

XIV A TALE OF TWO TOWNS.

I have not visited Russia, therefore do not possess an adequate reference for assessing the residual Russianization of Sitka, Alaska. Aside from a few buildings, most of which have been rebuilt or restored, the New Archangel Russian-flavored Dancers, a few street and place names, and the highly-flavored promotional tourist brochures, Sitka can boast little present-day Russian influence. The same might also be said of its Tlingit heritage; despite the artifacts, surely there is little that can pass as anything more than mere window dressings. One finds little presentable from within his own heritage.

The most redeeming aspect to the whole area, lacking a Russian connection, resides in its proximity to the sea; otherwise it would be difficult to distinguish from any other North American burg that might exploit some facet of its past whether or not relevant to its present, in order to enhance its own humdrum image. Because Sitka is located at the edge of the sea, it possesses the nominal appeal of most maritime communities, and to us, selfishly, we enboated ones, since it is accessible by water, and because it exists as a refuge from the hazards and perils of the sea. As communities go in Southeast Alaska, Sitka exists as the most spacious and friendly (the friendliness is a relative condition; most of Southeast Alaska residents seemed friendlier than their southern brethren). Its physical layout tends to follow the water front as is typical of maritime communities, gradually rising over low hills, its street patterns tending towards a modified grid, but seldom connecting at right angles, being somewhat influenced by the contours of the land.

During the tourist season one would expect all the communities of Southeast Alaska to be possessed of a welcoming disposition, which appeared to be evident in Sitka. This last is not said to diminish the salutary effect the sea tends to possess in producing a more kindly disposed humanity.

My object herein is not intended to lead into a discourse upon the communities of Southeast Alaska. I would not be the one to be trusted in presenting the most fair assessment of these communities, since I tend to be averse to being part of bunched-up humanity. In fact, I regard these outposts selfishly, for us itinerant mariners, as welcome places to replenish our stores and fuel supply. Their distinguishing features exist

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mostly in their natural surroundings upon which these outposts are casually and randomly located, nature provisioning some fortuitous platform upon which *homo sapiens* might alight. Their man-made accouterments exist, generally speaking, as a composite of ordinary standardized American fare reflecting the peculiarities of the decade from which they emerged. Most of them would rank as modified frontier towns; however the larger ones reflect some prosperity and a feeling of permanence, somehow escaping the stigma of ramshackle shanty towns.

I had begun this theme by suggesting Sitka's Russian heritage has very little apparency, and what may remain from that link with the past is mostly a promotional stunt for attracting the tourist.

Gud only knows what it is a tourist expects to see; if you didn't do a 'number' on him/her perhaps you wouldn't be able to convince him/her to relinquish his/her wherewithal; or maybe he/she would trundle off to Europe instead. How much exists in his/her imagination, I know not; how gullible or willingly gullible I know not. Whatever one does may appear more rewarding than staying home in Butte, Montana; Topeka, Kansas; Amarillo, Texas; or Chicago, Illinois, during the hot summer months; a cruise through Southeast Alaska may be 'just the ticket'.

As I have speculated, I know not what it is a tourist expects to see after a travel bureau works him/her over. I do not know if heshe expects to see a mummified Czar or Joseph McCarthy wrestling with the Russian Bear. Perhaps seeing a street named Baranof and a church with a Russian Orthodox Cupola and some Sitka housewives attired in some 'authentic' Russian dress doing a jig in the Sitka Centennial Building is enough to satisfy him/her. Perhaps these are only arbitrary objectives, and the milestones served up to his/her own susceptibility as an excuse for 'exploring' the world. Surely the plush cruise ships give him/her cause to feel his/her royalty and that he/she is getting his/her money's worth; the scenery to and from is without question distinctly different from, if not a vast improvement over, Butte, Topeka, Amarillo and Chicago (even when one stubbornly clings to the notion: There is no place like home). So, all in all, because one doesn't get to taste the 'real thing' (who could tell?) a little artificial flavor may go a long way towards satisfying one's untested appetite, as long as it is served up with a little dash and lotsa smiles.

Surely, this little discourse is leading towards something more; perhaps I ought cease the stalling, only to head directly

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for my destination; 'dead reckoning', in a manner of speaking.

In our cruise in Atavist we eventually alighted in Haines, Alaska with the intention of proceeding to Skagway, that o'erfabled outpost of yesteryear. While at Haines we learned from the harbor master the Skagway docking facilities were closed during a period of reconstruction. To us, this meant there would be no provision for protected moorage or anchoring at the head of Taiya Inlet, where it 'can blow like holy hell', should we continue there in Atavist. However, we had not traveled such a great distance to be denied a peek at this illustrious abode.

We had few options. One, we could very indignantly 'bullshit' our way into Skagway, feigning ignorance, or through acting out the unrelenting irate approach, demanding accommodations to preclude hazarding our lives; or by scandalously throwing dollar bills upon the water in the harbor; two, we could rent a car, driving the three hundred sixty miles from Haines to Skagway (only seventeen by water), which would really exhaust a person's supply of dollar bills with little dramatic effect and even less appreciation. (Why not take the ferry with car? [We could not take our dogs on the ferry]); three, we could take the Alaska ferry the seventeen miles as passengers (still without taking the animals).

All we needed do was become tourists for a while; all we really wanted was to see with our own two eyes the fabled joint from out some unaccountable curiosity. We considered the ferry schedule; we could leave the dogs for half a day on Atavist without difficulty, which was roughly the time period between ferries. We would not have enough time to take the notorious choo-choo from Skagway through White Pass, one of the famed Goldrush routes, into Whitehorse. Without knowing what new adventure awaited us, but in following our urges and our noses we rose at three A.M. to 'catch' a bus @ \$2.75 each for the five mile ride to the ferry which departed at 4:30 A.M. It was an overcast, blustery day; however, in the middle of summer we were greeted with ample daylight to observe the surroundings within Taiya Inlet. We arrived in Skagway at 5:30 to a coolish windy village. We wandered about gandering at the facades on 'Main Street', the side streets reflecting the city's marginal prosperity. Now that the Gold is all gone, Skagway is a humble tourist attraction with false fronts creating a front yard frontierism with plain rears telling of a more ordinary, if not dilapidated and threadbare state of affairs.

In walking about in the morning we noticed automobile rental agencies, prompting us to inquire, at least, what arrangements could be made to drive to Whitehorse, some eighty miles away, having plenty of time for a quick trip. Luckily we encountered one responsive and indulgent agency willing to bend

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its rules with regard to credit cards, minimum times, etc. to allow for the brief trip - with the stipulation we return by 1:00 P.M., when they would be closing the office to attend a free performance of Russian Folk Dances being presented by the 'crew' of the Soviet Cruise Ship ODESSA, which was docked at Skagway. The girls who operated the rental agency highly



recommended we attend the performance - which we thus planned to do. Our ferry was scheduled to depart at 2:30 P.M. for Haines.

Meanwhile we headed off towards Whitehorse climbing into the Coast Mountains on one side of the Skagway River while the White Pass and Yukon Route choo-choo traveled the other. However, we soon disappeared into the overcast, driving for many miles therein upon the newly completed dirt highway to Whitehorse; hoping all the while for a break in the cloud cover. We reached the Canadian border without any sign of change, driving already some twenty-five miles in the next to invisible murk, deciding thus to return to Skagway to explore Dyea instead, where it was expected we would actually be able to see something.

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Dyea was located at the base of the Chilkoot Trail, the famed and preferred route of the Klondike Gold Rushers. In its heyday, at the turn of the Twentieth Century, some thirty thousand rough and tumbles formed and erected an instant gold-rush town, now only a ghost of mounds forgotten and grown over with the characteristic persuasion of time. We visited the Slide Cemetery, serving the instant community in what now is a quiet woodsy setting. The headstones or headboards reveal dates of 1898 to 1900, redeeming from oblivion children of only a few months or a year or so old. Like a scourge of pestilential insects, men came and disappeared, leaving hardly a trace, after a time. They bored into her body, claim-jumped, caroused, drank to oblivion, murdered, lived and died ignobly, leaving no monument, lest it be this meager one, to their dead, and a reputation for greed!

Since the Soviet Union had been bullying around in Afghanistan, an unforgiving Western World had not allowed the Cruise Ship ODESSA the use of port facilities anywhere in Canada or Southeast Alaska; Skagway being the exception, allowing them to berth. Skagway, perhaps indicative of its past as well as present, would not permit principles to interfere with hunger or profit. The 'crew' of the Soviet Ship reciprocated by offering to provide free entertainment in the Skagway theater.

'Twas a lively, polished, and very well articulated performance in 'native' costume. The program was MC'd by a clean-shaven, babyfaced Soviet 'crewman' dressed in white dinner jacket. The group was equipped with a crooner and songstress. The whole presentation seemed professional and well rehearsed, rather than a casual performance of butcher, baker, steward, engineer, able seaman and deck hand. The athletic performances, 'typical' of some Russian 'Folk' dances, were most enthusiastic and impressive in their coordinated execution, in the extension of their vertical leaps and flights through the air. A rousing hand was attendant to this performance. Ah so, Goodwill!; More Please!

Why it is necessary for the nation that engenders these 'charming' people to be such bullies is beyond me. Alas it is a dichotomous world we live in; how soon these would be obliged to sever their conviviality when mother Russia calls. But then, what the hell, who ever said this life was meant to be a picnic; idealities be damned. Oh, by the way, the Russians are not the only *gluteus maximi* in this world.

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Later, when we were in Sitka, someone recommended we attend a performance of the New Archangel Dancers at the Centennial Building. These dancers were 'crew' of a different kind, billed as truly genuine American Southeast Alaskan housewives, of a Russian inclination.

The Centennial Building contains a large auditorium equipped with a stage, the auditorium being sufficient to seat the hold of a cruise ship full of tourists, plus a number of transient tourists. Coincident with the arrival of a Cruise Ship, the New Archangel Dancers are summoned to perform their 'authentic' Russian-flavored dances in 'traditional' costumes, at two dollars a head.

We arrived early enough to obtain a seat in the second row center. Directly in front of us, in the front row, some ten seats were pink-ribboned off as 'Reserved' (Boy!, what I could say about reserved seats in theaters and auditoriums would incinerate your ears). As the auditorium began to fill with tourists from the provender cruise ship, the inevitable inane queries and speculations arose concerning the 'Reserved' seats (Boy!, could I). Being unable to suppress the effect of the significance of this whole charade, in response to one busybodyish tourist I replied 'those very seats were being reserved for the King and Queen of Sitka'. I thought perhaps that would quiet the busy body; little did I suspect it would promote a rash of rumors which were also communicated to me as well. Alas!, I could have played to this unsuspecting audience, a confidence man, perchance coming away with a boatload of converts. The gullible lot surrounding us did further this unlikely rumor as gospel, promoting a wave of excitement.

As the performance was about to begin, a family of westernized appearing Japanese arrived to occupy the reserved seats, much to the dismay and screwed-up faces of the prospective audience in the immediate vicinity. King and Queen of Sitka! - Japanese? Hah!! I had a good laugh, considering myself fortunate I hadn't been brained. But who knows, perhaps the Japanese, who own Alaska Lumber and Pulp and control a goodly part of the fisheries were indeed the modern reigning monarchs of Sitka (something to bear in mind for yet another exploitable heritage).

Well, I just gotta tell ya - the New Archangel Dancers had perhaps not rehearsed for a while, or had had most of their Russian blood diluted from their lineage, or it was too early in the morning, or 'they just didn't have it' or.... whatever, despite their o'erfamed notoriety, they certainly couldn't 'hold a candle' to the 'crew' of the ODESSA. We had obviously been spoiled. But that's

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the way of the world these days; its all a big promotion, 'world class' and all that; some kind of hype, or manufactured bullshit.

I'm sure the housewives mean well, and they perhaps do try; however if they would just simply wear the 'traditional' costumes strolling about town as welcome-wagoners they might accomplish as much or more, as they do struggling to represent something not natural to them. Be that as it may, the tourist lives in his imagination and what he remembers will peradventure exist as some evocative phantom that will from time to time relieve the monotony of Butte, Topeka, Amarillo or Chicago; and he may very well relate, in truth, that the King and Queen of Sitka are indeed Japanese.

