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St. Nicholas Russian Orthodox Church

by Mary Glover



St. Nicholas Russian Orthodox Church (St. Nicholas is the Church's patron saint) is a religious facility to a number of residents in the Seldovia community and is noted as a major landmark throughout the Kenai Peninsula . This major attraction within Seldovia's city limits is on the National Historical Record in Washington , D.C. It is situated on the hill within the township and looks down upon Seldovia proper with a protective and ostentatious presence. It is definitely Seldovia's icon. When coming into the Seldovia harbor, it is one of the first sights of homecoming and is an endearment to the men who have been out fishing for a long time.

No collection of pictures of Seldovia is complete without a picture of the Church. It has been the subject of many artistic paintings and even a commemorative plate has been made of the structure which is currently on sale at the Herring Bay Mercantile.





This year, Elaine Giles and Helen Josefsen have served as Church guides to visitors who have come to Seldovia and would like to view the inside of the Church. Elaine and Helen are long-time residents of Seldovia and know a great deal of Seldovia's history. The visitor's book shows where 442 people have come through the Church since Elaine and Helen have so graciously donated their time this year so people could visit the Church...and some people don't even sign the book! There is no charge to tour the Church; however, Elaine stated there is a donation can for contributions. The donated money is used to pay the utility and other bills that are basic costs. Any donation is greatly appreciated. The Church was opened from 1:30 to 3:30 Monday-Saturday. The tours have now stopped as Labor Day has come. Elaine and Helen plan to open the Church for public visits again sometime after Memorial Day next year.

The rules for visiting the Church remain the same for the services and for the public visiting times:

- no smoking
- no eating or drinking
- no pets allowed
- no photographs taken inside.

Access to the Church is only for the one room of the building. No one except the priest and altar boys are allowed into the inner sanctuary. In the Church, everything is either symbolic or has a religious focus. There are six paintings (or icons) that are in the front of the Church and the bell tower represents the gateway to heaven. Helen told me that the chandelier in the center of the tower was made by her and a few other people who attended the Church. The circular bands are staves off of a barrel and the center is two, 2 lb. coffee cans sprayed with gilded gold paint. Then they hung crystals off the staves and made places to place candles to be lit.

Helen and Elaine said that in the early days of the Church, the women would sit on the left side of the Church and the men would sit on the right side of the Church. The Church designates the left side of the Church to be that of St. Mary as there are pictures of her placed on the walls on the left side of the Church. Pictures of various (male) saints hang on the right side of the Church. Today, there are no specific sitting areas for any gender. Also, Helen told me that she married Louie Nagy in this Church in 1979 and the marriage crowns were placed upon their heads. Elaine said that Micky Balashoff's father was an altar boy at the Church. There is a Christmas Star in one corner of the Church. Elaine and Helen explained to me that this Christmas Star is carried from house to house in the community at the Russian Christmas date in a procession with the priest. The procession goes into each house of the parish, and they have cookies and refreshments and the priest blesses each family's home.

This past year, Kirby Corwin (who runs a local Kayak rental business) built the walkway that Helen and Elaine are standing upon in front of the Church. This is a very nice improvement to the Church. Kirby has also had a part in restoring the crosses that are mounted on the roof. Many people have donated time and money to keep the Church in good condition.

History of the Church

1820's The original Church was a small log structure located along the beach. **1891** The St. Nicholas Church was built on the hill. It was originally part of the Kenai Parish, but now is directly under Alaska's Orthodox Bishop Gregory.

1896 - 1st resident priest, Father John Bortnovsky wrote there were 17 houses and 110 people and that they "raised some chickens and engaged in a little agriculture."

1904 - Children were studying from Russian and English textbooks.

1906 - Bell tower installed on Church. An invoice still exists from a Russian trader evidencing the purchase of the big bells. The bell was rung to call the people to Church when the priest came or when they were to celebrate the Holy Feasts.

1979 - The Church was condemned. There were braces to hold up the beams to keep it from collapsing

1981 - Helen told me that Clem Tillian was helpful in obtaining funds to restore the Church and that the funds were available if the Church became registered on the National Historical Registry in Washington, DC. Helen told me that she worked with Bishop Gregory to accomplish the restoration. The AK State Legislature funded a grant to the City of Seldovia in the amount of \$127,000 to restore the Church. Elaine Giles was the City Clerk at this time and administered the funds that were received. Helen said that Sam Combs got the

contract for restoring the Church. Sam Combs found two books in the ceiling area during the restoration project dating approximately 1904. Helen was also involved in scraping the paint down to the original colors. The plan was to restore the Church to the original design and colors of the 1891 Church. When the restoration was completed, Bishop Gregory re-consecrated the Church.

Today – The Church is used for marriages, funerals and other events within the Church doxology.

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