gave orders to Ivan Alexandrovich Kuskoff (commander at Fort Ross from 1812-1821) in 1813 instructing, “*...it is also necessary to investigate whether in the peninsula of the lesser Bodega, in the valleys and in the fields there are not those beneficial insects i.e. bees, which produce honey and wax essential to the prosperity and social life of mankind*” (MS 149-4-7, 1927). It seems as though the Russians were hoping there might be honey bees in the area – but none of the entomological researchers/collectors mention them.

Other Russian authors, acting as agents for the Russian America Company (RAC), e.g. Ivan A. Kuskoff and Kiril Khlebnikov, give *extremely detailed* lists and records of RAC activities. Along with requests for three nautical calendars and four-dozen pencils I was able to find on the list of necessities for 1820 “*25 pud of honey for pharmacies and officials and 610 pud of sugar*” (1 pud = 36.11 pounds, so about 900 lbs of honey and a metric ton of sugar); these were supplies brought *from* Russia *to* New Archangel - Sitka (Khlebnikov 1994).

Khlebnikov, who even by today’s standards could be considered a globe trotter, made several trips back and forth across Siberia spending an average of seven months each way in transit. He recounts a sea voyage departing Kronstad (near Leningrad on the Gulf of Finland) on September 7, 1816 and arriving in Sitka November 20, 1817 via Cape Horn (Khlebnikov 1990). A one-way voyage from Sitka to Fort Ross averaged one month. To transport “*a double walled skep and it’s horde of toilers*” for seven months across Siberia (winter or summer) or transport them by sea for more than 15 months strains the imagination; they weren’t even on the manifest!

Bees to Alaska’s Interior- 1913

It’s a chore researching microfiche records – you’re dizzy from the microfiche

strip flying by and it's easy to get distracted by war stories as reported nearly 100 years ago. I wouldn't have had the patience, so I fudged a bit and asked local agricultural historian Jo Papp about her sources for the first bees in Fairbanks (Papp & Phillips 2007). A few days later I was hunched over the microfiche reader at the UAF Rasmussen Library reading a short paragraph in the August 27, 1913 *Fairbanks Daily News Miner*.

“Vining Brings in Two Hives of Bees - As part of the cargo brought to Fairbanks by the steamer Alaska which arrived in port last night, were two hives of bees. The little honey gathers were brought North by R.L. Vining, being the first ever brought into the Interior. They are for Mrs. Ed Wickersham and Mrs. Truxton” (1913 *News-Miner*).

One would have to speculate that the bees (I'm going to assume they were some sort of nuc or even a full hive) would have had a tough time arriving in August which is the end of our honey season after a long voyage. Their route is open to speculation - the news item ...“brought to Fairbanks by the steamer Alaska which arrived in port last night” leads me to conclude they were landed right here in Fairbanks; but the “steamer Alaska” was an ocean-going vessel and could never make it up the Yukon-Tanana-Chena River route to Fairbanks. They would have most probably been transferred from an ocean going vessel at St. Michaels (at the mouth of the Yukon River) and then come by paddle-wheeled riverboat from there; a voyage of perhaps six to eight weeks from Seattle to Fairbanks. The most probable answer, according to local historian Dermot Cole, is that they arrived by a riverboat also named the “Alaska” (Cole 2009).

Two years later (August 4, 1915) another bee item appears in the *News Miner* that demonstrates even then reporters got things wrong! Here it is in full-

BUSY BEES ARE THRIVING HERE

Twenty-four Pounds of Honey are Taken from One Hive of Bees

THEY WON'T SWARM

Movement Is Now On Foot to Ship Queen Bees from Outside

That the raising of bees and the production of honey may one day be a thriving industry of the North has now been fully demonstrated as it is now an assured fact that the little sweet manufacturing insects will withstand the rigors of this climate with a little bit of care. There is only one hive of bees here at the present time, but they have demonstrated their ability to make enough honey to live on with some to spare.

This hive of bees is down at the Arctic Greenhouse. Twenty-four pounds of honey were taken from the hive yesterday and are now on sale at a local grocery store at \$1 per pound.

These bees were shipped into the country two years ago by Mrs. L. Truxton and Mrs. Ed Wickersham. Those owned by Mrs. Wick-

ersham failed to live through the winter, but Mrs. Truxton's hive lived very nicely off the flowers in her greenhouse.

When Ms. Truxton went Outside last summer she sold her bees to Charles Blaser of the Arctic Green house. He made a place for them at one end of his hot house and fixed the hive so that they could go into the hot house or out into the open air. Mr. Blaser did not attempt to take any honey from them, stating he did not know how to handle them.

Mr. Blaser's successor at the greenhouse, Peter Mortenson, is well versed in the science of handling bees. Accordingly, he made preparation to extract the honey from the hive and the operation was performed yesterday with success.

While he was extracting the honey yesterday Mr. Mortenson made a mental note of the fact that there are a large number of young bees in the hive. They have never swarmed which fact is believed to be due to the shortness of the summer season.

Since it has been demonstrated that the bees will not swarm in this climate, it has been suggested that some of the “honey” enthusiasts send Outside for queen bees as it is believed that if a queen bee could be introduced into the hive, she would soon be able to gather a crowd of followers together. By careful handling she and her followers could then be transferred to another hive and so the propogation (sic) of the bees would continue.

As you may realize, the reporter just didn't quite grasp the concept of making a split. As for swarms- we should be so lucky! Our package bees seem to break the rule by building up fast enough so that, if proper space (at least two deep brood chambers) is not maintained, they will swarm 6-8 weeks after hiving.

The honey harvest and prices paid were of interest to me; twenty-four pounds would be a less-than-average year by current standards here in Fairbanks (50-60 is the norm). How to relate the \$1 per pound price to today's value of the dollar? The price of

gold was \$20 an ounce – now it's over \$1000; using that as a gauge then we should be getting 1/20th the price of gold for a pound of our honey; but even in Alaska people would balk at \$50/pound! To refine the price I took a look at some of the ads on the same page of the newspaper article. Prospectors and miners were urged to “Get their waterproof wall tents, weight ten pounds, get one now before they are all sold. You might want it to go stampeding (the old term for folks going out prospecting) or on your hunting trip.” The price was \$6.50. Or, you could drop by the Shaw House Grill for breakfast (50 cents), lunch (75 cents), or dinner (\$1.00) with your dance hall gal after you've bought her a dozen roses for \$6.00. Nowadays a gold miner breakfast runs about \$7-\$9 and a meat & potatoes dinner at least \$25. Being either a beekeeper or a gold miner in Fairbanks is a big gamble. I am further impressed by the fact that both the hives shipped to Fairbanks originally went to women.

A short item in the Editorial section of *Gleanings in Bee Culture* sent into the magazine by a Mr. A. T. Cook mentions an article in the *New York World* of October 20, 1913 confirming the shipment of two colonies to the Fairbanks ladies – it also mentions there were two Alaskan subscribers to *Gleanings in Bee Culture* regularly receiving copies (Root 1914).

To be continued next month (1920's to present day).

Acknowledgements

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A map of Alaska showing documented locations of honey bee introductions (see text this month and next)

Fairbanks for great stories, access to past issues of bee journals and for sharing some of his personal archives. Thanks to Ashley Kircher of the Sitka Historical Museum for her efforts in tracking down historical photographs; Deirdre Helfferich of the School of Natural Resources and Sciences for the photo of John Bohme; Rosemary Carleton of the Sheldon Jackson Museum for information on Rev. Sheldon Jackson; William DeArmond of Sitka for accessing and transcribing a bee news item from the *Sitka Alaskan* and comments on my manuscript; and to the very helpful Sandy Johnston and the staff at the Alaska State Library Historical Collections department.

Photo Credits (Part 1 of 2)

(1) "Russian Priest with beehives at Sitka", Photo courtesy of Alaska State Library-Historical Collections, Sheldon Jackson College, Merrill Photograph Collection, SJC 29-861

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