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Press Release

ALASKA STATE MUSEUMS

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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SHELDON JACKSON MUSEUM SEPTEMBER ARTIFACT(S) OF THE MONTH



The Sheldon Jackson Museum's September Artifact(s) of the Month is a pair of Yup'ik smoked moose hide slippers (SJ-II-S-197). The slippers are children's size and have white hide soles crimped at the toe and heel with a single piece of smoked moose hide uppers sewn with a welted seam up the back and decorated with seed beads. The ankle opening is bound with red cotton cloth and a strip of hide, originally with fur, is welted into the outside of the seam. The slippers were not collected by Sheldon Jackson but by Moravian missionaries, one of several denominations Jackson influenced to come to Alaska in the late 19th century.

In 1884 Sheldon Jackson was made the General Agent of Education for Alaska, making him responsible for ensuring the education of all children in the Territory of Alaska. Because Jackson was only

allocated \$25,000 for this major task, he sought other Protestant denominations to establish and operate mission schools under the umbrella of his office. (It was common during this era for mission schools to be funded via government contracts.) Jackson called upon Protestant denominations to come establish missions and schools in Alaska and encouraged the Roman Catholic and Russian Orthodox Churches, already long established in some villages, to continue their work educating children. Presbyterians, already present in Southeast Alaska, were called upon to expand their reach to St. Lawrence Island the northern Arctic Coast. Baptists came to the Cook Inlet area and Kodiak Island. Anglicans from Canada worked along the Yukon River, and later, the Episcopalians. Methodists came to work in the Aleutian Islands; Congregationalists to Prince of Wales. The Friends Church sent representatives to the Kotzebue area; the Lutheran and Covenant Churches to Nome. Moravians were sent missionaries to the Kuskokwim.

Jackson's appeals to Moravians to come to Alaska had begun as early as 1883. In August of that year Jackson, then secretary of the Presbyterian Mission Board, wrote to the Moravian mission agency, the Society for Propagating the Gospel, asking for assistance with proselytizing activities in Alaska. In February of 1884, he followed up his initial request with a speech in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania to a group of Moravians. Within a month of his speech, the Society appointed a missionary named Adolphus Harmann and William Weinland, a graduating seminary student, to seek out a place to establish a mission in the far northern territory. The men began their search in Unalaska and made their way inland to Nushagak where it was suggested to them that they start a mission in the Kuskokwim River area to the northwest. No competing missionary presence along the Kuskokwim and the prospects of being close to the river for transporting people, goods, and maintaining relatively regular communications made the location promising.

Harmann and Weinland explored the Kuskokwim River for several weeks in skin boats. Accompanied by four Alaska Native guides, they explorers were met with bad weather and incessant mosquitos, but in June, arrived at an Alaska Commercial Company camp at Mumtrekhtagamute. The two men thought that they had come to best location option for a mission station. After exploring few other potential sites, they settled on Mumtrekhtagamute, which they later renamed, Bethel.ⁱ

Once Harmann and Weinland returned to Pennsylvania in late September, the Society for Propogating the Gospel resolved to establish a presence in Alaska. They quickly sent back Wienland along with two others - Rev. John Kilbuck and Hans Torgeson, to start the new mission. On June 21, 1885, the first Sunday worship service was held by Moravians in Alaska.ⁱⁱ Nearly twenty years later, Herman and Elizabeth Holtmeir, Moravian missionaries, arrived to the region and acquired the moose hide slippers that are the September Artifacts of the Month.

Herman and Elizabeth Holtmeir were Moravian missionaries at Bethel and Quinhagak from 1907-1917. Soon after the couple's return to the Midwest, Elizabeth passed away. Herman Holtmeir remarried, and his second wife, donated these the moose hide slippers to the Carver County Historical Society in Waconia, Minnesota. The slippers were later acquired by the Friends of Sheldon Jackson Museum along with twenty-six other items, and given to the museum for the permanent collection.

The Sheldon Jackson Museum is home to over forty artifacts made with moose hide including pants, pouches, bags, necklaces, gloves, mukluks, dolls, sheaths for knives, and more. To see these and the September Artifact(s) of the Month, visit the gallery between 9am and 4:30pm any day except holidays, Tuesday through Saturday. The September Artifact of the Month will be exhibited until September 30th. General admission is \$7, \$6 for seniors, and free for those 18 and under or members of either the Friends of the Sheldon Jackson Museum or Friends of the Alaska State Museum. Hours of operation and admission prices will change Sept. 18th when the museum changes from summer to winter hours.

Moravian Archives. "Bethel, Alaska – Beginning of the Moravian Mission in Alaska." This Month in Moravian History (June 2009): No. 44. Web. 17 August 2017.

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

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ⁱ As missionaries, Hartmann and Weinland read the bible on a daily bases. Their reading of Genesis 35:1 the day they arrived to Mumtrkhlagamute influenced them to later re-name the mission Bethel. The text from the reading was: "God saith unto Jacob, Arise, go up to Bethel, and dwell there, and make there an altar unto God that appeared unto thee."

ⁱⁱ In 1887, a Moravian mission was established at Nushagak.